

Charting Your Course: **The Building Blocks of Excellent Product Roadmaps**

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Productboard's new roadmap feature





**Properly done, a
product roadmap
can steer your entire
organization toward
delivering on the
company strategy.**




C. Todd Lombardo,

VP Product at MachineMetrics
and co-author of *Product
Roadmaps Relaunched*

DELIVER ON
STRATEGY

The strategic role of roadmaps in excellent product organizations



A good roadmap is a strategic communications tool, a statement of intent and direction, and, done well, a way of rallying the whole organization around the key problems that must be solved to achieve your product vision.

Bruce McCarthy,
Founder at
Product Culture

Product Excellence may sound like a lofty and unattainable goal, but it doesn't have to be. We've identified three pillars that the best product teams have in common: deep user insight, a clear product strategy, and an inspiring roadmap.

Almost everyone can agree on the importance of user insights and a well-defined strategy, but the role of the roadmap is much more complex. What should the best product roadmaps accomplish (and avoid)? Who should get access to the roadmap and how much detail should they have? Are roadmaps a relic of the past that are unnecessary in today's agile world? (Hint: This guide would be much shorter if the answer to that question was simple!)

Let's start by outlining what a product roadmap should (and shouldn't) be.

Ideally, a roadmap is a:

- Tool for reducing uncertainty
- Strategic (and tactical) communication tool
- Statement of intent and direction
- Shared understanding of where you are going & why
- Conversation-starter

A good roadmap allows you to:

- Communicate how you intend to achieve your product vision
- Provide a view of the problems you want to solve & assumptions you want to validate ordered against priority
- Check assumptions and confirm with others that you're on the right path
- Create functional alignment and unite your team behind a common purpose
- Know where you're going and why

On the other hand, a roadmap is not:

- Just a release plan
- A substitute for a lack of a vision and strategy
- Determined by gut or opinion
- Created in a vacuum—stakeholders should be on-side & aware of the choices & trade-offs you've made
- A top-secret document—it should be available to as many people as needed

Defining excellence for product roadmaps

We've created a rubric to illustrate the five levels of proficiency when it comes to roadmaps. Take a moment to look it over and see which most accurately describes your current practices.

The five levels of roadmap proficiency

1

Lack of understanding around the product roadmap leads others to question it

2

Roadmap lacks clear objectives; long-term goals are private and undocumented

3

Roadmap is shared, but focuses on outputs rather than outcomes

4

Product roadmaps clearly communicate why some ideas are prioritized over others

5

Everyone rallies around both the product strategy and roadmap

CHAPTER ONE

The building blocks of excellent product roadmaps

Roadmaps aren't stand-alone documents—they're the culmination of several Product Excellence best practices, like:

- An organized system for collecting and organizing feedback from customer-facing colleagues and removing bottlenecks around customer feedback.
- A transparent process for surfacing valuable insights hidden within that feedback.
- An objective method for using those insights to prioritize tasks on the product roadmap.
- A closed-loop system for sharing the roadmap with stakeholders & customers and for obtaining further feedback

Below, we dive into some key features all good roadmaps tend to have in common.

Questions to ask as you embark on your roadmap journey

1. Why do I need a roadmap in the first place?
2. What's the best format?
3. How far in the future should it go?
4. Who has access?
5. Is it user-facing?
6. How will changes be communicated? And how often?
7. What criteria will we use to add something to the roadmap?

BUILDING BLOCK ONE

Your roadmap should reflect desired outcomes

Roadmaps should reflect the desired outcomes the product is trying to achieve rather than just outputs. What exactly does this mean? Outputs are the stuff we produce for a customer (like car seats for babies) while outcomes are the difference our stuff makes (like keeping kids safe in cars). In an ideal world, the roadmap effectively communicates both outcomes (the why, and the problems we are solving) and outputs (the how).

Focusing on the “why” in your roadmap instead of just the “what” communicates more clearly where you are headed and what success looks like. An outcome roadmap is more stable over time with only the tactics employed to reach those outcomes shifting as different approaches are tested.

Still not sure if you’re focusing on outcomes or outputs? Here are a few ways to tell, courtesy of *Product Roadmaps Relunched* by C. Todd Lombardo.

