

# Prune the Product Tree



*Shape Your Product to Market Needs*

Gardeners prune trees to control their growth. Sometimes the pruning is artistic, and we end up with shrubs shaped like animals or interesting abstract shapes. Much of the time the pruning is designed to build a balanced tree that yields high-quality fruit. The process isn't about "cutting," it is about "shaping." Use this metaphor to help create the product your customers desire.

## THE GAME

Start by drawing a large tree on a whiteboard or butcher paper or printing a graphic image of a tree as a large format poster. Thick limbs represent major areas of functionality within your system. The inside of the tree contains leaves that represent features in the current release. Leaves that are placed at the outer edge of the canopy represent new features. The edge of the tree represents the future. Write potential new features on several index cards, ideally shaped as leaves. Ask your customers to place desired features around the tree, shaping its growth. Do they structure a tree that is growing in a balanced manner? Does one branch, perhaps a core feature of the product, get the bulk of the growth? Does an underutilized aspect of the tree become stronger? We know that the roots of a tree (your support and customer care infrastructure) need to extend at least as far as its canopy. Do yours?

## WHY IT WORKS

One of the greatest challenges in creating and managing a product is creating a balanced picture of everything that must be

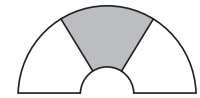
done to be successful. The problem can be complicated by overly linear, inorganic representations of product road maps, which tend to represent product evolution as linear over time. By tapping into our understanding that products must grow in a planned way, and that products are supported by a variety of mechanisms, *Prune the Product Tree* allows customers to shape all aspects of the product, instead of just providing feedback on a selected set of features in a road map.

You and your customers both know that features vary in importance. We tend to want to put our efforts behind the most important features—those features that provide the greatest value to customers. Unfortunately, sometimes this means that we put too little effort behind the features that are needed to complete the product. The *Prune the Product Tree* game provides your customers with a way to provide explicit input into the decision-making process by looking at the set of features that compose the product in a holistic manner.

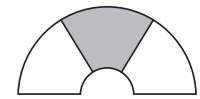
*Prune the Product Tree* also gives product teams the rare opportunity to identify, and potentially remove, those product features that are simply not meeting customer needs.

## PREPARING FOR THE GAME

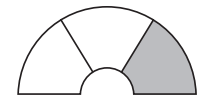
The first step in preparing for the game is selecting your tree and deciding how you want it drawn. You can have a graphic artist draw the tree, or you can draw the tree by hand. If you choose to have a graphic artist draw the tree, be careful about how nicely they draw it. One of the goals of this game is to have customers mark up the tree, and if something is



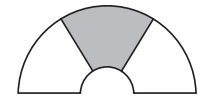
*Open-Ended Exploration*



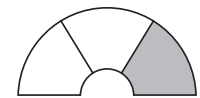
*Time Frame of Action*



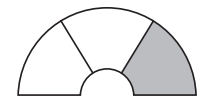
*Scalability*



*Customer Preparation*



*Market Preparation*



*Physical Preparation*

drawn too nicely customers may resist marking it up.

You'll need to prepare one tree for each group of customers. A good size for a customer group is between 5 and 10 people.

You'll also have to consider how your product is evolving over time. Stable products can be characterized by broad limbs and consistently growing canopies. I've provided a sample drawing of this kind of product (see Figure 2.2). The differently colored canopies represent various product releases. In this

kind of tree you will want a way to let customers "prune" features that aren't working for them, even if they are part of the already released product. You can do this by representing these as leaves that can be removed. New features can be added to outer growth rings.

Young products can benefit from having multiple trees, especially when the branches that represent major aspects of the product may be in a state of flux. In this case, draw one tree for each version of the product, with branches appropriate to that release. Then,

### Picking Your Tree Shape

One of the best parts of preparing for *Prune the Product Tree* is considering the kind of tree that best represents your product. Are you a fast growing cottonwood? A slow but steady oak? Are you a fruit-bearing tree? Do you provide shade? Comfort? Beauty? What kind of tree would your customer pick? Why? Here are some

images of various trees to help get you started.

For even more inspiration consider ordering the *National Register of Big Trees* from <http://www.americanforests.org/resources/bigtrees/>. I'm especially fond of the Seven Sisters live oak, a 1,200 year old tree that survived Hurricane Katrina.

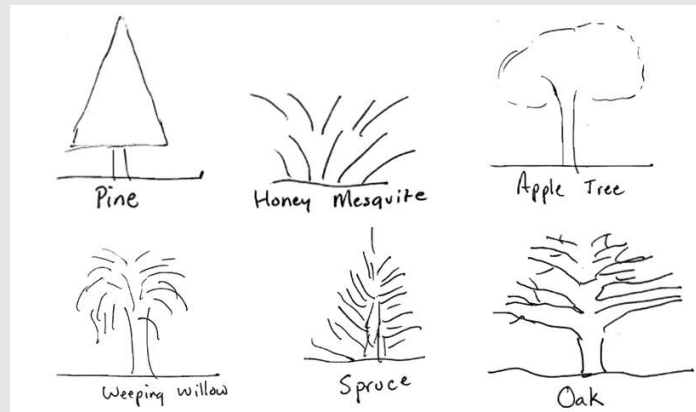
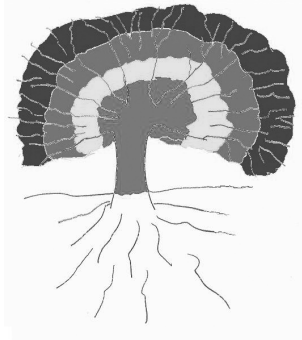


FIGURE 2.1 Sample Tree Shapes

in the “new” version of the tree, allow your customers to draw the branches that they think are most appropriate.



