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What Consumer Technology Companies Can Learn From Apple Product Launches

by Joshua Weinberg, President, Digital Life Consulting Group

Apple is widely regarded as one of the most effective companies at launching products today, but some people chalk this up solely to Steve Jobs's star power.

As a launch consultant, I've spent a lot of time analyzing Apple's product introductions and I have seen that while there is no denying that Jobs is a very powerful element in Apple's launches, there are plenty of things that Apple does that can be learned and emulated by other companies, small or large.

It all starts with the product

Product launches are not just PR events; they are the last step of a long product-development effort. Start with the product itself. No amount of launch pageantry and flashy presentation can guarantee the success of a seriously flawed product. At the same time, a brilliant product can disappear into obscurity without a carefully conceived launch strategy and a clear marketing message.

Apple is able to generate interest and excitement over even minor product launches because of its reputation for creating innovative, elegant and functional hardware and software. Every facet of the device or code, right down to the industrial design, packaging, accessories and even the product's Web site, is scrupulously polished to enhance usability, esthetic appeal, and Apple's overall image as a maker of "insanely great" consumer products. "We make products that we want to use ourselves," Steve Jobs said at D5.

The obsession with form, fit and finish extends even to the most minor or hidden parts. One of the most time-consuming design tasks of a recent laptop introduction, an Apple hardware manager said, was to make sure that screws on the bottom of the machine did not disrupt the smooth flow of the computer's aluminum skin—even though most users will never even look at the underside. Compare that to, say, the hulking, mismatched power supply of Microsoft's Xbox 360 video game console, which looks as if it were originally designed for a Soviet-era tractor.

Even the font choices in Apple's user documentation and manuals are carefully selected. By crafting a uniform design identity not just for the core product, but also for all ancillary materials, Apple builds a tangible expectation of superior performance and value.

Don't launch the product until it is ready

Apple rarely launches a product until every aspect is ready for the public; indeed, Jobs has been known to kill a product launch at the last minute because something is not exactly perfect.

A journalist related that he wrote a scathing review of a new non-Apple product and later ran into the product manager at a restaurant. "I'm sorry I had to be so hard on the [product]," he said. "That's OK," the product manager said, much to the journalist's surprise. "We knew we were going to get some knocks." Then why didn't they fix the flaws? Too many companies today are willing to accept glitches just to get the product out the door, hoping to patch them in a future version. But will there even be a future version if customers are disappointed?

The "we'll fix it in version 2.0" attitude at some of its competitors is anathema at Apple. Version 1.0 is as good as it can possibly be; version 2.0 will be even better.

Is your product as good as it can possibly be? If not, perhaps it's better to delay the launch.

Some companies don't seem to understand the difference between making technology and making a product. Technology doesn't become a successful consumer product until a complete, user-friendly experience is built around it. Launch products, not technologies.

Everything is coordinated

When you walk into the Moscone Center for an Apple product launch, the posters outside tout current Apple products. The advertising on passing taxis and buses are familiar Apple themes. The nearby Apple store still promotes the current bestsellers. The Apple Web site is still business as usual.

But as soon as the keynote presentation ends and people file out of the building, everything is new: The advertising on the buses and cabs has miraculously changed to trumpet the new product. The Apple Stores are stocked and ready to sell the New Thing. Apple employees are wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the new message. The Apple Web site is ready with new information and images. New TV ads showing the just-introduced product are already spreading the news.

Everything is coordinated across multiple departments of the company, from factory to marketing to retail to customer support, all for the precise moment of the launch. The achievement is all the more impressive given the simultaneous launches in multiple countries around the globe, and, increasingly, the involvement of partner companies (like AT&T for the iPhone launch).

Such precision and coordination requires a comprehensive launch agenda and clear cross-boundary communications (along with flawless execution) among all key players in the company.

This is the way consumer products should be launched in today's world of instant communication and nearly instant gratification. As soon as a consumer hears or reads of a cool new product—especially a message reinforced through multiple channels—he wants to be able to buy it and use it. With a few notable exceptions (the iPhone, the Mac OS X Leopard operating system), Apple has products in its stores and well stocked on the day of the announcement. After going to so much trouble to build excitement over a new product, the company rarely wastes the opportunity by telling consumers they have to wait days, weeks or months to buy it. The strategy of announcing a product and shipping it months later is best left to business-to-business products, where long-term budget planning and lengthy evaluation periods are more common.

Rehearse, rehearse and rehearse, because launches are theater

With Apple, preparation for a keynote begins months in advance, and Steve Jobs rehearses relentlessly, right up to show time. Insiders know that if a product does not demo well, even at the last moment, Jobs will pull it from the presentation rather than risk a public flop.

In one keynote in which Apple unveiled a new notebook computer with a built-in accelerometer, to protect the hard drive in the event of a fall off a table, Apple's head of global marketing, Phil Schiller, had to jump off a 15-foot platform on stage with the computer cradled in his arms. Afterward a reporter noticed a nasty scrape on his arm. Did it happen in the keynote plunge? "No, it was in one of the rehearsals," Schiller told him. "I can't remember which one, there were so many."

Jobs's predecessor, Gil Amelio, once gave a three-hour Macworld keynote for which he obviously hadn't prepared sufficiently. His extemporaneous speech-

ifying befuddled, bored and frustrated the audience. The lesson is not about length but about preparation: there's no substitute for preparation and practice.

The big announcements are important.

The little ones aren't

Apple releases dozens of new products each year, but only a handful of major ones get the full Steve Jobs treatment. Partly this is due to the time constraints on a very busy CEO, but Apple also recognizes that overexposure lessens the impact of even a Steve Jobs presentation.