Focusing on outcomes

- You focus on the problem space (missions, objectives, themes, problems to solve) rather than just the solution space (features)
- You tie your product initiatives back to a why
- You are open to adjusting your roadmap based on strategy or new learnings

Symptoms of shipping only outputs

- Stuff gets shipped, but there is little to no impact on goals and success metrics like OKRs or KPIs
- Implementing customer requests doesn't improve customer satisfaction
- Features released don't solve customer problems
- There's a lack of clear product vision & conversations focus on execution
- Product teams focus on delivery instead of discovery

How to focus on outcomes

- Align on common goals & priorities informed by product vision & strategy
- Change the conversation from outputs to intent and direction
- Identify the high-level objectives (needs, problems, jobs-to-be-done, themes, business outcomes), not just features
- Give guardrails, guidelines, goalposts, and allow delivery teams the room to decide how best to solve the stated problem
- Use leading indicators that tell you when you are done, rather than dates

**Your roadmap shouldn't
merely share what is being
developed and when it
will be delivered. Your
roadmap should be a
tool for building a shared
understanding of the why
behind each decision**

Scott Baldwin,

Product Excellence
Consultant at Productboard

BUILDING BLOCK TWO

Your roadmap is a product of cross-functional collaboration

Collaboration is one of the keys to roadmap success. It is a best-case scenario when stakeholders—leadership, sales, marketing, engineering, and more—understand what is on the roadmap and why. Even better, their needs are considered, and they know why their request has been included (or not).

Here's why:

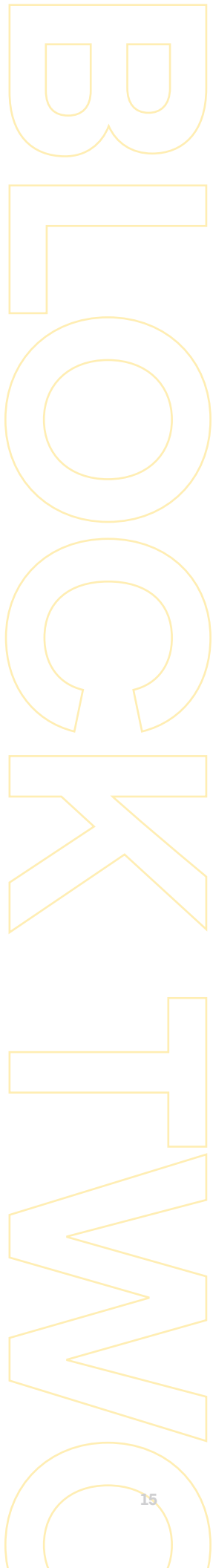
Where the product is headed (and why) impacts everyone in the company. So it makes sense to build a roadmap that considers the needs of cross-functional stakeholders—not just the product team.


Other departments can offer valuable insights. Stakeholders have knowledge and expertise that stretch outside of the product team's domain. Unlike sales, customer success, and support, for example, product managers don't spend their days talking directly to users. Getting these insights from customer-facing teams is essential for creating a roadmap that focuses on real customer needs & concerns.

You need buy-in from stakeholders. Oftentimes, product managers do not have the authority to push through product decisions without explanation. Instead, they must use influence and soft skills to earn support. Engaging stakeholders from the get-go helps uncover fresh insights and reduce risk, and getting their buy-in early ensures that significant resources and time don't go to waste.

Stakeholders should be involved throughout the roadmap process. Set up a regular meeting cadence, send emails updating the team about any changes, or give them access to the roadmap so they can self-serve anytime they'd like.

Regular communication about the product roadmap creates an agile product process. Stakeholders involved can course-correct their tasks & projects if they know that there are delays or changes.





I think of roadmaps as communication vehicles rather than decision vehicles

A lot of folks say their goal is to have a roadmap. And I say no, our goal is to have a good product strategy where we make hard choices and prioritize the right things. The roadmap is simply a reflection of this.

Rich Mironov,

Product consultant
and thought leader

GOOD
PRODUCT
STRATEGY

THINKING
RIGHT
ABOUT
THE
RIGHT
THINGS

A step-by-step guide for building outcome-driven roadmaps

Now that we've explored some of the elements of good roadmaps, let's look at the four steps to take to start building your own.

STEP ONE

Align on product vision, strategy, and objectives

To define a clear product vision and strategy, consider what type of long-term outcome and benefit you want to deliver to your users.

