

SOPA, PIPA and Product Management

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SOPA and PIPA – two acronyms that have been splashed across the pages of the news, taken over Twitter feeds with the #SOPA hash tag, and caused groups to form by the thousands on Facebook in protest against them. Seeing these words so often in the last month not only burned them into my brain (quite possibly forever), but also got me thinking about how these bills relate to product management – more precisely, the consequences of not addressing the right problems.

Case in point – SOPA and PIPA tackle the issue of online piracy, but what problem was actually trying to be solved with their introduction? Copyright infringement!

These words have been in the middle of a battlefield since the beginning days of the Internet. With many early file sharing sites (think Napster) thrust into the spotlight early on as an example of what might happen if you placed content online for others to download and exchange freely amongst themselves. Lawsuits, huge financial penalties and the possibility of jail time threatened both those who created the file sharing sites, and those who used them. And they still do today.

But realistically, what else would happen when you open up a virtual space to the world, with very little policy and law in the first place? The same thing that happens when you do that with anything – people will create their own policies and they will do it with free speech as a foundational premise. And so more and more file sharing and content streaming sites have opened up, so that these days you can instantly download, watch, or listen to just about anything with the click of a button, and at no cost.

On the side of content providers, revenue is lost due to people downloading copyrighted content online for free.

The SOPA and PIPA firestorm really got me thinking, what exactly is the issue – is it really copyright infringement? Or is there something deeper going on here?

If you were to ask a company who supports SOPA to state the problem they are trying to solve with the bill, my guess is they might say something like “everyone is stealing from us, nobody respects copyrights, people want everything for free”.

But is that true? At our moral core, is society really looking to get everything for nothing? Personally, I don't think so.

In my opinion, it's a question of value for the end user. If large content distribution companies (who consider copyright infringement the problem) looked a little deeper at the market, they would find that consumers are asking for easy, affordable and instant access to content. This indicates that the problem lies in the distribution channel.

So instead of asking how they can protect copyrights, content providers should ask themselves how they can conveniently provide access to quality content in an affordable manner that provides value for customers and a revenue stream for themselves. In doing so, they might just find that they don't have to worry about the stealing anymore, because people just might be willing to pay (a reasonable price) for what it is they are offering.

So how does this relate to product management? Simple – looking at the problem from a different perspective will get people to find answers for the better problem. Over the past couple of years, we have seen several companies (and even one comedian) do just that.

With the music industry being one of the first industries hit by the piracy trend, many music distribution companies chose to fight by suing for copyright infringement. Over and over and over again. But then Apple came along, took a look at the real problem, and offered an affordable solution. iTunes was introduced into the market and offered a solution the market was really asking for – an affordable and convenient means of accessing quality music online. The result? Sales.

Another example is Netflix – a company who responded to the market a long time ago, and who would make a good partner for any content distribution company looking to capitalize on the shift towards an online market. Millions of people adopted the idea of paying for content online by subscribing to Netflix, proving that we are willing to pay for the convenience if it's offered.

And last but not least, proving that even independent artists can offer the market what it is asking for, and reap all the financial rewards for themselves, is Louis C.K. The comedian recently produced a new stand-up show that would typically be released on a DVD and cost consumers around \$20. But instead, with his ear to the ground and a willingness to experiment with online distribution, he decided to release it directly on the Internet as a \$5 download. The result? He cleared \$1M in 12 days.

Funny what happens when you take the time to figure out and resolve the right problem instead of fighting the wrong one, isn't it?

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