Everyone remembers the keynotes where Jobs has a blow-out announcement—the “There’s just one more thing” finale has become a signature in his delivery—but there are many other B-level and C-level announcements that are handled with less fanfare by other executives or, in some cases, such as recent updates to the Mac mini, by no formal announcement at all.

Apple saves its biggest announcements for its biggest products. Even when the identity of the new product is top secret, Apple has been known to call major tech journalists to quietly let them know “this is a big one, you should be here.”

In contrast, IBM once flew a reporter to North Carolina for a “major announcement,” accompanied by nearly a dozen PR and executive team members. The announcement? IBM had decided to streamline its PC operations and cut bureaucracy and cost, the better to compete with leaner rivals. The message and the messenger should be congruent. A phone call or press release is appropriate for many announcements. For a new bet-the-company product, however, it's a safe bet that only the CEO will do. Make the big ones count.

Of course, sometimes there's pressure to give big treatment to a little announcement because of internal company politics. This may keep a handful of people happy, but in the end it won't get consumers excited, and could make journalists and the public less receptive to news about a company's truly important products.

Products have names

There's a great new restaurant that serves chunks of cold, dead fish mixed with seaweed and artificially green-colored horseradish, on a glop of sticky rice. Sound appealing?

If you're looking for a lightweight laptop, do you choose the Fujitsu P1610 or the Aspire 9810-6829? (Can you tell by the names that one weighs 2.2 pounds, the other 17.3 pounds?)

Do you already own one of the most popular consumer electronics devices of the 21st century, the M8513LL/A? Perhaps you know it by its name and not its part number: the iPod.

Too many companies find that the product naming processes is not fast or easy so they resort to using model numbers in place of real names.

Apple knows the importance of names that's why we have iPods, MacBooks and Cinema Displays.

A product isn't ready for launch until it has a name that customers can understand. DF-20HT is not a name; it's a part number. The name of a product influences the customer's response to it. Calling your new device DF-20HT identifies it as a technology, not a product.

This isn't to say that giving a product a snazzy name like "Vista" or "ROKR" or "Microsoft BOB" will insure its success. But if all the other aspects of a successful product are met, why saddle it with a nerdy moniker that consumers can't remember or even understand? Shakespeare wrote, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." But for a new consumer product, DF-20HT stinks.

Use secrecy as a marketing weapon

Influential consumer tech journalists, some who typically write fewer than 50 columns a year, often receive that many new product announcements in their email in-boxes every week. Each email gets at most about five to fifteen seconds of attention. If the first paragraph of the email does not say what it is, what it does, why it's significant and what it costs, the email goes straight to the trash.

Why is it, then, that these same reporters are willing to drop everything and fly cross-country to Cupertino, Calif., based on nothing more than a cryptic note that Apple will be unveiling a secret new product?

The answer: Apple has learned to use secrecy effectively as a marketing tactic.

At one time, when it was struggling, Apple realized that it could use the element of surprise as a competitive advantage against larger rivals. It caught the computing world off-guard by introducing such innovations as the mouse, the graphical user interface, the 3.5-inch diskette, wireless networking, colors, flat-panel LCD screens, Bluetooth, online music sales, touch-controlled iPods and iPhones, and so on.

Today, despite the fact that Apple's market capitalization is now bigger than Dell's, secrecy is even more important. Asian competitors knock off Apple designs and even rumored Apple designs.

But secrecy also generates intense interest in Apple's announcements, as everyone wonders what new marvels Apple has in its plans. The company very rarely pre-briefs reporters and analysts, but when it does, it's for a big payoff—like promising a major national magazine an exclusive sneak peek in return for a promise of being the cover story.

Even so, very few of its announcements are pure surprises, in part because bloggers, journalists, analysts and investors scrutinize the company so relentlessly, but also in part because Apple is an expert flirt, and a peerless influencer of the media.

Many companies feel that secrecy is not practical because they need to inform the channel, brief partners and create marketing campaigns. These needs do not make secrecy impossible they just make it harder to pull off. Apple weighed the problems associated with secrecy against the benefits it would deliver and decided on the secrecy route—and it's been paying off. Any company launching a new product needs to go through the same exercise.

Learn from Apple's imperfections

Nothing's perfect, not even Apple's vaunted marketing machine. Even when Apple makes mistakes with a product launch, however, it provides valuable lessons for any company.

Think about Apple products that failed, like the Macintosh Cube. Although it was a triumph of design at the time, at least compared to the boring beige boxes made by other PC makers, the Cube sacrificed usability and performance in order to achieve its form factor, a textbook case of form over function. Customers stayed away in droves.

Even the Apple iPhone product launch was flawed, despite the sale of more than a million units in the first three months. By waiting just 10 weeks to cut the high-end iPhone's price by one-third, to \$399 from the initial \$599, Apple angered its loyal consumer base. Customers angry at a price cut? In this case, yes, because early adopters felt they were snookered into paying a \$200 penalty for being Apple's best customers. Everyone knows that technology prices fall over time, but the timing suggests that Apple knew from the beginning that the iPhone was overpriced. Lesson: Don't alienate your most loyal customers. To mollify them, Apple issued a \$100 credit. Another lesson: It's expensive to attract new customers, but potentially far more expensive to lose the ones you already have.

Watch and compare

Steve Jobs has promised a year of exciting product announcements, so whenever he takes the stage for a keynote or special event, I'll be watching, taking notes and comparing how other technology companies launch products. If you're watching and comparing, I'd love to hear your thoughts.

Joshua Weinberg is the president of the Digital Life Consulting Group, which advises consumer electronics and consumer technology companies on how to make their product launches strong, effective and successful. He has been helping launch products for 18 years. He has never worked for Apple, but observes the company closely.

Joshua Weinberg
President
The Digital Life Consulting Group

joshua@DLifegroup.com
(415) 777-3339

Two Northwood Drive
San Francisco, CA 94112