Inside the Tornado

Review by JoAnn Hackos, Comtech Services, Inc.

In the February 1999 issue of Best Practices, I introduced Geoffrey Moore’s first book, Crossing the Chasm, to Center members. Since then, many of you have joined in the discussions on the Chat Room and in the Study Group list-serv. Moore’s second book, Inside the Tornado, continues the tradition of giving us significant insights into the complexities of marketing high-tech products in a hypergrowth environment.

It’s easy after reading Crossing the Chasm to assume that we can easily identify our products’ position within the Technology Adoption Life Cycle. Inside the Tornado reminds us that understanding a product’s positioning can be extremely difficult. Even when the position of the product in the Life Cycle is correctly analyzed, creating an effective strategy to take advantage of that position is even more challenging. In fact, although I keep identifying companies that are following Moore’s analysis and positioning products to bridge the Chasm, enter the Tornado, and successfully emerge on Main Street, I have encountered almost no one in technical communication that has actively pursued a Chasm strategy.

To best understand Moore’s market analysis, we need to start with the fact that the world of high-tech products is different from the world of traditional products. The term Moore uses to describe this phenomenon is “discontinuous innovation.” Discontinuous innovation describes the reality that many of our companies offer new products to the market place that are incredibly disruptive to the end-users. They force the end-users to change completely how they do something. Take the switch from the typewriter to the word processor. The processes of producing and storing documents changed dramatically. In contrast, consider the automobile—in the past 75 years it has remained virtually unchanged, although originally it caused a massive discontinuity.

As communicators, we often learn quickly how difficult it is for many of our end-users to understand how to use our products effectively, especially when they have to change their workflow, their behavior, their learning, and so on. In return for all these radical changes, we promise greater efficiencies, higher productivity, and improvements to the quality of life. We know, however, that some of these promises are hard for end-users to realize. Just look at the difficulty of adding new Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) software to an organization. Some companies have experienced a negative Return on Investment (ROI) from the people costs alone.

In drawing his picture of the Chasm, Moore suggests that marketing high-tech products that are so disruptive is no easy task. Senior management, and all of us middle managers and developers, often don’t know what direction is best. Should we appeal to the early adopters, just ship as much product as possible, take advantage of every opportunity, or concentrate on a few focused niches? As communicators, we often find ourselves between the combatants: marketing and development fight for control over the product, everyone inside is afraid that sales will leak news of new development too soon, senior managers push shorter and shorter product release cycles, development and marketing believe that no one really needs any manuals or training, and so it goes.

In Inside the Tornado, Moore gives us some additional terms to help understand the Technology Adoption Life Cycle as he sees it developing in high-tech. We learn about the Early Market of early adopters and innovators, the Bowling Alley that helps us cross the Chasm, the Tornado that occurs when everything in the market has clicked on the new technology, and Main Street, which marks a period of stable growth before a product’s End of Life.

Our interest, of course, is the role of information developers (whether in documentation or training), as our companies attempt to move products through the cycle. I have some theories, of course, but we need to look closely at each stage and determine what information-development strategies might actually succeed. One thing seems clear to be successful we must drastically change our approach to information development and delivery at these life cycle stages.

**EARLY MARKET**

Significantly innovative (and disruptive) products first appeal to a rather small and often unusual group of customers. The Innovators and Early Adopters who Moore describes in the Chasm are often enthralled by new technology and are anxious to use new technology to establish a leadership edge in their own markets. The members of the Early Market club may be line managers or, more likely, local technical gurus within the organization, who want the latest technology as soon as, or
before, it is ready. Have you noticed that many of the product developers we work with really love these market leaders? They speak the same language as the developers; they often want new technology more for its own sake than what it will do to enhance their business environment. They challenge marketing to deliver more complicated features. If they have money to spend, they twist the arms of management with promises of big contracts—if only we added a few more important functions.

As information developers, we must ask some serious questions about the information needs of the Early Market. Much of the standard task-oriented information we produce for end-users may be irrelevant. The focus in the Early Market is on product, product, product—not usability.

THE CHASM
The Chasm is often a time of despair. The early markets are drying up or they are bringing in regular revenues but no bonanzas. Venture capitalists are worried because the promise isn’t being fulfilled. In fact, the steady climb in revenues may have ended. We’re not making our numbers because we’re still trying to use strategies that worked in the Early Market. Moore’s tough advice is to change focus completely. He urges high-tech companies to focus on one niche market and develop it to the hilt. To do so means getting very close to a small subset of customers and giving them a compelling reason to buy. He calls this process the Bowling Alley.

BOWLING ALLEY
In the Bowling Alley, the most significant shift for our companies is to let go of the total to concentrate on product features and functions and move into what Moore refers to as Customer Intimacy. Moore wants us to market exclusively to a manager in an end-user organization who really needs our new technology and to fight to win 40 percent or more of this niche market, a clear sign of market dominance.

Moore refers to this end-user manager as the economic buyer. This manager has an unsolvable problem, and your product is the solution. However, the solution requires that the end-users redesign their workflow and learn how to do their jobs differently. That’s where documentation and training come into play. If we can assist our developers and our marketing organizations in becoming intimately familiar with the end-user’s business, we can help in reducing the dreaded learning curve and overcome the resistance to the cost of supporting a new technology in the workplace.

Moore argues that customers in the niche markets of the Bowling Alley require a lot of expensive services to keep them happy and spending money. They may need, as I interpret it, extensive, end-user focused training and thorough business-oriented documentation. The Bowling Alley means producing specialized documentation and training that respond to the business goals of each niche. It means designing information that is specific to the customer’s business. It means spending time learning a great deal about the customers.

