THE PRODUCT MANAGER'S COMPLETE GUIDE TO

PRIORITIZATION

How to Choose the Right Features and Ship Better Products

ProductPlan

The Product Manager's Complete Guide to Prioritization

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Introduction

If you've been a product manager for any amount of time, you've likely found that your challenge isn't a lack of data, information, or feedback. Rather it's just the opposite; the firehose of ideas can be very difficult to manage.

With this reality in mind, it makes sense that prioritization is such an essential skill for product managers. The question always is: which ideas are worthy of making it onto your roadmap?

Our hope is that upon finishing this guide, you'll realize that, like any skill, effective prioritization can be learned and mastered. It just requires practice, teamwork, and the right tools.

Did You Know?

Of the 500+ product managers we surveyed in our 2018 Product Planning Report, more than 25% of respondents reported that the primary objective of their roadmaps is to help plan and prioritize initiatives.

1

Optimizing Your Firehose of Ideas

1

Optimizing Your Firehose of Ideas

Since it all starts with gathering business intelligence, let's review some key channels for data collection. At the very least, you must ensure that your firehose of ideas contains some good ones.

Customer Feedback

Your customers know better than just about anyone what your product needs. Ask them for feedback, but remain aware that this is a bias data sample. And don't allow one-off feature requests to distract you from your overarching product vision.

Analytics and Metrics

Evidence is far more compelling than opinion. If you have real-world user data on your product or similar products, then you already have a great source of business intelligence to inform which ideas might be worth pursuing.

Competition

Your goal, of course, is to bring a unique and valuable product to the market. But competitors offer valuable data. Learn what customers like about competitor products, what they don't like, and what they wish they had. Just make sure to steer clear of 'me-too' products.

Sales and Customer Success

Look no further than other teams within your own company for valuable product intelligence. Your sales reps and customer success managers are in constant communication with your customers. Ask them about common feature requests, usage trends and complaints.

Analyst Research

Study industry reports about your category of product (i.e. analyst firms like Gartner and Forrester) to determine what types of products work, with whom, and why.

2

Organizing Initiatives Into Themes

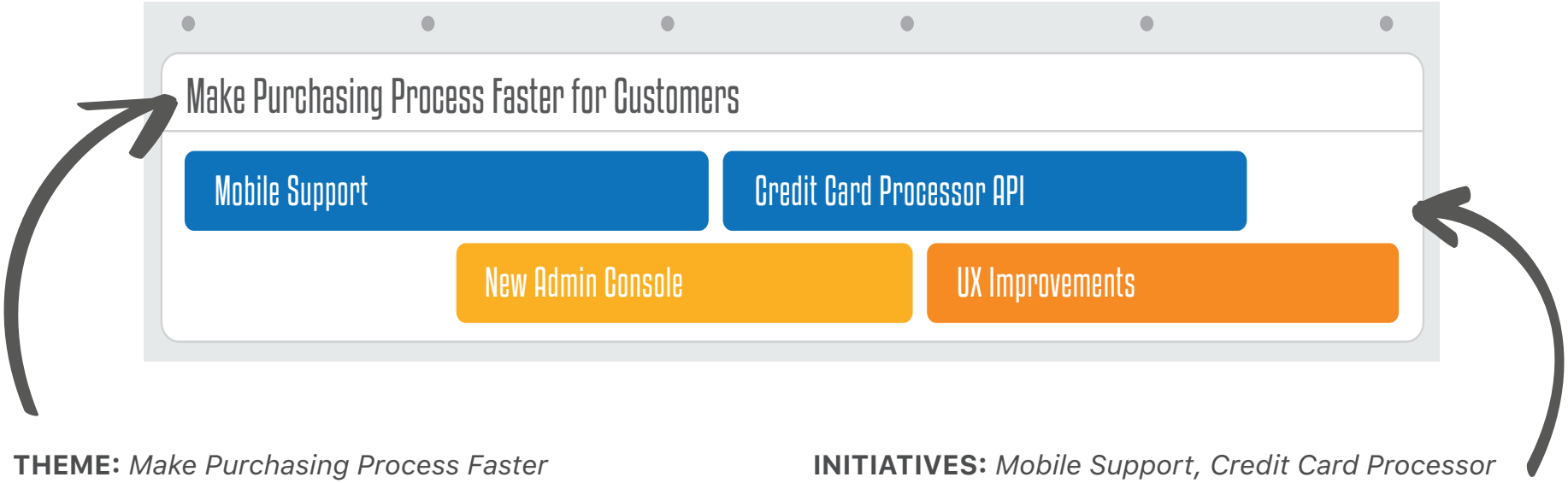
2

Organizing Initiatives Into Themes

Once you're convinced that your list of feature ideas contains some good ones, it's time to create a strategy that will help you decide what makes it onto the roadmap. One effective way to do this is through the use of themes.

