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iv
Chapter 5

A SUPPLIER PERSPECTIVE: SUPERIOR SERVICES AND PRODUCTS HELP CHANGE HAPPEN

Victoria de la Huerga and Elizabeth Topp

**Why Read This Chapter?**

Understand the perspective of the supplier in this chapter, which provides a straightforward and explicit description of the fine dance that exists today between customers and suppliers.

**Introduction**

This chapter presents the role of a supplier at the beginning of the new millennium. The perspective I am sharing is from a product development standpoint of a supplier. As a supplier, we (WILD Flavors) work with big companies, small companies, and start-up companies. And we see all types of challenges out there. But there are a lot of common themes—convenience, leveraging outside resources—and issues related to partnerships. I will focus on what a supplier sees and what some of the challenges are, and how a client company might be able to further leverage suppliers to help get to the endgame of successful products and their launches faster.

In an analysis of supplier integration practices, many companies reported that getting the suppliers involved earlier in the product development cycle is of paramount importance (Ragatz et al., 1997). The study
identifies supplier membership on the product development project team as the greatest differentiator between most and least successful integration efforts.

**Basic Product Development Process Flow**

I will start off first with a very basic product development process flow. When a new product project is initiated, the steps entail defining the product concept, identifying consumer needs and product benefits, and determining the target consumer demographics. Finally, a key objective of the project is to make the business case for the product “can the company make money on the product?” These steps define the product, the consumer, and all the key elements that should make a product that consumers want and that will make money for your company (fig. 5.1).

After these steps are defined, developing the product is initiated. Key steps in developing the product are figuring out how to make it on a commercial scale, identifying product and microbiological issues, and any regulatory concerns. Once an acceptable prototype product is developed, the process is scaled up from bench-top to pilot plant and then to the manufacturing location to confirm production feasibility and potential scale-up effects on the product. Gearing up for production and product launch, one needs to prepare all the technical documents that identify the product formulation, ingredients, packaging, and manufacturing process. During this stage, the rest of the organization is working on finalizing the business plan. The marketing and sales groups finalize the launch plans including launch regions, target customers, advertising, and the action standard for success. The manufacturing group is

![Product Creation Process Diagram](image-url)

*Figure 5.1.* The product creation process.
reviewing process equipment needs and other issues related to start-up of a new product.

Following launch, review begins on the product performance. Were purchase rates achieved? What is the repeat purchase rate? What are the consumer complaints? Is the product meeting the expected shelf life?

While this may be a simplistic perspective of the product development process, it approximates the process for many companies.

For some companies, this process can take a very short period of time. I have observed some companies that complete the development process in as little as three months. I know of companies that have taken two years to develop and launch a product. A two-year timeline is becoming rare, because most companies are working to quickly grow top and bottom line performance through speed to market with innovative and differentiated products. Most companies want products that meet changing consumer needs when the opportunity is fresh and there are limited products available that address this new consumer need.

The question that arises is, can suppliers help you through this whole cycle? Can they really help you at every stage of this cycle? I say the answer is yes. First, though, I present a review of situations that slow the product development process, impacting project timelines.

**Changing, Creeping, or Unclear Objectives for the Product**

The project is initiated and you begin developing the product based on consumer input, and you think the product is on the right path. Then, what happens? Your company’s management gets involved in the project and changes the development direction. Sometimes the product needs to be changed so much to address the management input that it’s like going back to square one. The entire project may need to be reworked, taking time to get it right.

Creeping objectives arise in situations such as when your customer tells you, “I want you to do this,” and then later they add, “But I need you to do this as well.” This can lead to another round of refocus and change in the project plan, and in some cases, the need to redo some work or start again from the beginning.

Unclear objectives can slow down the development process. This can be problematic if members of your team aren’t marching down the same path toward the same objective. Clearly stated project objectives
and timelines agreed to by all team members can alleviate this problem.

**Changing Timelines**

Most people in product development have experienced an occasion when marketing told the project team they committed to management that the product would be launched earlier than the timeline the development team was working against. The team scrambles to figure out how to take time out of the development process and achieve the new launch date. When launch dates change and teams regroup, sometimes additional precious project time is lost, because team members need time to investigate how they can speed up their area of responsibility.

**Large Teams**

Suppliers observe the impact of large development teams at their customers, which is more typical for big food companies than smaller food companies. On a project team with many team members, it seems it takes longer for things to get done, to get all the team members together for meetings, to agree to work on the same objectives, and to reach agreement on issues. Teams are an effective approach to develop products today. To maximize the benefit teams bring to the development process, teams should be sized as small as needed to include members that represent the key business areas that are engaged in the decision process. All team members need to understand their role and should agree on project objectives and timelines.

