

TEI 014: How to Break Into Product Management or Change Industries

Speakers:

Chad McAllister, PhD

Lee Martucci

Welcome to the Everyday Innovator Podcast for Product Managers, Developers and Innovators. Your Host is Chad McAllister, who gives you innovation training your customers will love you for. Get ready to take your career to the next level, for the doctor is in.

Chad: Hi, everyone. I'm Chad and I have the pleasure of introducing to you Lee Martucci. Lee, thanks so much for talking product management with us today. Lee is a Marketing professional with over 25 years of experience with numerous roles and product management from telecommunication and cellphone services to building and construction materials. He is currently helping GAF. You likely know this company if you've been involved in building, repairing your roof, or walking through Home Depot or Lowes where the roofing shingles and ceilings are sold.

Lee, I'm glad we could arrange this interview and that's really because you have such a diverse experiences in different industries as a Product Manager.

Lee: Well thank you, Chad. I'm glad to be here.

Chad: So let's start with that diverse experience. Did you find it difficult to change industries as a product manager? That's pretty different going from telecommunications like into construction materials.

Lee: It can be. But what I always found most important is to really have the discipline—understand the discipline of product management. I find a lot easier to go from a product manager in one company to another one that's a totally different product and market that would be to change from a Salesperson to a Product Manager. So in my particular situation, I went from [Telecomm](#) to building products. For me to go from a Telecomm—very large structure product management group—to, let's say, building products in another very large sophisticated Product Management group, it might be a little tougher just because they can attract people that already have that product experience.

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Chad: Sure.

Lee: But what I did is I went to a smaller company into building products and they really valued the fact that I had Product Management experience in a different field. I was able to quickly learn the products in the market. So bottom line, I think it's easier to move to another company, another market than it is to move to a whole different discipline—like going from Sales to Product Management.

Chad: Okay, so your path there was actually to go join a smaller company that appreciated the Product Management processes that you had and the knowledge that you had as opposed to you trying to reestablish yourself as a larger company, like you said, where they could attract more people with Product Management experience.

Lee: That's right.

Chad: Very good. So how did you gain that product management experience? What are the kinds of things did you do along the way to make you stand out as someone that really understands Product Management well so you could jump industries?

Lee: Today, maybe they have Product Management majors. Back when I started they certainly did not.

Chad: Yeah, we still don't see too many of them.

Lee: Okay. It was a business major. When I started out, I was a marketing major and like many marketing majors, your first jobs sometimes are

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Sales. I did work in Sales for quite a while. The way that I got from Sales into Product Management was really by doing product management type activities in my sales position. I'll give you a specific example. I was working at Telecomm with [US West](#)—which is now Century Link in Colorado. I, as a Sales Manager and a salesperson, created a competitive analysis report for the market and shared that up the line to corporate. That report, nobody else was doing it and to do that report required marketing research. It required studying competitors, pricing, and how they position in the markets. So what that did is it separated myself from other Sales Managers that this person actually has product management type skills and aptitude. When a position came open, I was able to apply for that and to say they recognized it because they recognized that I did the competitive analysis but I was also able to pitch the sales and street smarts benefit that I would bring into that position. So they really valued that and said, "Hey, he knows the market. He knows competitors. He's been out there carrying a bag and this person has the skills necessary to be able to do product management." So I basically found an area of product management and excelled in it even from my position that wasn't a Product Manager.

Chad: Street smarts sure goes a long way.

Lee: Yeah.

Chad: What was your motivation at that point, I'm curious? Were you just trying to do a better job as a Sales Manager or did you have this notion of day to work into closer to Product Development.

Lee: Yeah, that's a good question because I really wasn't doing it to try to get a position in corporate. I was doing it because I just felt that to be really effective at my job, I needed to really understand the market and understand the competitors. There was another angle that I recall. A lot of times we would have corporate come down with either pricing or

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products that I knew weren't going to work in the market because they never asked the salespeople. That was my way of saying, "Hey these are the things you need to consider as you're developing products and pricing for our markets. I was doing it so that they would deliver products that I knew I could sell and therefore, I would be more successful at Sales. It just happened to lead to an opportunity in the corporate in Product Management.