Themes are groupings of similar features, epics, or initiatives. They are goal-driven and represent customer value. Themes provide direction and guidance during the prioritization process by focusing on higher-level objectives that generally make for easier consensus-reaching. One way to think about it—themes represent the 'what to do,' whereas specific initiatives represent the 'how to do it.'

Here is an example that conveys the difference between themes and initiatives:



THEME: *Make Purchasing Process Faster for Customers*

- Notice the goal-driven, value-providing nature of this theme.

INITIATIVES: *Mobile Support, Credit Card Processor API, New Admin Console, & UX Improvements*

- These initiatives likely would have emerged during the business intelligence gathering process.

How to Create Themes

Reviewing your product's strategic goals is a good way to identify roadmap themes. Pick a handful of high-level, value-oriented initiatives you want to accomplish—they can be at the product-level or identified for the broader organization. With strong product vision and plenty of research, it should be relatively clear which parts of the business need the most attention and improvement.

3

7 Roadmap Prioritization Techniques

3

7 Roadmap Prioritization Techniques

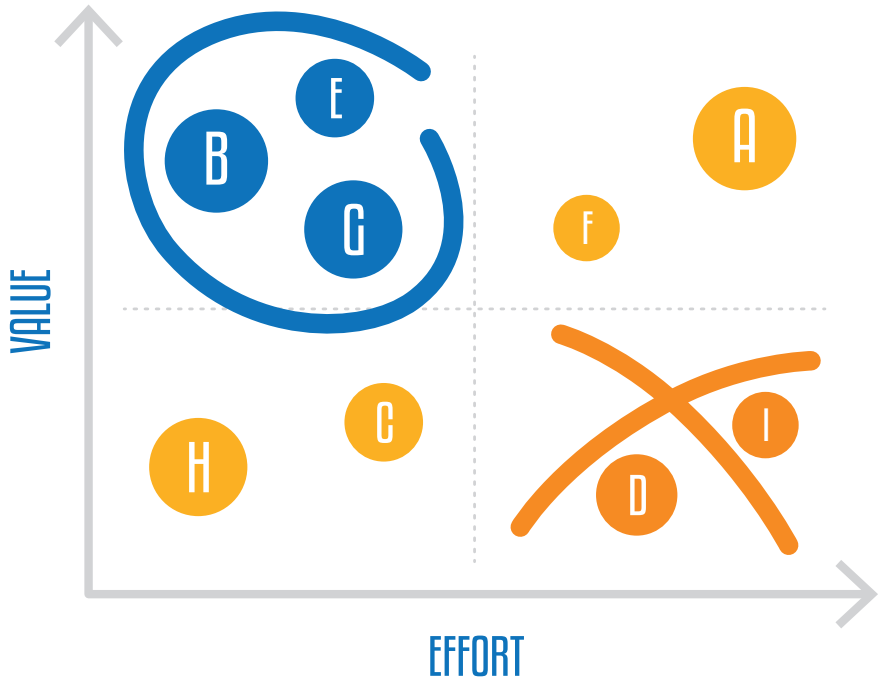
Hopefully by this point you've conducted thorough research and begun to think about the core themes that make most sense for your business. Maybe you're having trouble narrowing down which themes to pursue. Or perhaps you need help mapping specific initiatives to your themes.

Whatever the case, the following prioritization techniques are versatile and will give your team a solid framework for choosing which items are important enough to make it on your near-term roadmap.

1. Value vs. Complexity

The value versus complexity model allows you to evaluate every opportunity based on its business value and its relative complexity to implement.

