In my nearly 20 years working in marketing at disruptive companies, it’s always perplexed me when people label startups as being “post-market-fit,” and “ready to scale.” As if product-market fit is a point in time. It’s not. Product-market fit is a journey that never ends and requires continual iteration.

As soon as someone invests more money in your company, the expectations for revenue go up. You get to $10 million, and they want $50 million. Get to $50 million, they want $100 million. Achieving growth gets harder and harder because the numbers get bigger and bigger.

There’s never a “We’re done now” moment – where new users will automatically continue to gravitate to your product and you’ll see perpetual growth.

As CMO of Coursera, I helped grow revenue five fold in 5 years and lead the company through IPO in 2021. Every quarter, even as a public company, we were running three- to eight-week product-market fit (PMF) sprints to continually reassess and redirect our efforts to create new products and reach new customers.

And while there’s no one-size-fits-all for these sprints — the timing, goals and focus may differ from company to company and stage to stage — there’s a basic approach that can work for every organization at each stage of growth.

What follows is a jumpGuide on running PMF sprints. It’s based on the framework we adapted at Coursera from Dan Olsen’s The Lean Product Playbook: How to Innovate with Minimum Viable Products and Rapid Customer Feedback, which I use to help consumer and enterprise organizations overcome business and marketing challenges.

The idea is to learn as much as possible in a short time and come out with the ability to make a decision about a product, service or marketing strategy: either proceed, kill or sprint again.

The beauty of this framework is that it applies to every stage of a company’s development, from Seed to Exit and beyond. The way you assemble your sprint team and test your hypothesis evolves over time, but the framework remains the same.
Why Sprint?
As long as you’re growing, you’re going to need to keep finding new markets and new products to meet changing demand. Which means you’ll want a method to answer questions like these:

- Is there a market for my product? Who should I focus on initially?
- How do I refine my product to appeal to the kind of customer I want to attract?
- I have a product that’s seen strong early organic adoption, and now we want to scale. Who do we go after, and how do we position it to these new audiences? (This is the question I hear the most, BTW.)
- I have a product, but our growth is slowing down. What do I need to do?
- Our product is selling but our retention isn’t where we’d like it to be. How do we fix that?

When to Sprint
As customer needs change and competitors jump in with alternatives, it’s important to continue assessing PMF, particularly when:

- Designing a new offering for the market
- Deciding how much time and money to invest in a product
- Developing your marketing strategy for a new product
- Entering new markets with existing products
- Determining how to increase adoption speed and sales of existing products
- Validating packaging or pricing options
- Overcoming a slowdown in growth or retention
- Responding to a competitor who’s taking customers away

How to Sprint
Regardless of the business challenge you are facing, here’s the basic process:

Gather the Team
You want a small core group of two to five people. In an early stage startup, this might be a business development person or COO working alongside a marketer or product person. Once you have product managers and marketers, a typical team would include them, ideally committed full time, with the support of an executive sponsor. Typically, teams include members from product, marketing and sales, but depending on the nature of the product and testing, you may need to engage an extended team from areas like data science, engineering, design, research, services or others.
Hypothesize the Six Ps

Whose problem are you solving and how? Existing data and market research are helpful, but you’ll also need to engage with potential customers using surveys, one-on-one interviews and/or A/B testing. Step one is to document your collective hypothesis of the “Six Ps,” as explained below.

Try to do this fast, in a day or two. You want most of your time to be spent in the validation process. Don’t waste time arguing if you have differences of opinion; you can note the options and use the sprint to test which one resonates the most. PMF sprints are a great way to generate the customer-based data to resolve arguments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>Persona</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify the specific people whose unmet needs you plan to fill.</td>
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<td>• There may be more than one: a primary buyer, for instance, and an influencer of the buyer and a user.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Boil each down to the fewest number of observable characteristics about them that will predict that they’re likely to be interested in the product. Ideally, this might be based on data culled from demographics, psychographics or behavioral characteristics.</td>
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<th>2</th>
<th>Problem</th>
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<td>Uncover the Persona’s needs that are not being met or not being met well enough. Capture the words they use to describe their pain, frustration and longing to determine if the problem is important or painful enough that they’d be willing to pay for a solution and prioritize them from most painful to least painful.</td>
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<tr>
<th>3</th>
<th>Proposition</th>
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<tr>
<td>A statement of the solution and how it will meet a Persona’s needs, generally in the following form:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “For [describe Persona] who [is facing X pain point], [Company Name] [describe unique product functions and features] will [describe benefit to Persona that addresses unmet need].”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Here is a hypothetical example: There’s a VP of talent who is struggling to filter through entry-level engineering applicants because it’s difficult to decipher which candidates are most capable across the technical and soft</td>
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skills required for the job. Company X has developed a 1-hour project-based screener that can be offered to any applicant that uses AI to assess the candidate’s technical and soft skills and prioritizes which candidates to reach out to for you. This reduces interviewing hours, increases candidate conversion, and quickly grows a talented, diverse employee base.