Chad: Okay. So you were trying to pull through actually from the product management group to get products you knew the customers needed.

Lee: That's right, yes.

Chad: So, in effect, kind of helping do the job that Product Managers do to understand what customers' value.

Lee: Yes. Very true.

Chad: That made it a good transition. I get that. So let me go back to that transition a little bit because a question I often get asked is how you get into Product Management. Most job openings will say a minimum number of years of product management experience for this role. And it's that classic catch-22 for applicants that don't have the experience and how do they get that experience? So you went from an existing Sales role and just started doing some product management activities.

Lee: Right. Yeah.

Chad: And was a formal position open that you applied for or—?

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- Lee: Yes. Yes, it's often hard to—if you don't have that experience—to get that. Say, I had those two years but here's a couple things. One is to know that when people lay out a job description, I look at it as a wish list. I've hired quite a few people too, over the years. Let's say you have four key things that you need from that applicant. You're usually going to get three of the four. If you only have two of the four, that's probably not a good fit. It's rare that you get four out of the four. I look at that two years' experience as a—they say it's a requirement but you've got to have pretty much all the other skills and experience that you can and you can overcome that.
- If you're going to try to go from Sales into Product Management, it's going to be very difficult to go from one company in Sales to Product Management somewhere else as opposed to going in your own company where they know you and they know your experience. So, for example, what I did is I was in Telecomm as Sales Manager to Product Management. They knew me, they knew what I could do, they knew I had some of that experience in that competitive analysis. So it was easier for them to say, "Okay, he doesn't have Product Management but we know him and he does all these other things. He understands our market, he understands our business." Therefore, I was able to make that switch. Had I gone to Telecomm Sales trying to get into building products in Product Management, it wouldn't work. It would be too big a jump for them to take, I must say. Unless my uncle worked for the company.
- Chad: Some inside path there.
- Lee: Yeah, right.
- Chad: Very good. So in changing industries, you did that successfully by starting in a smaller company that appreciated the product management disciplines you had. This is a question I get asked a lot of times because Product Managers will find a position that they're really interested in and

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have that deep experience of Product Manager but it's outside their prior industry experience.

Lee: Right.

Chad: The job application might say, "We want someone with this particular type of industry experience in the last five years" or something. Frankly, it's something I struggle with too. The distinction that I found is if it's a company that's looking on how we improve our existing offerings, then I can appreciate that industry experience being meaningful and can shortcut some things. But at the same time, the products I've been involved with that I've seen others involved with that are truly innovative, was innovative because often the Product Manager was from outside that industry and didn't come in with the assumptions that everyone else was making.

Lee: Yeah. What I would say to that is you've got to sell that. Because there is truth to that and the person doing the interviewing and the hiring may or may not recognize that. There's certainly advantages of having fresh eyes and looking at it from a different perspective. You can get very myopic in a company in how you look at things so having somebody from the outside can be advantageous to that company to get new way of thinking and that's where a lot of your breakthroughs will come. I think as an interviewee in that position, you need to take that in what could be perceived the negative—don't have experience in the industry—and spin it that way in showing that that can be a very much a positive. Even better if you're able to find examples of where either you've done it or other people have done it in the past.

Chad: Yeah, that's really good advice. I appreciate you sharing that. For the Everyday Innovators listening right now, the notion that if you want to switch to another industry, focus really on the disciplines of Product Management and how coming with a fresh set of eyes to that work really

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can lead to the breakthrough in innovations that offer much more value than the customers that have in the past experiences.

Lee: Yes, that's right. And just to add to that, the idea of learning the market and the actual product is a heck of a lot easier than learning how to be a Product Manager and stressing that point that you're interviewing that great Product Manager, you can learn the products in the market.

Chad: Yeah, and so on that point, what are some of the things you did to learn Product Management? Was it just grinding out the years and going through product and getting experience? Or did you proactively also seek out some information?