The matrix is simple. The initiatives that deliver the highest value and require the least effort will be the low-hanging fruits for your roadmap. Meanwhile, you should probably avoid the initiatives that offer the lowest value and require the highest effort. Initiatives that fall into the other two quadrants may merit further discussion with your team and stakeholders.



2. Weighted Scoring

The weighted scoring model is similar to the value versus complexity model, but it layers in numerical scoring to arrive at objective results. The ProductPlan Planning Board is one example of weighted scoring in action.

By using a scoring method to rank your strategic initiatives against benefit and cost categories, product managers can facilitate a more objective (and productive) discussion about what to include on the product roadmap.

In the case of the Planning Board, scoring is on a 1 through 5 basis. A 1 means either low benefit or low cost, and a 5 means high benefit or high cost. The score you choose determines what percentage of a category's weighting each item will receive.

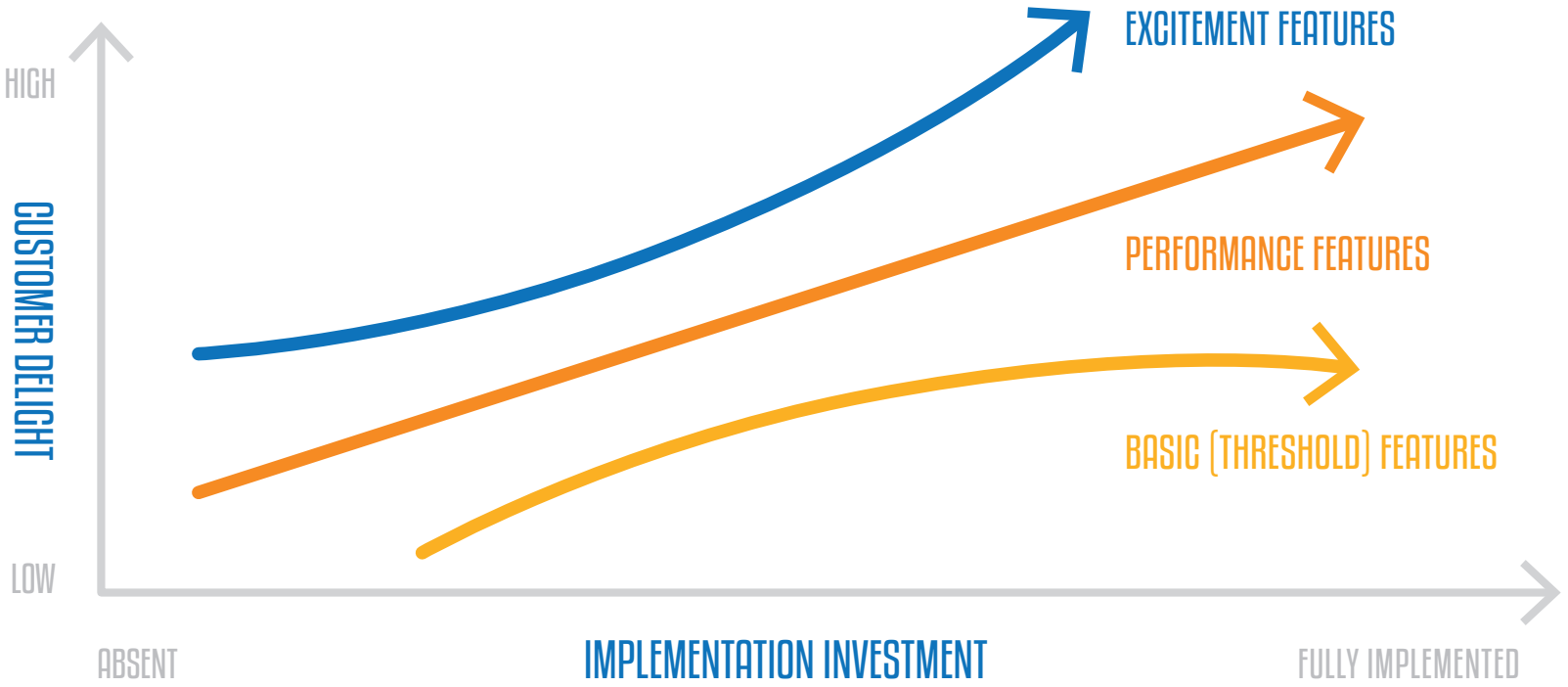
Title	Benefit		Cost			
	Increase Revenue	Customer Value	Implementation Effort	Operational Costs	SCORE	RANK
	20	20	20	20	80	
Customer Experience Initiatives	3	5	2	2	64	1
Cloud Support for PowerLink	5	3	3	1	60	2
Android	3	4	3	2	56	3
New Admin Console	1	4	2	4	52	4
iOS Reporting	3	3	5	3	40	5

3. Kano Model

With the Kano model, you can prioritize initiatives by analyzing customer delight vs. the potential implementation investment.