This is a collaborative process where product leaders work with executives to translate **company** vision and strategy into a **product** vision and strategy.

When creating your product vision & strategy, it'll be helpful to consider the following:

- What you want to achieve in the near-term, mid-term, as well as further into the future
- Insights from prospects, colleagues, & customers
- Market trends
- Technological trends
- Competitive intelligence
- The company's business model
- Unique differentiators

Let's start with some definitions

pro-duct v-ision (n.)*

the overarching goal you are aiming for, the reason for creating the product*

pro-duct strat-e-gy (n.)

your plan to bring your product vision to life—it clearly outlines what you aim to achieve

ob-jec-tives (n., pl.)

clear, measurable goals aligned with specific outcomes you're striving to achieve for your customers, product, and business

**according to Roman Pichler*

A good product roadmap visually communicates your product vision, strategy, and objectives in a way that everyone can understand and unites the product team behind a common and documented purpose

Once product vision and strategy are set, product teams can break them down into objectives to tackle over the near- to mid-term in relation to key date-based milestones (like when they'll need to raise money again).

Product objectives should be high-level enough to represent a worthy outcome for your customers or product, yet specific enough to help guide your prioritization decisions around which features to build next. They can be derived "top-down" from company objectives or "bottom-up" based on user insights you've received, market intelligence you've gathered, or your product strategy.

Here are a few examples of good product objectives:

- Help users perform core job-to-be-done X
- Close core feature gaps experienced by user role Z
- Expand customer base to three new regions

STEP TWO

Prioritize what to put on your roadmap based on desired outcomes

Once you align the product team behind a common product vision, strategy, and objectives, it's time to prioritize the products and/or features that will go on your roadmap.

The following inputs are a great place to begin:

- Insights from prospects, colleagues, and customers
- Market segments that your product serves
- Date-based milestones, such as conferences, industry events, or marketing campaigns
- Capacity planning—what is the bandwidth of your team?

A product prioritization framework can help you take a more quantitative approach for assessing inputs. It can also be helpful to have a tool that organizes all of these insights in one place.

This step can become a little overwhelming given the sheer volume of information you're working with, as well as the competing needs of stakeholders from both in- and outside your organization.

Support may want to focus on fixing bugs, for example, while sales is more interested in a new feature requested by a promising prospect. And though your customers are a valuable source of feedback, they tend to voice the solutions they think they need rather than their underlying problem.

Despite the challenges, gathering and synthesizing these inputs changes your thinking from "I know what we should put on the roadmap" to "We're putting this on the roadmap because of XYZ."

A product prioritization framework can help you take a more quantitative approach for assessing inputs. It can also be helpful to have a tool that organizes all of these insights in one place.

[Check out *The essential guide to prioritization* to learn more about this step.](#)

STEP THREE

Build your roadmap to summarize your plan

Now it's time to create a working draft of your roadmap that communicates the products and/or features you are building, when you will be working on them, roughly when they will be released, as well as why they are a priority vs. all of the options that were considered.

To make your roadmap informative and easy to understand for your end audience, try including these elements:

When date-based roadmaps can be valuable

Product people love to hate date-based roadmaps. But, contrary to popular belief, date-based or "timeline" roadmaps can be highly valuable for agile product teams. Here are a few examples of when they come in handy.

Backward planning from milestones

For larger organizations and those working in more complex environments, time becomes a key input in major product decisions. There are Gartner analyst briefings to consider, industry conferences, multi-pronged marketing launches, and the occasional commitment to a strategic partner or major customer.

When we decide which objectives to tackle next, we backward-plan from these milestones in time and consider what would be most important to accomplish by then.

Timeline. Even in the agile world, it is important to set expectations around when short-term, medium-term, and long-term features will roll out so other teams can plan around them. We're not talking about specific dates or deadlines. Instead, show a general time, such as the month.

Solutions. Communicate what features you want to roll out in the above timeline. You can be as high-level or as detailed as you want, just explain why you are including each feature to give context.

Strategic context. Let all teams know where the product is headed and why you're building these features next. Currently, only [44% of product teams](#) are confident that their roadmaps reflect the strategic context behind what they're building. If some roadmap decisions are hard for certain stakeholders to swallow strategic context helps them to understand the rationale behind tough trade-offs, even if they don't personally agree with it.