**FIGURE 2.2** Sample Drawing of a Product Tree

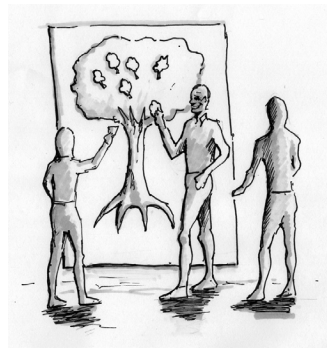
Don't get hung up on drawing a perfect picture. I was working with a client who wanted to use this technique, and they seemed to be stuck on how to get started. I sketched out the tree used in the sample drawing in a few minutes on a regular piece of paper, scanned it into my computer, colored it with a simple drawing tool, and then printed it on a larger format printer as a 6'×6' poster, one tree per group.

When you're finished selecting your basic tree shape, you'll have to consider the leaves.<sup>2</sup> Existing features that you want customers to consider pruning (by taking them off the tree) should be printed on paper and attached to the tree with tape or re-adhesive glue. New features that you want customers to consider adding to the tree should be

<sup>2</sup> You can also use pine cones, fruit, or nuts, depending on the kind of tree that you choose.

printed and placed around the tree. It is a good practice to list the feature on the front of the leaf and the perceived benefit on the back. You'll also want to include blank leaves to capture new ideas.

The ratio of blank leaves to predefined feature leaves reflects the degree to which you want customers to provide you with new information (things you haven't thought of or heard before) versus the degree to which you want them to arrange your existing plans. More blank leaves means that customers can add their own ideas. More predefined leaves means that customers will spend time organizing your suggestions. Either approach is okay.



*Work in small teams to shape your tree.*

**FIGURE 2.3** Playing Prune the Product Tree

If you intend to have a large number of predefined leaves (more than a dozen, for example), consider sending the list of features along with a brief description of the same to customers in advance so that they can become familiar with them before the event. Note that having a large number of leaves usually slows down the playing of the

game, as customers spend more time thinking about what the leaves mean and less time adding or removing leaves.

Game play is enhanced when you use index cards that are cut into the shape of a leaf or have an image of a leaf printed as a watermark. It is okay to mix leaf styles; on one project we started by using a watermark of a maple leaf but found a teacher's supply store that sold leaf-shaped cutouts. They worked great together (see the sidebar "Using Multiple Trees at the AIPMM PMEC 2006 Conference").

In terms of inviting customers, you should emphasize customers who have been using your product long enough to provide solid feedback on future developments based on how your product has evolved in the past.

The last major element of your tree is its root system: the services, support, and related corporate infrastructure (websites, partners, distribution channels, and so forth) that they would want in a vibrant, healthy tree. Such corporate infrastructure is less subject to change than product features, and you may want to consider preprinting the trees with this infrastructure.

### Materials

- Trees, printed in poster-print format or ready to be drawn on butcher paper or a white board
- Preprinted leaf cards
- Blank leaf cards
- Leaf stickers (customers can put these on leaves to signify importance)
- Stickers and/or other artwork that help you establish the right tone

## PLAYING THE GAME

Organize your participants so that 4 to 10 people are at each tree. Having too many people at a single tree prevents good group interaction. It is ideal if you can allocate one observer to each tree.

During your explanation remind participants that the shape of the tree represents growth over time. Existing features should therefore go near the trunk, as they are the oldest. The next closest leaves represent features to add in the near term. Leaves on the outer edges of the tree, at the edge of the canopy, and even beyond are considered longer term. You can make this even more explicit by putting time frames or release identifiers on the growing canopy.

Allow each group time to present their results to the entire group. Encourage other participants to ask questions about how the leaves in the tree were organized.

Try not to worry about the tree becoming unbalanced. It might happen, but my experience is that participants tend to organize features according to the shape of the tree you've given to them. In one game, a participant remarked to another, "We've got to move some features around, as the tree is becoming lopsided," and another remarked, "We're cramming too many features into this release—what can we push out?" Of course, the tree your customers create might not match the tree that they started with. If that happens, pay attention to what your customers are trying to tell you.