This model creates 3 categories of initiatives.

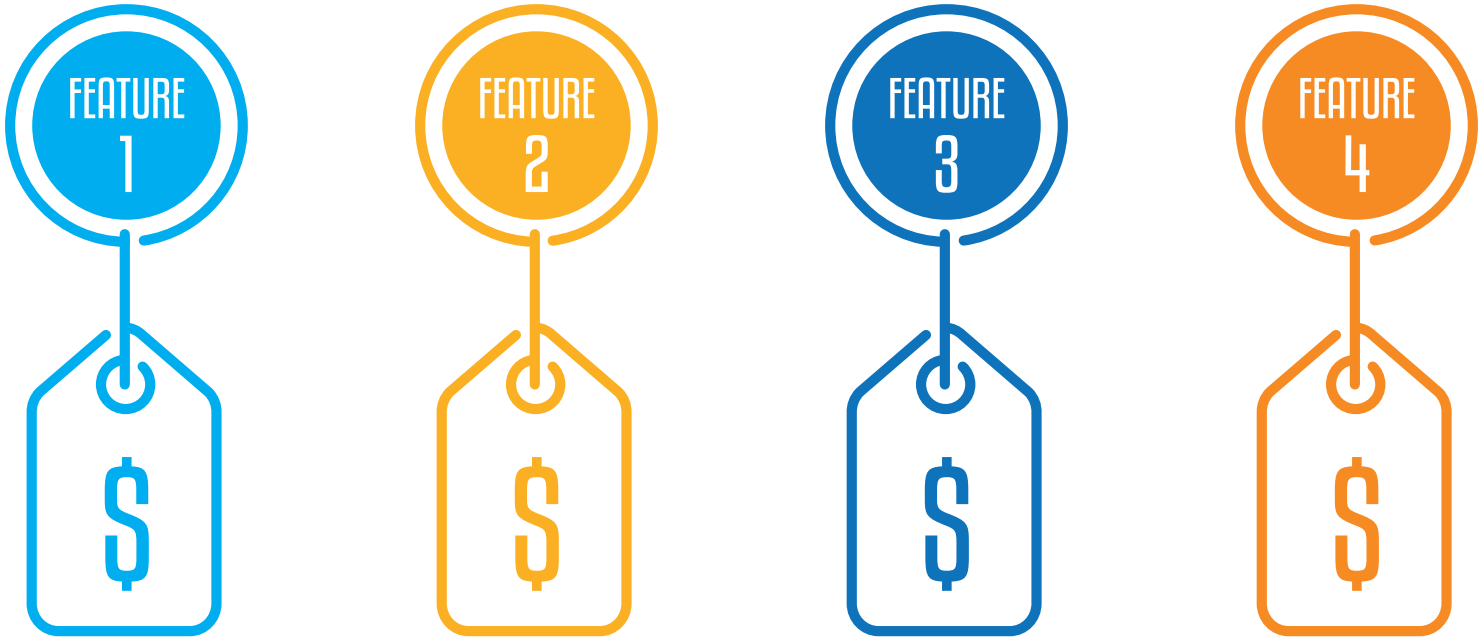
- **Basic Features -** Features that your product needs in order to compete.
- **Performance Features -** Features that give you a proportionate increase in customer satisfaction as you invest in them.
- **Excitement Features -** Features that yield a disproportionate increase in customer delight as you invest in them. If you don't have these features, customers might not even miss them; but if you include them, and continue to invest in them, you will create dramatic customer delight.



4. Buy a Feature

The "buy a feature" method can be used with customers or stakeholders to prioritize a set of potential features.

Assign "prices" to a list of potential features (based on the relative cost to develop them) and present the list to participants. Hand out a set amount of cash and then ask participants to "buy" the features. Some will place all of their money on one particular feature they're passionate about, while others might spread their cash around. The result is your prioritized feature list.