THE TORNADO
The analogy of the Bowling Alley, however, means that sometime, someday, we have to be ready for the Tornado, necessitating another radical shift in strategy. In the Bowling Alley, we keep working on moving from one niche to another, knocking down additional bowling pins until the conservatives in the market (early majority pragmatists) begin to notice. Once they notice that a lot of companies and individuals they know are using our product successfully, they are finally ready to buy. When they do, we find ourselves inside the Tornado.

In the midst of the Tornado, the tactic to use is simple—“just ship.” The goal is to win as many customers as possible by shipping product to them quickly. The challenge for information development is meeting the demand. Tornado customers are reluctant buyers. They don’t like disruption or innovation. They want something that works for them and is simple for their end-users. In many cases, the Tornado buyers come from the IT organizations, ready to insist that everyone in the company standardize on your company’s product. They want no hassles; everything must work just fine.

Product development in the Tornado is unimportant; conservative buyers don’t want innovative, complicated systems. Now is the time for new, easier to use interfaces with well-integrated documentation embedded into the product. Unfortunately, there is little time to develop any of these. To be prepared for the Tornado, information developers, as well as product developers, have to anticipate the need for usability during the Bowling Alley. At that point, we have time to use our experience with niche customers to find out what really works and can be produced quickly. This is the time where efficiency wins—getting information out the door, reducing costs, moving as fast as possible. For information developers it means finding ways to reduce cycle time through standardization, minimalism, and technology-based automation. Quite frequently, the quality of information may be irrelevant, at least until the Tornado ends.

Moore tells us that during a Tornado we must ignore the customer, attack the competition, focus on streamlining the product so that it needs less support, less training, less documentation. Then, as soon as the Tornado ends, we have to do a complete about turn and focus on the customer.

THE MAIN STREET
The end of the Tornado and the beginning of the Main Street part of the product life cycle is traumatic for many people in the company. Sales are down, revenues are down, executives bail out, unable to handle the end of hypergrowth. New management comes in tasked with finding a solution that will continue to provide stockholder value. There are few new buyers to be found but lots of customers who have a huge investment in our
products. Now they need care and feeding to keep them buying enhancements that will make their work lives more productive and enjoyable. They need usability and goal-centered information and training.

The Main Street market should become a “hay day” for information developers. Moore explains that the focus must be on the end-user, not the technology buyer. Under these circumstances, research and development is no longer especially important. In fact, the product may be in maintenance mode from a technology standpoint. However, customers must be courted with solutions, problem-solving, greater productivity, more enjoyable use of the product.

In many cases, it will be up to information development to help customers begin to get full use out of the product they already own. Through information and training, customers are helped to discover that functions they never knew existed can be made usable and exciting. To find out how to help customers, we need to engage in customer research, collecting data about the end-users and their work environment, experimenting with innovative ways of delivering information solutions. Moore reminds us at this state that “until a product’s feature is used, it has no value.” Information developers are most able, with a close relationship to interface redesign, to help customers discover these features.

**WHERE IS YOUR PRODUCT IN THE TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION LIFE CYCLE?**

Perhaps the most significant message that Moore has for us in *Inside the Tornado* is that you will not find it easy to sort out the life cycle and the product’s place in it. Different products that you support will be at different points in the life cycle and will require different documentation solutions. The message is clear: “one size does not fit all.”

Moore points out that a single product can actually be in more than one part of the life cycle. For example, a product might be in Main Street in North America but in the Tornado in Europe. In identifying the product’s life cycle stage, Moore recommends asking several questions:

- Where will the new product enter the Life Cycle? Not all new products are innovative, designed to appeal to innovators and early adopters.
- Where is the product in terms of its particular market segment? A product can be in the Bowling Alley with one market segment but viewed as a technology innovation in another market segment.
- Is the product permanently in the Bowling Alley, with no Tornado in the offing? Many products continue to be sold successfully to one niche market after another.
- Is your product failing because it is in the Chasm and no one is focusing on a new marketing strategy? A product’s failure does not necessarily mean that it is in the Chasm. Products can fail at many points in the life cycle and for many reasons. Even in the Tornado, your company may not be able to respond to the need to ship product as quickly and efficiently as possible.
- Is your product experiencing a small Tornado in the Bowling Alley? If so, how should you change your information-development strategy to respond?

**HANDLING HYPERGROWTH**

Moore ends *Inside the Tornado* with some ideas for us about handling the pressure of developing the right information at the right time for a reasonable cost. He suggests that we work together with marketing, sales, training, development, and others in a cross-functional team. The team’s goal is to position each product correctly in its market and make the right strategic decisions about delivering the product effectively. It means that everyone on the team must understand the Technology Adoption Life Cycle and the challenge of the Chasm. It means that strategies have to be developed by the team, given the expert contributions of each professional team member. It also means that no one should dictate what other team members contribute.

Information developers have long suffered under the influence of uninformed and short-sighted individuals representing development, marketing, or senior management. Everyone seems to be an authority on documentation except the professional technical communicators. To combat these attitudes, we must become partners with our marketing organizations and our developers, but most important, we must understand our customers and the role our products play for them.

To assist in this strategic planning, we have scheduled a full day on the Chasm model at the Best Practices conference, scheduled for September 26-29 in Keystone, Colorado. Please join us.

Geoffrey A. Moore; Harper Business