Lee: Yeah. All of the above. When I first started, it was a lot of learning from my peers, my boss, from others and seeing how they approached their jobs and learning from them. At the same time—we had many people may know Robert Cooper who wrote the book on winning new products, I believe. It's been a while. Back in the early 90s. We actually brought Robert Cooper in to install our new Product Development process. So we had people who wrote the books who knew the market and learned from them as well.

Going forward, I joined—that's where I met you, Chad—the PDMA (Product Development and Management Association). I learned a lot from networking with other Product Managers and then went to get certified in the new Product Development professional [MPDP](#) discipline. I went through that, studied, went through that course and I passed that test, and I continued to learn. So it's a combination of books and it's a combination of networking—learning from inside your company but very important outside the company too. I think networking groups are very valuable. You should get involved.

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Chad: Yeah, and things like Meetup.com, makes it a lot easier these days to find people who are doing the same sort of work or interest in similar activities to dive in and talk with each other.

Lee: Yeah, absolutely.

Chad: I've been involved with that new Product Development professional MPDP certification so long now I kind of lose track with who I've worked with. It's kind of interesting to me how I run into—"I've done that or something like that" as formal education to really prepare themselves for product management.

Lee: Yeah. I think a lot of people get so bogged down in their job and they have so much to do and they just end up taking on what your internal company views as how to do product management. But I think you need to step back and step away from the company and really get out and learn from others. There's always things that are changing in this business—new techniques, new tools that are out there. You're not going to learn that by just nose to the grindstone in your own company.

Chad: Right. Lots of opportunities just to see how the Product Management concepts are applied by different people in different industries.

Lee: Yeah.

Chad: Oh, you do it that way. That's interesting. Maybe I should think about how that applies to us.

Lee: Yeah, definitely.

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Chad: Great. Very good. So just to recap the kinds of goals that you've had. So you started in marketing. I think Marketing was your actual educational background, right? Marketing Business?

Lee: Yes.

Chad: And you moved to Sales as a career.

Lee: Right.

Chad: And from there on to Product Management?

Lee: Yes. Sales, Sales Management, and then into Product Management.

Chad: Okay. Did we miss any roles along the way?

Lee: Well when I was in Product Management, I actually got out of Product Management along the way. But I kept coming back to Product Management. So once I got into Product Management, it evolved into an opportunity in Channel Management. I did that for a few years.

Chad: Tell us how that differs. What were your responsibilities as a Channel Manager?

Lee: Yeah. So as a Channel Manager, it was less of the developing new products and more of the managing the relationship and the program. IT was more of a program type of management for the Salespeople. For example, I would take new products that were developed and I would

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launch and manage that new product with the channel. I would also develop programs to help the Salespeople do their job better. This was in the Telecomm space and one thing was to understand where our footprint was and where we could actually deliver service.

So it was realizing that there was times where we could sell or provide service. So how can we provide tools so they know when we can and can't sell and what the performance of our network would be in those areas? So that leads to a development activity in creating tools for them to do their jobs. So different things like that. Assisting Product Managers in launches.

So I did that for a few years and it was very good. I was in a position where I had been a Salesperson and also a Product Manager so that in between was very effective.

Chad: Sure, the perfect combination and no doubt that gave you huge credibility with both groups.

Lee: That's right. So Salespeople—I think this is a point that helps with Product Management. I got into Product Management because I was frustrated with my company bringing things to the market that I knew wouldn't work because they didn't understand what it was like to be trying to sell it. Nothing happens will something gets sold—another one of my favorite sayings that comes from the Sales side. You were really developing these products that can be sold by the Salespeople or if it's retail, on the retail shelf. So you need to understand that and you cannot understand that by sitting back at corporate and going on your computer and pulling up other websites. You need to get out in the field. So being that I was a Salesperson, it has always helped me relate to the people that always have to sell it. I've had people say, "Lee gets it." Salespeople say that. So there's that credibility that's very important. If you haven't been a salesperson, then I suggest you spend a lot of time with salespeople and show them that you're listening to them, you're traveling with them, understanding what the customer needs, and what salespeople need to sell it.