5. Opportunity Scoring

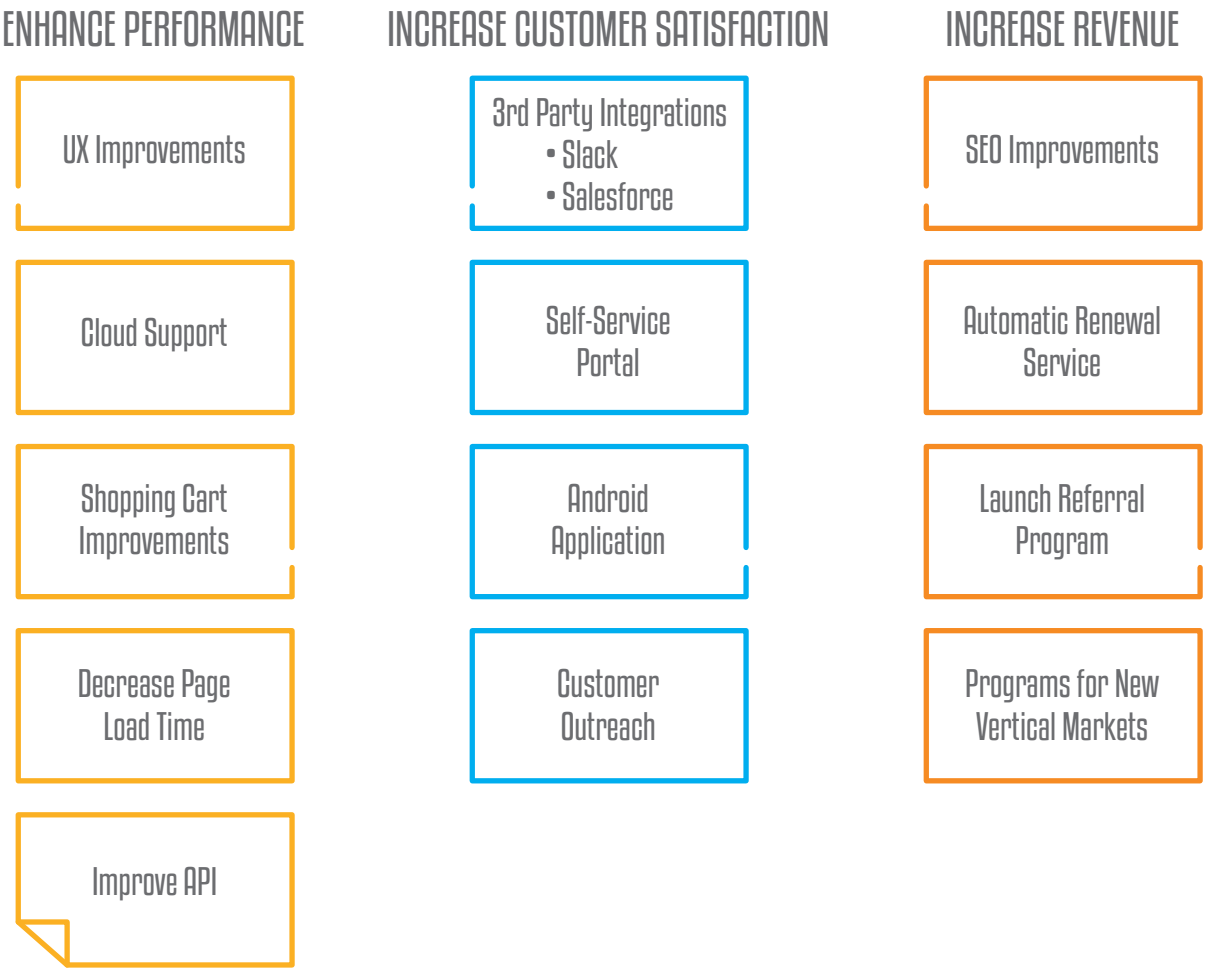
Opportunity scoring is a type of gap analysis that comes from outcome-driven innovation. The idea is to measure and rank features according to their importance and how satisfied customers currently are with them. Your opportunities are those features that hold high importance and receive low satisfaction scores.