(cont. from previous)

Multi-team planning

Is there work that one team must tackle before other work can get started? We're guessing yes. There are many occasions when you need to align internally on concrete dates. Only timeline roadmaps can offer sufficient granularity to carry out what-if style planning amid complex variables like team capacity and dependencies.

Release planning for the near future

When you're planning objectives along a timeline, you have the advantage of remaining high-level. But as you prepare to plan sprints and launch activities, you'll want to decide which features to release together, and when. You can expect this to come later on in the planning process, once features themselves are thoroughly discovered, scoped, and groomed.

If you're working in an agile environment, you may resist planning releases much more than 4–6 weeks in advance. Though if you focus on just the next several releases and the features they contain, timeline roadmaps can be useful for tactical planning.

Three types of outcome-driven product roadmaps

Align your team behind a shared vision and
purpose

ROADMAP ONE

Objective-driven roadmap

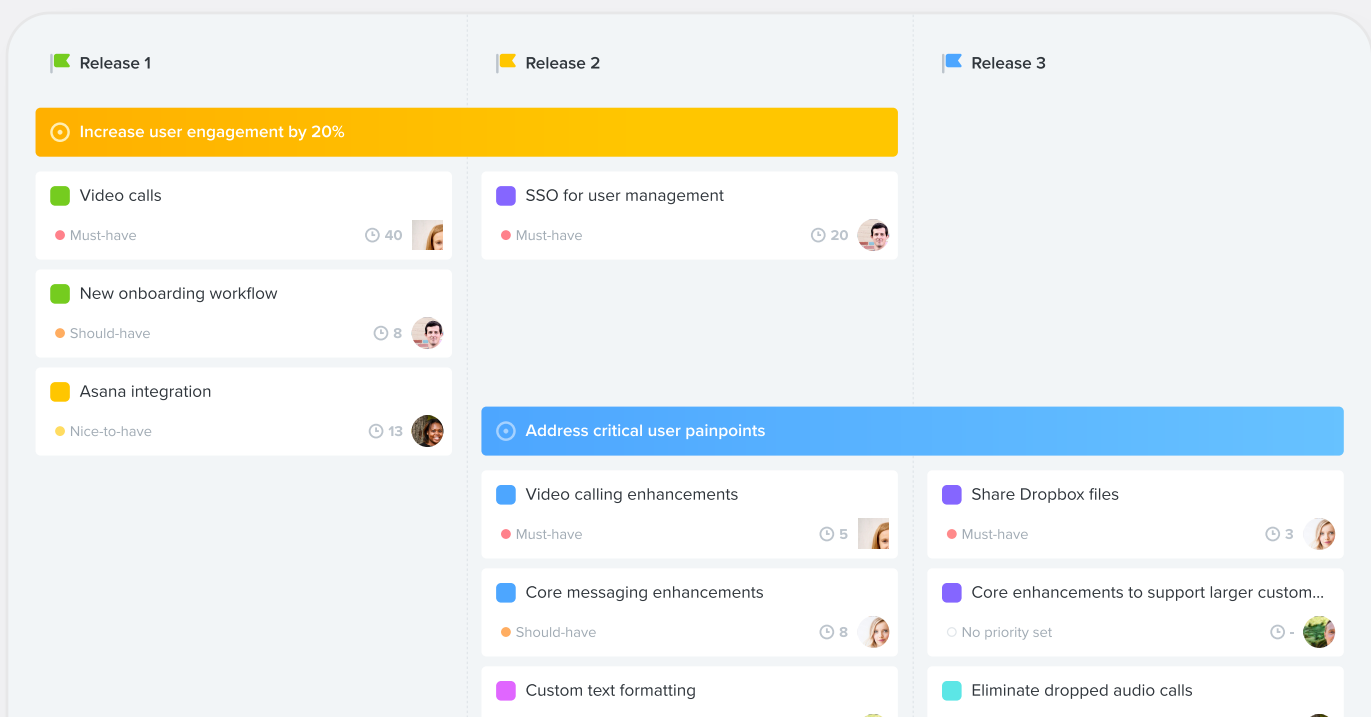
Objective-driven product roadmaps tie features to objectives, which give stakeholders a better understanding of strategic context.

When using business-level objectives, this offers a clear connection between your product and business strategies.