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- Chad: I love that motivation you share that you're interest in Product Management was to get products that customers would buy from us—that actually solved a problem they cared about.
- Lee: Right.
- Chad: Which kind of suggests that Product Management at the time, for you was not doing what it should've been doing to really enable the sales team to be successful with good products.
- Lee: That's right.
- Chad: Because a good product a customer wants almost sells itself, right? I don't want to diminish the importance of the Sales role. If you have a product customers don't want, a really good Salesperson has a tough time with that no matter what.
- Lee: Yeah, that's right. You can have products that are good products and nobody is selling it, especially in a Direct Sales situation. If nobody is selling it because the Salesperson doesn't understand it or let's just say the Salesperson is not compensated appropriately for it, the Product won't get sold even if it's a great product. So you need to always make sure you understand that it's the place part of the four P's of Marketing, right? It's the distribution, it's the Salespeople, it's how it actually gets to the customer. So it just can't be a great product. You have to figure out how you're going to sell it. Understanding your channels, your sales channels is going to be the key component in getting that thing on the market.

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Chad: Absolutely. Very good. So do you have an example of a time where there was a product that you were involved with that you thought could be better or maybe one starting from the beginning?

Lee: You mean when I was in a Sales capacity?

Chad: You can take us wherever you'd like to begin with. So looking for an example from where you learned from a Product Development experience—here is something we can do better and how did we figure out what to do.

Lee: Yeah well a lot of times it could be little subtle things. We had a product when I was working for a building materials company which was cocks and sealants. The product, typically we put this in our products in an 11-ounce cock tube. It was originally going to go out in that type of configuration but then really went to understand who the target audience was and how they would do it installing products. It was a sealant for in a bathroom. Of the product, often we found that the person that would do sealing around things like the sink, for example, a lot of times we found that the females were actually doing the work. You might think, oh it's on the guy's honey-do list and he does it. Well a lot of times it's the females and that's—

Chad: Yeah, that's only because the guy that she asked to do it never got around to doing it.

Lee: I think you might have experience.

Chad: I'm speaking as a husband who may have ignored a few things on my honey-do list at times.

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- Lee: Yeah, exactly. So anyway, the woman doesn't have a cock gun. So they're like, "I don't want to buy a cock gun but they're certainly familiar with a squeeze tube and the jobs were smaller too. It wasn't like you were doing a whole huge bathroom or shower and all that. So the idea that let's put this product in a squeeze tube was a lot more targeted towards that customer. You've got a female who's using this product. You want to make it so that it's easy to operate let's say. You don't need a lot of force to squeeze it, necessarily. The product needs to come out easily and just make this product very easy to seal was something we learned.
- From a sales side of it, originally we were starting with an eight-ounce tube for example. We found that our competitors were smaller and that size tube would put us out of the market because when you're hanging there, I don't think you put a lot of attention whether it's five ounces or six ounces. You see the tube sitting there and you think it's the same. Marketers have been doing this all the time—finding the right amount of volume that's in the product. So coming out with a five ounce tube versus a seven ounce enabled us to get price points that was also important. We wanted to get the price below the \$10 dollar range.
- So there's all these factors involved with distribution to figure out where the product needs to be in size, how the products configure, who the target audience was. Had we designed this as a regular cock tube, it would be priced high, be in the wrong section, and probably wouldn't be as successful as it is. So today it is in most Ace Hardware stores and True Values and it's been a successful product.
- Chad: Yeah, great example and really good example of product repositioning. Of taking an existing sealant, a cock and putting in a new product for a market segment. I don't know if you were involved in this work or not. I'm curious what research was done to recognize that there was a need here for women to have a product that could be applied without also purchasing a cock gun. What steps were taken to uncover this in the first place?