### Product

The key functions, features, content and services that will deliver value and allow for the fastest learning over the course of the sprint. It’s also great to take a special look at which are the table stakes features, differentiating features, and delighting features.

### Positioning

How the features and benefits are better than the alternatives, as described by the Persona. A positioning statement might go as follows:

- “For [Persona] who [needs/cares about], [product] is a [category/solution] that [main benefits]. Unlike [competitors’ offering], [product] is [unique differentiator].”

- A hypothetical example: “For parents of 3-8 year-olds who are concerned about their child’s literacy development, Product X is a science-backed, scripted early literacy program that allows any parent to become a world-class tutor for their child. Unlike Company X and Company Y, Product X is the only product that delivers scripted lessons and on-going progress monitoring to give parents confidence they are taking the right steps to enable their child to read at grade level and beyond.”

### Promotion

How to get the product to Personas and get them to try and buy it. Key issues to consider:

- How to scale customer or user base and at what cost — given where/how customers will purchase the product and the expected rate and cost of customer acquisition

- How to leverage unique strengths that competitors can’t copy

- Ways to validate go-to-market estimates and assumptions
Create and test a Minimum Valuable Product Prototype

This goes beyond the conventional “minimal viable product” designation — something that meets the minimum requirements of use but can be adapted and improved upon. Look to maximize the rate of learning about your MVP with the least amount of time and effort. The idea is to:

- Quickly validate value with customers, not build a perfect product
- Discover whether the product provides the core value proposition to the target customer
- Help prove the pricing and promotion strategy

For example, a consumer startup I work with has their first enterprise customer and wants to expand in that arena. But since they don’t have a track record or the confidence to approach the big guys yet, our plan is to design an offering they can test with smaller, or more “friendly” enterprise prospects to help refine and package it.

Iterate, iterate, iterate!

Achieving product-market fit requires moving forward on all six Ps simultaneously. So it’s useful to create a prototype quickly and get it in front of prospects. And remember: Failing quickly is its own form of succeeding. A test that quickly, cheaply and clearly suggests killing an idea is as successful as one that shows the way ahead. You’ll need to:

- Verify that you’re getting feedback from Personas in your target market segment
- See how customers use the product and ask non-leading, non-binary, open-ended questions
- Avoid defending or justifying the MVP to customers; the aim is to learn from them how to revise it for the next iteration cycle
- Consider changing course or shutting down the tests if you’re not seeing progress after several iterations. You might find that:
  - the unmet needs aren’t serious enough to require a paid solution
  - the competition has too great an advantage in meeting the needs already
  - the market isn’t big enough

Measure product-market fit and decide on next steps

Focus only on your target customer and ignore everyone else.

- For enterprise companies, set up conversations with existing and prospective customers to assess the likelihood of their purchasing the product; the main benefit they’d be looking for; and what might increase the likelihood of purchase. Think of this as half research interview and half sales call. Your goal should still be to end the call with a sale, but you will set it up as a call designed for learning and gathering feedback.
● For consumer companies, use surveys and follow-up interviews to refine your understanding of customer pain points and interest in the product.

● Keep track of your progress throughout. Refine the product, Persona and the questions, scoring on a scale of 1 to 5 to gauge how well-defined each of your six Ps are.

● Signs you’re approaching or have reached PMF include:
  - Your six P scores are mainly 4s and 5s
  - 40% of your target customers say they would be “very disappointed” if the offering went away
  - The NPS, which measures product satisfaction and engagement, is at least 30 percent, considered strong (70 or more is world class). You can survey existing customers to generate this score.
  - A high proportion of prospects are opting to participate in beta tests, an indication of strong demand

Takeaways

1. **Product-market fit is a continuous journey** that requires ongoing assessment and adjustments.

2. **Data solves disagreements and builds alignment.** Use your PMF sprint to generate the real customer insights you need to pick a direction.

3. **It’s not enough for a founder to have a feel for the customer** and the products they want – you need to define and codify the problems you’re solving against and for whom.

4. **Three- to eight-week product-market fit sprints can help** reassess and redirect efforts for creating new products and reaching new customers. These are adaptable to every stage of a company's development, from seed to exit and beyond.

5. **Decide how you can get the most and best information** with the least amount of time, effort and money.

6. **Test your assumptions and revise your offering** and customer persona accordingly throughout the sprint.

7. **Keep scoring and ranking** until you hit the right threshold.

8. **Don’t be afraid to pivot or walk away.**

It’s well worth investing in this process throughout your growth. Go-to-market refinement never ends, and these continual PMF sprints will ensure you remain resonant.

About the author: Kim Caldbbeck is a former CMO of Coursera.