Someone might ask, “Why are we doing Feature X instead of Feature Y?” With an objective-driven product roadmap, you can clearly show how Feature X ties to your company’s

business objectives and your product’s objectives.

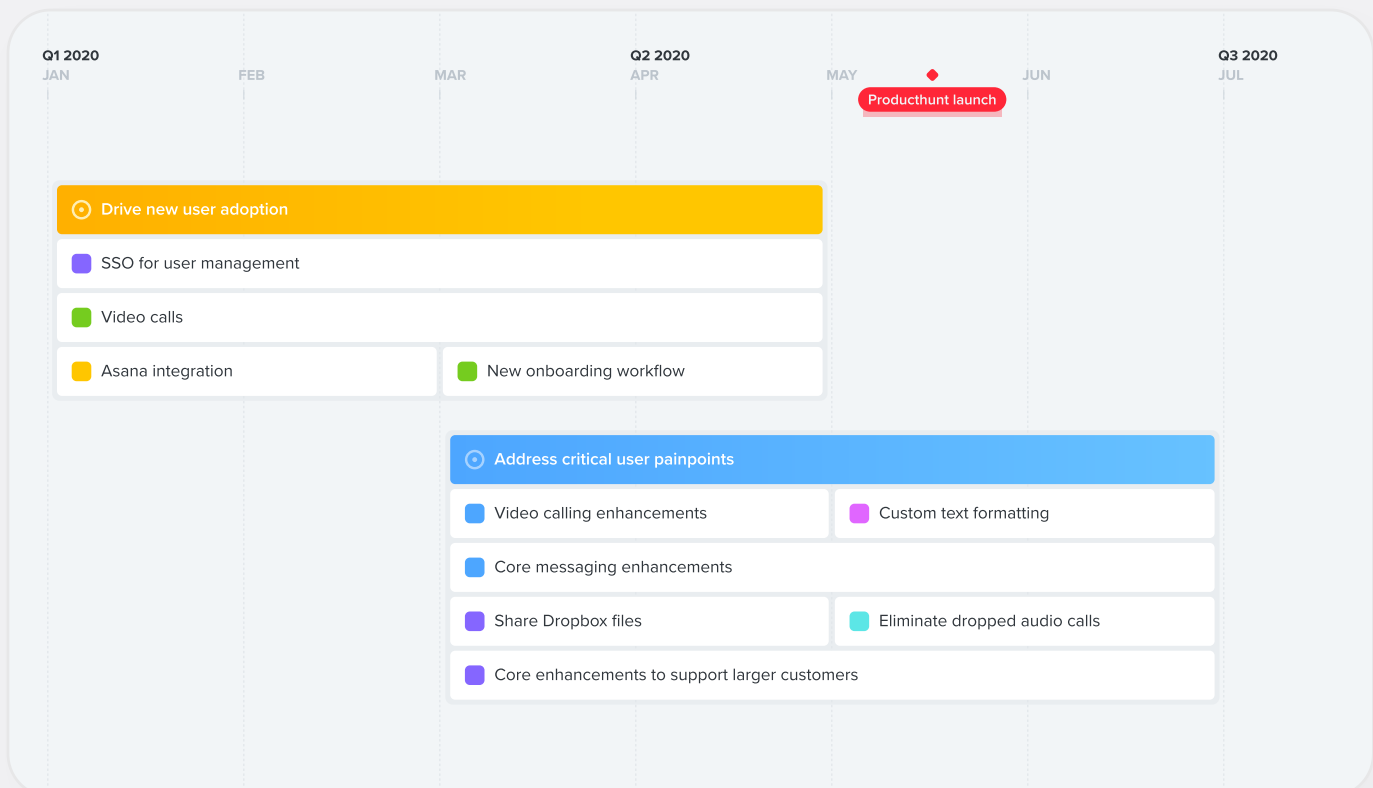
A Productboard customer told us how using an objective-based roadmap was eye-opening for his team. He wanted to motivate his developers by showing how the work they were doing would move actual business metrics. He said, “So things like ‘new onboarding workflow’ wasn’t just some feature, we could see how it was actually going to help get us to our target monthly revenue faster.”