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- Lee: Yeah, well first we started out talking with our distribution partners—going to our ACE Hardwares—and talking to them and really understanding what products were out there and what some of the problems were with cock. The whole idea—this product was a mildew-free product for bathrooms. So there was a concern about mildew, right? Mildew is something that's been growing (no pun intended) as a concern lately. Mold and mildew and the hazards of it. So you've got this kind of upswing in kind of recognition of the issue. Therefore, having a product that really addressed that was important. The distribution of the Ace Hardwares of the world have confirmed that the people who have come in say, "Will this mildew?" So it lead to the name which is [Mildew Free](#). So it pretty clearly tells what the product is and—
- Chad: Let me ask you, were those interactions with those partners visiting them or talking to them in person interviews? Phone calls? Surveys?
- Lee: Yes. Visiting. But what I would also do too is I would go to the cock isle and just kind of hang out. I'd see somebody maybe looking at cocks. I would go there and watch without stalking but watch what they were looking at. I would see that they'd look at the label, they'd turn it over and they would try to read something. They would then look at another one. So you kind of observe that observation of them in their natural environment. It's funny, sometimes they'd ask me. They'd go and ask, "Have you ever used this?" Or I'd ask them. I'd say, "Have you used that before?" As I'm just a curious shopper. They'd go, "No" or "Yes, I've used it and it works well." And so you'd just learn from them by hanging out and visiting. So I'm fortunate that I was in that business where I could go to the local Ace Hardware store and as I've always had to go for other things anyway. I just kind of experience that isle. So you learn a lot by just observing and talking with customer and sales guys. The sales guys in the store, for example, are full knowledge because they get questions all day long and that's how you can come up with product ideas—by asking them what people are asking for.

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- Chad: Sure. And the shift in the market segment there—recognizing that there was a need for a product for women to use just in their bathroom. Where did that shift in gender come from? Was it through those observations or some other research?
- Lee: You know, the...there wasn't any primary research that we conducted or even secondary that we bought. I think it might have been as simple as a Reed Magazine that say the trends women mind. So I think it was from that and from a theory that was proposed in perhaps these women buying cocking to do bathrooms. I think through asking questions with their distributors, they confirmed that. So I think that's where it came from but the idea I'm not sure if it's a spark from a magazine or in our office even might have even said, "I'm the one that does all the buying." And we're like, "Really? I thought your husband did." And then we find out by asking others in the office that indeed they are the ones. We were like, "Wow. Originally we missed this so let's look deeper." I think that's probably how that one came about.
- Chad: Yeah, exactly. This practice of actually getting out and talking to real people and getting customers and learning preferences and what they need as opposed to collecting information through surveys or even existing data that was probably taken for some other reason. That's what Product Managers need to do. We actually get a handle on what others value and what the problem actually is.
- Do you have another example of where those user observations, that ethnography kind of research was used to look at a product and try to make that product better or come up with a new product?
- Lee: Well we're going through one now that I can think about. In the commercial roofing area, there is a—it's very labor intensive. You have—unlike residential roofs which are similar. They're sloped and usually clear. Every once in a while we have pipes coming up. Commercial roofs are all different shapes and sizes. Some have more penetration than others. Some are relatively flat. They have to be tapered to strains and

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things so the water can drain off. There's a lot of different things to consider. The old school way of putting up a commercial roof was the old tar and reinforcements so put down hot asphalt and membrane and then hot asphalt membrane. A lot of businesses have shifted away from that but to more simply putting down what we call single ply. However, that concept to tailor a roof to that particular roof tailor and build it right there like they used to do has lessened in the market because the cost of asphalt, the fumes; the new cleaner technologies have moved away from that. What I'm getting at is that worked very well but as the materials and public opinion changed, we started moving away from that.