Encourage participants to group leaves or draw lines between leaves to clarify relationships among features. As described in the

## Using Multiple Trees at the AIPMM PMEC 2006 Conference

The Association for International Product Marketing and Product Management ([www.aipmm.com](http://www.aipmm.com)) used multiple trees to gather feedback from attendees at their 2006 Product Management Educational Conference. In this photo from the conference you can see three trees (see Figure 2.4). The top left tree represents the 2005 conference, which had two primary tracks (represented as two branches): Product Management and Product Marketing. The 2006 conference tree is shown below the 2005 tree and has four branches representing the phases of the product life cycle: Plan, Build, Launch, and Sustain. Tutorials, keynotes, and activities were represented as leaves that could be moved to the new tree.

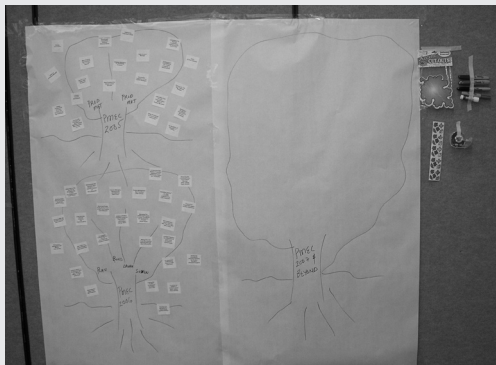


FIGURE 2.4 Using Multiple Product Trees

The 2007 tree is shown to the right. As you can see, it allowed for a completely open-ended exploration of the next conference. PMEC attendees could create their own branches, move leaves from the 2005 and 2006 trees to the 2007 tree, and add new leaves (representing new topics they'd like to see addressed at the 2007 conference). There is also a package of leaf shaped foil stickers, which attendees used to indicate strong support for a proposed topic. Attendees were also encouraged to personalize their trees, adding business cards or other mementos of their time at the conference.

PMEC participants quickly got into the game, as you can see in Figure 2.5. Groups quickly formed, mostly from people who

shared the same lunch tables. These groups moved the leaves representing the talks that they liked most from the 2005 and 2006 conferences to the 2007 conference, and, as you can see, they added several new ideas for talks by adding new leaves. Participants added business cards and one even drew a heart around two leaves that she particularly “loved.”<sup>3</sup>



FIGURE 2.5 Playing Prune the Product Tree at PMEC

Therese Padilla, Executive Director of AIPMM, posted her experience of the event into the Enthiosys Forum at [www.innovationgames.com](http://www.innovationgames.com). Here is an excerpt from her post:

“Once the trees were placed around the room and the conference attendees began to add ideas, it was gratifying to scan the room and visually see all the new ideas that were placed on the trees. We have begun to gather the results, but already we have three exceptional ideas for our next conference.

This is a wildly different approach to conference activities. This form of engagement energized the attendees and really involved them. This was the first time in all our conferences that we witnessed this level of participation and creativity from attendees. Attendees really took an interest in the event and were encouraged to make the event their own. This was the best way to ask them to design PMEC the way they wanted to see the content.”

3. This is an example of when it was good that an observer spoke; by asking the meaning of the “heart,” the observer was able to confirm that the participant “loved” the talks.



## Letting Customers Pick the Tree Shape

You can make this game even more open ended by giving customers a list of current features and several different kinds of leaves (or just blank index cards) and asking them to select both the tree and structure of the leaves and branches. You'll find that although this approach takes quite a bit more time, you'll gain an even richer and deeper understanding of your customers as you listen to them explain why they chose a particular tree and how the features of your product relate to this tree. This approach can also provide more insights into the larger product ecosystem, as customers often draw additional items along with their trees.

sidebar about the PMEC conference, one participant drew a heart around a pair of leaves to signify that she “loved” these features.

Encourage participants to personalize their trees. Although not required, the game can be more fun when people add additional art (birds, grass, sun), tape business cards to the trunk, or write their name on the back of their leaf suggestions.

Don't forget about the root system. Encourage participants to write information into the root system.

Try to leave the trees up as long as possible. If you're playing this game over a multiday event, put the trees up on the first day and leave them up as long as possible. You'll find that participants continue to play the game as they think of more leaves and discuss the game with other participants.

## PROCESSING THE RESULTS

Depending on the number of participants, you'll have between one and seven trees, each adorned with leaves, along with the notes of the observers. Compare the results of this exercise to your current product road map and look for the following items.

- Which of your features were pruned? Although you might have a strong attachment to some (or even all) of these features, you should carefully consider removing them to allow for other features that have more customer demand.
- Do the trees retain their general shape? Customers who put a lot of leaves on a single branch can be telling you that you

haven't been paying attention to a critical feature set. Customers who change the shape of the tree can be providing even richer feedback about how they perceive your company.

- How fast do customers want your tree to grow? Customers who put a lot of features on the inner versions (or releases) may be signaling that you're not releasing your product fast enough or often enough. Alternatively, fewer leaves in the interior may mean that the current plans are just fine, but look for the growth in the canopy, which might hold some really big new features.
- What things do customers add to or remove from your root system? How do these relate to your current infrastructure? Pay special attention to this information because it usually is of critical significance to your customers.

## HOW I CAN USE PRUNE THE PRODUCT TREE

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