ROADMAP TWO

Objective-on-a-timeline roadmap

Align your stakeholders and organization around measurable, time-bound goals across different teams over time. Objective-on-a-timeline roadmaps are ideal for aligning your product organization around outcomes—without prescribing specific solutions—and for high-level planning to ensure your teams are focusing on the right problems.

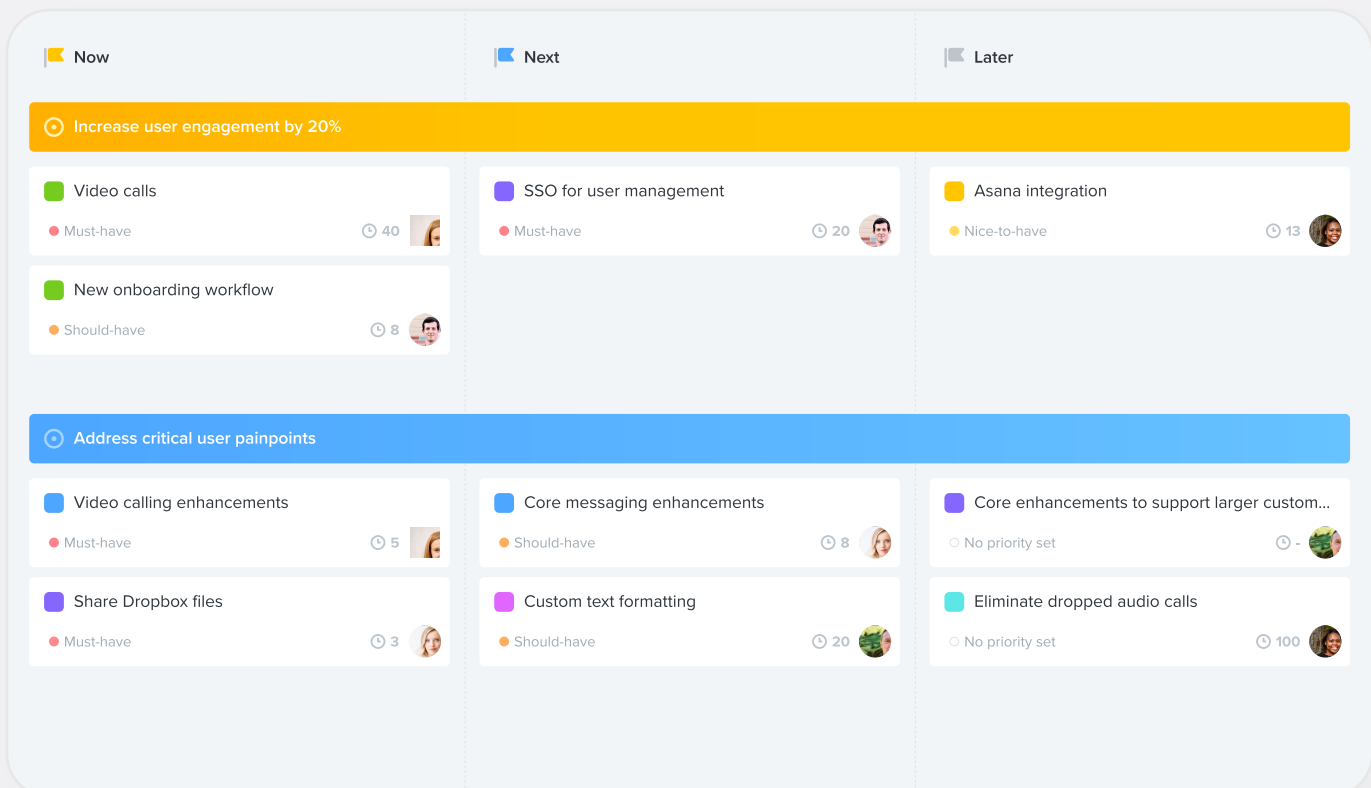


ROADMAP THREE

Now-Next-Later roadmap

Now-next-later roadmaps communicate your priorities over broad timeframes with an emphasis on the near-term. Features in the “later” bucket will be more high-level and reflect your long-term strategy. They are perfect for teams operating in fast-changing environments where release dates may change.

While this view is great for organizations that move quickly, you’ll want to keep things on track with a rigorous prioritization process. Otherwise, you risk having things in “later” stay there indefinitely and ideas not aligned with your long-term strategy may make their way into the “now” or “next” buckets.



