Activant

Keeping the 'Touch' in a Growing High-Touch Business

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Industry**
  Business Management Solutions
- **Business Opportunity**
  Scaling the business to meet diverse customer needs while retaining high customer loyalty
- **Solution**
  End-to-end Accept360™ suite with a customer social community on the front end to provide and validate product idea, with visibility and control all the way through the ideation, planning, and execution process
- **Results & Benefits**
  Closer alignment between product and engineering teams; increased customer loyalty

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Activant Solutions Inc. is a leading technology provider of business management solutions serving small and medium-sized distributors and specialty retailers. Based in Livermore, California, Activant provides customers with industry-specific software, professional services, content, supply chain connectivity, and analytics.

Business Opportunity

In a world of "take it or leave it" products and services, Activant stands out for its truly customer-centric approach. Activant considers listening to the customer as the centerpiece of its culture and its business, according to Frank Heenan, director of product management.

Unlike many business-to-business firms, however, Activant supports a tremendously diverse group of 30,000 customers, ranging from lumberyards and nurseries to retail pharmacies, durable goods distributors, and well beyond. Most of these customers are smaller businesses, many of them family-owned, with tried-and-true ways of operating. In this environment, growth brought special challenges to Activant.

"We built our business on listening to our customers' needs and developing and delivering out-of-the-box products that minimize their need for customized solutions." Heenan says, ". Still, we needed a way to maintain the 'high touch' interaction with our customers that would keep us responsive as we grew."

Activant had considered point tools for areas such as requirements management, and actually bought a trial of one application but were not using it. The tool helped run their business better, but only in one area. But what could help Activant keep up with customers' evolving needs and stay with a "one size fits most" product model, while retaining customer loyalty?

Solution

That's when Activant came to know Accept360. Accept360 offered an integrated end-to-end solution connecting ideation, planning, and Agile execution. And something more: A way to engage customers in the product development process as a community, while still making each one feel valued.

"Working with Accept360, we created an online social community where customers could collaborate not only with us, but also with each other on product development ideas," says Heenan. This crowdsourcing-based ideation program, enabled by Accept360 Ideas, engaged Activant's customers early in the product innovation process and more deeply in the product development process. Individual members of Activant's social community are given scores based on their activity and their comments influence the priority score Activant gives to potential features.

Customer feedback in the online social community provided data-based analytics through Accept360. They enable Activant to gain an accurate picture of their customers' collective feedback. This "single source of truth" has gained the trust of Activant product leaders.

Results & Benefits

"By crowdsourcing through Accept360, we gained the insight to implement product features we weren't planning on," says Heenan. "We also learned that some features we thought were important actually weren't, as far as our customers were concerned. Both of these results are very valuable to us."

But that's only the beginning. Accept360 provides traceability and alignment for Activant. Every engineering task can be traced back to the market driver or strategic objective that justifies the investment in product development. And proposed product development projects can also be vetted against company and product strategy using defined metrics and a scoring model.

"Accept360 has given us clear visibility at the release level of the work effort that needs to get done, the cost associated with that work effort, and the potential revenue impact behind it," Heenan notes. While the impact of this on product cycle times has not yet been quantified, Heenan believes Accept360, fully implemented, could reduce product cycle times by as much as 25%.

In traditional product development processes, any suggestion for a change that seems non-intuitive to influential team members can meet resistance and, often, defeat. The extent of the damage may not be realized until customers start defecting to competitors' solutions that offer the rejected feature.

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>
> **—Frank Heenan**
> ***Director of Product Management, Activant***

But with Accept360, Activant's product team gained a customer-originated, traceable, justifiable data trail to help convince engineering and other groups of the value of proposed project changes. From engineering's perspective, the Accept360 single system of record provides insight into where an idea originated, which customers it's important to, and why. Both groups now have a common understanding of the process and what is motivating it.

There's another benefit, Heenan says. "Customers are pleased to know that their recommendations are not in some manila folder in a product manager's desk. They can see it and know we're paying attention to them."

Ease of use is, of course, a key factor in driving adoption of any software. "As someone who makes software for a living, I can say Accept360's user interface is outstanding," says Heenan. "Their thought process behind the user experience is very good. I'm very pleased."

Contrast the Accept360 experience with a typical product development process, with spotty or non-existent documentation, creating significant information gaps that sometimes lead to educated guesses about the original intent of a change. Even in the best organizations, memories can be faulty, different ideas can be confused with one another, and vocal internal advocates can sometimes smother good ideas. By providing that single source of truth, with all relevant materials for a project immediately available to team members, Accept360 provides a guidepost throughout the product development product.

Adoption

Accept360 has transformed the way Activant goes to market with new products.

Additionally, Heenan says, "We received priceless guidance on what customers really wanted in the product. For example, we had thought our job management features were relatively unimportant, but our customer community provided thirty ideas in that area and weighted it as a top priority."

Heenan says, "But creating this online social ideation community with Accept360 and allowing our customers to influence the product's development actually built stronger bonds with our customers. They appreciated that we really listened to them."

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About Accept Corporation Accept Corporation delivers The Product Innovation Management solution that technology-driven companies use to decide which products to bring to market for the fastest time-to-profit. The Accept360 Suite is the only complete end-to-end software solution that tightly links company and product strategy through ideation, portfolio planning, roadmaps, requirements and execution. For more information, visit www.accept360.com or call us at +1.866.423.8376

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