

Founder's Guide to Building a Developer Tools Business: Part 2

Marketing to developers

ALL ARTICLES



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There's marketing, and then there's marketing to developers.

Although many vendors think they know how to speak to developers, the typical developer will tell you otherwise. Developers commonly feel that vendors fail to align the tools they offer with vendors' expectations, or they complain that vendors talk down to them.

And that's a mistake because whether you're a software vendor marketing to one-person Web programming shops or large enterprises, developers do much of the decision-making when it comes to choosing tools.

With this challenge in mind, here's a primer on how to market to developers effectively.

Meet developers where they are

One thing you learn quickly when marketing to developers is that many generic types of marketing communication strategies don't mesh well with developers.

Developers aren't very likely to read your marketing campaign emails -- and they are more likely than the typical prospect to filter them out automatically before they even reach their inboxes. Nor are they going to respond well (in most cases) to cold calls, if you can find a phone number for them in the first place.

Indeed, in general, any communication that feels like an active outreach can be a turn off to developers. They spend their days getting chased by headhunters, which most of them don't like; the last thing they want is to have marketers disrupting them from doing their jobs too.

That's why a more effective marketing strategy is one that reaches developers through the channels where they want to spend their time -- which is not reading emails or answering phones. It's engaging with developer communities and technical ecosystems.

For example, a marketplace where developers go to search for a tool to solve a particular pain-point is a much more organic location for a vendor to reach developers than a traditional campaign. The developer is already going to the marketplace by choice, and finding a product that helps solve a problem that s/he is facing is a welcome outcome.

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Use buzzwords wisely

Everyone -- primarily every developer -- loves to hate buzzwords. Nothing turns a developer off to your product like marketing copy that is full of terms like "digital transformation" and "technical debt."

These terms usually mean little in a specific sense. They also tend to convey values of features that exist in virtually every modern software tool and therefore do little to distinguish one

product from another. After all, which modern tool doesn't enable digital transformation or help teams avoid technical debt in one way or another?

This is not to say that you should never use buzzwords. Sometimes, they do communicate clear value. For example, "microservices" is a hip buzzword at the moment. Still, it means something relatively specific (it refers to a specific type of application architecture as well as the software delivery process that goes along with it). A term like that might be OK to use if your product is related explicitly to microservices.

But avoid buzzwords that lack specific meaning, or that don't make your product distinctive within your market or ecosystem.

Segment based on reality

A market segment is the portion of the overall market that you intend to reach. Typically, choosing one or a few segments to focus on is critical because few software vendors can genuinely appeal to the entire market of developers.

But the mistake commonly made is to define segments without real planning or research. Your company might follow a narrow market vision established when the company was born, even though the market has changed significantly since that time. Or you might make the mistake of choosing another vendor to try to imitate, and then end up copying that vendor's marketing strategy. This approach is unlikely to communicate the unique value of your product.

Instead, segment yourself based on research and reality, not aspiration or vision. Survey developers to see which pain-points they face in your ecosystem, then determine which ones your product addresses -- not the other way around.

And don't be afraid to realign when the market changes. A vendor developing APM for containers circa 2015 (before most people had heard of Kubernetes, and when containers were still viewed mainly as a solution for software testing and staging rather than production) would be in a different segment than a vendor in today's Kubernetes-centric age.

Make it easy to adopt

Developers like writing and deploying code. They don't like having to wade through tedious processes before they can start writing and deploying code.

Thus, your marketing strategy should make it easy for developers not just to find your product and see its value, but also to adopt it.

By "easy to adopt," I don't mean a product that lets developers sign up for a free fourteen-day trial on a Web form, only to require them to go through a lengthy setup process -- and, even worse, get bombarded with marketing emails during the trial period. Instead, I mean a product that can be launched quickly -- with minimal signup and clicks -- from the same place where developers learn about the product. If all of this can be done within a browser and without requiring any downloads, even better.

Don't talk down

Last but not least, remember that no developer responds well to marketing that feels pedantic. An approach that sends the message that "your process is good, and our product can make it even better" is much better than "your process is broken, and you need us to solve it."

You may think that no developer in the world can live without your product. But few developers think that. You need to explain how your product can add more value to their existing workflows rather than implying that the developers don't know what they are doing and need you to be their savior.

Conclusion: Persona, Persona, Persona

What all of the above boils down to is understanding developers' persona. Developers operate in specific channels (like app marketplaces) that conventional marketing overlooks. They want tools that respond to their actual needs, not the needs that vendors imagine them to have. They also want tools that are easy to adopt, and that add value to the stacks they already use, rather than trying to redefine everything they do. These are the traits that define developers, and that's the persona marketers must understand to reach them.



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