STEP FOUR

Communicate your roadmap and rally the team

The final step is to rally everyone around the roadmap and empower them to get the information they need. For example, you can set up a regular meeting cadence or send emails updating the team about any product roadmap changes. Here at Productboard, we host a weekly product call that is open to the whole company where we look at a roadmap tailored for a large audience.

Provide product roadmap access to all members involved in the product lifecycle—from development to go-to-market. An easy way to do this is through a product roadmapping tool like Productboard, where stakeholders can view and track changes at any time with a consistent, single source of truth.

With Productboard, you can manage access to the roadmap and hide certain features based on roles and permissions—every stakeholder's roadmap can be tailored to their exact needs.

Once stakeholders have access, they can click on features and releases to learn more about the context, like what problem you're trying to solve and which objectives you're addressing. They can even see the customer feedback behind each feature or release.

This self-serve approach is much more powerful than a static slide that's quickly outdated and forgotten. Keep in mind that roadmap needs vary from stakeholder to stakeholder. Using multiple roadmaps tailored to different audiences can be extremely helpful:

- Use **delivery-specific roadmaps** with granular timelines for **development teams** that want to know the details. Communicate objectives, status/stage of development, areas of your product, and account for other work they need to support. Leverage dependencies and capture risks
- Use an **objective-led roadmap** focused on broad timelines for **senior executives and stakeholders** and make sure you include information such as the market opportunity & profit & loss details
- Use an **objective-led roadmap** with **customer-facing teams like sales, marketing, customer success, and support** to help them see what you're delivering feature-wise to support your objectives and provide details on the target customer. Leave room in your roadmap for go-to-market activities

You can see how this approach benefits all teams—engineering knows what they are accountable for and when. Customer success can thrill and delight customers and be clear about what you are and aren't working on. Sales can close more deals because they can share with confidence what's likely to be done and when. Product marketing can communicate new functionalities with great fanfare. And support can let customers know when new features are likely to be launched. All without asking the already overburdened product manager!

CASE STUDY

Knotch and Productboard

Lucas Galgano, Head of Product at Knotch, adopted Productboard because it allowed him to visualize his roadmap and flexibly collect, organize, and prioritize feature ideas.

Lucas says, **"We have multiple products with lots of features and so many ideas to get out the door. Managing our roadmap out of Excel and PowerPoint, as we've done in the past, wasn't sustainable. I needed something that could scale with our growth."**

As part of his first big initiative, he ran ideation exercises with colleagues across the organization. He captured these ideas in Productboard and added more context, force ranked them, and shared with colleagues for additional feedback from there.

Lucas later presented the roadmap at an all-hands meeting that was remarkably well-received for someone who had joined the organization several months prior. Colleagues didn't just appreciate the plan—they raved about the entire process and welcomed the opportunity to be a part of it.

KNOTCH



EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

Productboard's new easy- to-use roadmapping feature

Align everyone around the product roadmap with Productboard's
roadmapping software

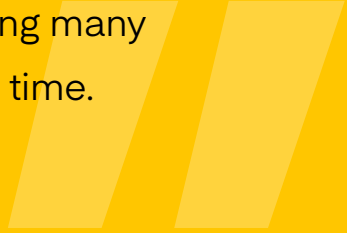


The best part about Productboard's Roadmaps is they are simply the output of a well-crafted plan



We don't spend any time building roadmaps for specific individuals; instead, a few clicks gives them what they need.

Having a single source of truth in Productboard creates a clear picture when you back up beyond a single team. We've moved our internal updates out of PowerPoint, saving many hours each week in preparation and distribution time.



Noah Singer,

Head of Product at
1-800-Contacts

WELL CRAFTED



Easily organize & create roadmaps

Add features directly to your roadmap, or use filters to display many at once



Customize roadmap structure

Make flexible high-level roadmaps or detailed release plans with a roadmap screen guide



Define custom swimlanes

Organize your roadmap by product area, team, or theme.



Plan objectives, releases, and features

Visualize exactly when you plan to start and finish working on initiatives.



Timeline Roadmaps: plan around milestones

Plan backwards from important visual data-based milestones



Share with different audiences

Tailor your roadmaps for every audience. They will all stay up-to-date

[Learn more: productboard.com/product/roadmaps/](https://productboard.com/product/roadmaps/)