You can also use the opportunity scoring model to plot your competitors' features and customers' relative satisfaction with those features. This can help you identify areas for innovation.

THEME	IMPORTANCE OF NEW FEATURES (1 - 10)	SATISFACTION WITH EXISTING FEATURES (1 - 10)	OPPORTUNITY
REPORTING & PRINTING	8	2	HIGH
BILLING	8	4	MEDIUM
PURCHASING	4	7	LOW
ACCT/MANAGEMENT	6	3	MEDIUM
USER MANAGEMENT	7	8	LOW

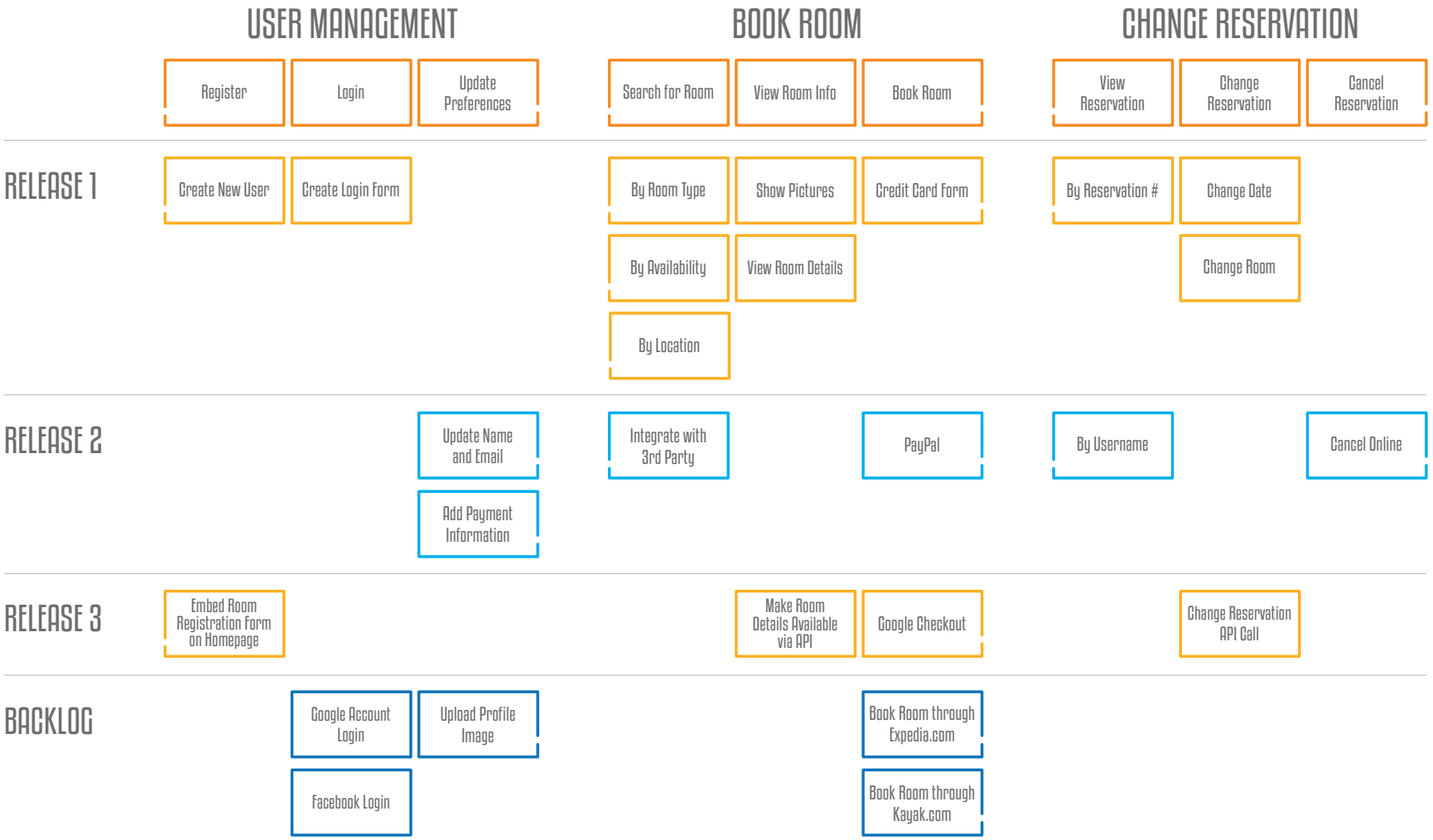
6. Affinity Grouping

The idea behind affinity grouping is simple: have your stakeholders brainstorm opportunities on sticky notes. Then as a team, begin to group similar items together and name the groups. Finally, have everyone on the team vote on or rank the groups. This can be particularly useful when prioritizing themes.



