

Priorities in Action

by Jonathan Smith

In last month's column, we looked at the costs and problems associated with an overloaded NPD system.

In most businesses we see, there is no shortage of NPD activity! Unfortunately, too much of this is destined either to clog up the system and never see the light of day or to contribute to the dispiritingly high failure rates seen in food NPD.

There are several main aspects to address in the quest for better success rates and a reduction in wasted effort. The first we will look at is the method by which resources and efforts are focused against real priorities.

It is a statement of the obvious to say that NPD resources, workload, and effort should be aligned with the objectives and priorities of the business.

And yet, in reality, this is often not the case. Large proportions of the NPD resources of many businesses are diverted onto a wide range of projects that do not fit with any pre-agreed set of priorities. Often, the NPD project list is the result of an ongoing contest between the various interested parties, be they sales and marketing managers or managing directors!

Take a look at your own company's NPD project list and see how closely (or otherwise) it fits with the company's stated objectives and priorities.

The problem is easy to describe but how do you go about addressing it and improving the situation?

The first step is to produce a simple, clear statement of the objectives, strategies, and priorities that will guide the NPD effort. This should be a series of bullet points confined to one side of paper, not a lengthy, multi-page essay. It should be short, clear, and simple enough for everyone concerned to be able to understand and remember. If people can't even remember something, how can it be expected to affect their actions?

It may take time and some serious argument to hammer out a meaningful document that can make a difference but this will be time well spent.

The contents of this statement then need to be "sold" to everyone concerned. Again, this selling process may take a little time but will pay dividends later in terms of the avoidance of wasted effort and debate further down the

track. The next step is the hardest and needs ongoing, focused attention. It is to ensure that a whole series of decisions and actions in the day-to-day management of the NPD machine actually relate to the agreed priorities. Ideas- generation sessions need to be focused against the agreed objectives rather than just being scatter-gun brainstorming sessions; hard decisions need to be taken to put aside proposed projects which, whilst potentially having merit in their own right, do not match the agreed objectives and priorities; resources must be made to follow the priorities.

This is a task which must fall to the handful of senior managers or directors who should form the NPD leadership team. They need to see themselves as the guardians of the NPD resources of the company and be accountable for the performance of the NPD operation as a whole.

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