

## When a plan isn't a plan



*So often called a plan, many "plans" are nothing more than a series of thoughts connected by hopes.*

Many managers make sincere efforts to prepare good plans for developing new products and for launching products into new markets.

However, many of these planning processes are doomed from the start. Let's look at some of the most common flaws that sink good intentions.

**Lack of a plan.** After a meeting with extensive verbal dialog about a new product development, it's so tempting to stop there and agree that we now have a plan. Wrong! A plan must be committed to paper. If it isn't on paper, it isn't a plan.

**Omission of dates.** Absence of time-sensitive goals or using general phrases such as "as soon as possible," avoids one of the essential ingredients of any plan — completion dates for important steps and the whole project. Some managers understand that it is difficult to estimate the time and costs required for developing new products that are based on new technologies. Therefore, they prepare two plans. One covers developing the new technologies, and a second applies to the specific products that utilize the newly developed technologies. The latter plan has specific dates assigned to major stages (milestones).

**Unassigned responsibilities.** If a plan neglects to establish who will do what by when, don't count on much progress. Any activity assigned to everyone is no one's responsibility.

**Lack of critical review.** Committing ideas to paper enables others to review and offer constructive ideas. Reviews should be made by all participating disciplines including marketing, engineering, manufacturing, promotion, accounting, and all others who will play a part in the project's execution. Another important and frequently overlooked review group includes *customers*. Properly selected, they are an excellent source of valuable inputs.

It is commonly believed that it is unwise to discuss product developments with outsiders, especially customers who can leak sensitive information to competitors. For some companies, this is a valid viewpoint, but industry leaders in the power transmission industry rigorously practice customer review. Such companies develop close partnerships with customers, then exchange confidential information. Because most plans are prepared to enable someone to sell something, discussing new product ideas with the final bosses (the customers) should be considered essential. Assuming that salespeople know their customers' needs and thoughts is only partially correct. Buying influences haven't thought much about a concept or product that they aren't aware of. Therefore, the product planners should visit the buying influences to relate the situation accurately and to hear and see the responses.

**Distribution avoidance.** Withholding copies of the plan from the contributors will most certainly limit progress. If parts of the plan are confidential, then distributing segments on a need-to-know basis will put the information in the proper hands.

All of these points are so simple that one wonders why they are even worth mentioning. But the planning process is so vital to designing and producing profitable products that many organizations — and this publication — feel it is worth stressing and repeating.

Many organizations have a long way to go in their planning activities. It's easy to see why. Planning is hard mental work that takes lots of time. One pass doesn't do the job. It takes many rewrites to make a plan meaningful. But the investment is well worth the time and effort.

— Phil Kinglsey