7. Story Mapping

Story mapping is a great way to prioritize user stories and begin to document a minimum viable product. The idea is to first create task-oriented story cards and then group them into stages of a workflow. The workflow goes from left the right; you then arrange the cards in priority order from top to bottom for each group. The final step is to draw a line (often with tape) across all the stories to divide them into releases/sprints



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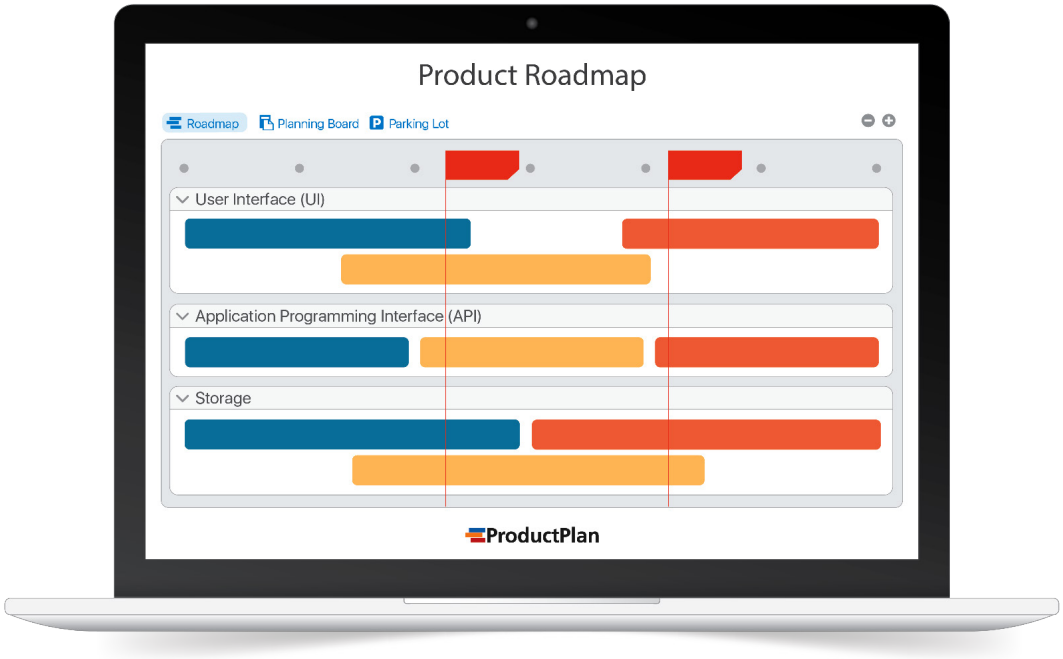
Conclusion

Regardless of the prioritization method you choose, a few best practices will always remain consistent. Here are some final things to keep in mind once you decide how best to approach your prioritization efforts.

Final Tips:

1. **Approach prioritization as a team activity.** Not only does it create buy-in from the team; it also allows you to consider different perspectives. Ideas come from all angles, so keep an open mind and encourage everyone involved to speak up. Not to mention, it's a lot more fun to work in teams.
2. **Limit the number of items you are prioritizing.** As emphasized in our discussion on themes, a top-down approach is most effective when prioritizing. Focus on the biggest items first rather than the details.
3. **Don't forget about cost.** Before you begin, it's always good to have a rough idea of the monetary investment attached to each initiative being considered. Even rudimentary T-shirt sizing of "small", "medium" and "large" can be helpful. After all, what good is prioritizing an initiative that is out of budget?

Create Beautiful Roadmaps

ProductPlan is the easiest way to plan, visualize, and communicate your product strategy. We believe roadmaps are essential to create organizational alignment and ship successful products. Our intuitive features for building, managing, and sharing roadmaps help teams across the globe convey the big picture in one place.

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