Now we're looking more towards liquid membrane. So in a sense, going back into that liquid but with new liquids that are not hot asphalt. They are cold applied. They're reactive bite. In other words, they mix with the part A and part B and they react in cure. So the idea now that going back to using a liquid and a [inaudible] [00:32:57] allows you to custom that roof to that need more quickly because we have faster cure type of materials and they're what we call "self-terminating" so that those liquid products will terminate right to all those flashings, right to the edge of the curves, and to the walls. Now, in a sense, we're going back to the old way of doing things with new materials. And it's allowing a lot of versatility in the business by the new innovations in adhesive and sealants and materials that are in liquid form. Years ago it was too expensive. Competition folks in all these areas were coming out with cost effective—so you're starting to see roofing back to more of a less liquid applied in the field. That's an early development.

Chad: That's really being driven by technology—the new materials—a change in environmental concerns—materials that are more environmentally friendly and safe—and it sounds like also more faster application time and overall better quality.

Lee: Yeah, and that's a good point. Because the focus is on the ability or that roof to get that job done quicker because time is money in this business and it's labor intensive so to get them to be done in two days instead of three days, that's huge. And this is at the very front end of the market. A

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lot of those people looking into the future and how this is evolving, I think you're going to see it more and more.

It kind of reminds me of the Telecomm days. There was a lot of talk for years back in the early 90s about how data is going to be so big. We said that for ten years through the 90s. It's going to be big and it never really did much. It was all just, "Why do I want data? I could use my phone to call people." Now we're here using Skype. Who does text and get their emails from their phones and all that. So now what looked like what everyone said was coming and it didn't happen near as quick as people thought. But now it's the way you do things. So I kind of look at this liquid-applied roofing as similar where people are saying it's coming but they're not seeing the traction and it usually takes longer than people think. But one it does, it catches on and you get that growth and I think that's what you'll see there as well.

Chad: Yeah, and then trusting how you're seeing some connections between the industries you've been involved in even though they're very different industries.

Lee: Yeah.

Chad: Very good. Thank you so much for sharing that example too. It kind of emphasizes the environmental forces and technology forces driving new Product Development. I always like to wrap up my interviews by asking for an innovation quote that you love and why you chose that one so what is yours?

Lee: Well, I would say "Perfect is the enemy of good." That was, I believe, by Voltaire who said that. The reason I like that is a lot of times in Product Development, we'll be working with other groups who are involved in that product and a particular time but that's not their role in the company. For instance, it might be people in the marketing area that are doing labels, let's say, or it might be somebody in manufacturing who is

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producing the product. One thing I learned is you're never going to get the product perfect. You're never going to get it absolutely right. But you need to get to the market because that's where you end up learning in the market. As you learn in the market, it's really where you're going to get your incremental growth and really learn to tweak that product to really make it successful.

So it's very important to get speed as you get that product out. It doesn't mean to be reckless but if you can get 90 percent there, the other 10 percent you'll figure out when you're in the market. That's good. If you wait until it's 100 percent perfect, it's going to be a delayed product. It's going to take longer to get out and your learning is going to take longer, and you might miss some if the early market growth. That's why that perfection is the enemy of good. You need to get out to the market and learn once you're there.

Chad: Perfect is the enemy of good. Excellent quote. Love that. I would even go further than that. If you're trying to wait until you get perfect, you're never going to learn what you really need to know because you don't have that customer interaction.

Lee: That's right.

Chad: In the software world, there's the often-used phrase that if you're embarrassed by the first version you ship, then you ship too late. Because you have to get it out and learn from the customer feedback and then make things better.

Lee: Yup. I like that.

Chad: Very good! I really appreciate your time going through this interview with us and such a great experience talking about how to get into Product Management from another role and across industries. What

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makes this interview work well for you? Was there anything you want to wrap up with?

Lee: Well I'm just glad to share my learnings with others. I continually learn every day in this business and I think you need to look outside to learn from others. So if I can give back some, some folks have picked up some pointers or even if it's just one pointer, that's great. I'm just happy to share and help out in any way that I can.

Chad: You're doing a great job of paying it forward and thanks so much for sharing your experience and knowledge with us.

Lee: Sure.

Chad: Great. Thanks, Lee. Take care!

Lee: Okay, Chad. Thank you.

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