**Changing Team Members**

As a supplier to food companies, my company has worked with all kinds of customer organizations. We observe that people on teams change all the time. Changes with marketing representatives appear to happen more than with R&D people. Whenever a new person joins the team, inevitably the person brings new ideas, which sometimes strengthen what the team is doing, and sometimes disrupts previous actions the team has already completed. The time it takes for the new team member to become fully on-board with the rest of the team can have a costly impact on the project timeline. Forming teams with individuals who
remain team members throughout the project duration benefits the project continuity, decreases potential time delays and can lead to a smoother path for the project.

**Communication, Communication, Communication**

Poor communication contributes to delay in projects. Effective teams demonstrate good communication among team members on the issues and decisions that impact the project. Regular team meetings to exchange progress and discuss project issues guide the team to make necessary adjustments in project direction and to modify the timeline if required. Team meetings also provide a forum for flagging significant project issues and delays that can be communicated to higher levels of management.

**Getting Agreement**

The issue of getting agreement, again, is more of an issue at the larger food companies than the smaller food companies. The project team leader has to present the team’s decision to senior management and make sure management is aware of the team’s actions and that they’re aligned with the risk the team might be taking on. Reaching agreement on risks and other issues adds time to the project. At this point, one can begin to understand why smaller companies can move more quickly and capitalize on opportunities suppliers may provide.

**Lack of Risk Taking**

In some companies, you may hear the term “paralyzed by perfection.” Ensuring food safety is the responsibility of every food company, so it is important to make sure the company’s procedures are adhered to in order to avoid risk of a food safety issue in the marketplace. But some food companies focus on small technical issues unrelated to safety, which the consumer is unlikely to be concerned about. When a company focuses on details that have low impact on the consumer, taking time to dot every “i” and cross every “t” before the product can be launched into the market, the company could lose its lead position. Market advantage is lost when a company is second or third
bringing its product to market. With a late entry to the market, not only has the customer lost out with decreased sales and profit potential, but its suppliers are impacted as well with reduced sales of their components.

**Inappropriate Action Standards or Misleading Consumer Information**

Suppliers often observe the use of inappropriate action standards by their customers. Branded goods companies that conduct a lot of consumer research testing develop “norms” that serve as guidelines for product success and they may apply these norms to new product categories, where the norms may not apply. This can result in a company becoming unable to make a decision.

A similar situation has been observed from consumer research guidance testing, during product optimization. Results from a designed consumer test may indicate the consumer wants the product to be a little less sweet, or perhaps the consumer wants the beverage to be a little more carbonated, yet consumers rate the product highly acceptable. The question is, how do you make this product better? The product developer adjusts the product formulation to address the consumer input. Then the revised product is tested again. Well, guess what? The consumer rating of the product may actually go down. Because while they’re telling you they want it less sweet, consumers really liked the sweetness. Interpreting consumer feedback on tested products is difficult. Understanding how to use the feedback to modify or not to modify the product formula is important, because one doesn’t want to slow the project down unnecessarily.

In summary, changing or unclear objectives, timeline changes, team size, team member changes, poor communication, senior management agreement, risk aversion, and misinterpretation of consumer data can all contribute to slowing the product development effort. And these issues can lead to the difference between becoming the leading company in a new market or being second or third to market. The market leader is often perceived as the innovator while the others are seen as market followers.

With all of these issues facing product development teams, working with suppliers can add another issue to deal with and a new set of challenges. It can sometimes add to the project time to have suppliers
work on project activities, but if the team manages it right, it won’t take more time and will often reduce project time.

**The Product Creation Process—Barriers to Using Suppliers, Are They Real or Perceived?**

**Capability**
Do you understand your supplier’s capabilities? Where can they help you? What skills and expertise does the supplier organization have that your company does not have? If you know your suppliers well, working with them will not be an impediment to moving along the product development cycle faster.

**In-House Expertise**
Many companies want to own everything. And while a lot of outsourcing is going on, some branded goods companies still want to make sure they own the technology. Companies often believe they have sufficient expertise in-house and enough time to develop the new technology. The reality often facing companies is aggressive project timelines often don’t allow sufficient time to develop the technology within the time frame using only in-house resources.

**Confidentiality**
Companies are often concerned about the confidentiality of their projects. They ask themselves, “will the supplier tell my competition what our company is doing?” Suppliers survive by being confidential about customer projects. If they don’t work confidentially, they lose business. To address this concern, formal confidentiality agreements are signed between companies and suppliers. A supplier will gladly sign a confidentiality agreement with a packaged goods company to alleviate any concern about confidentiality. A supplier is not motivated to breach the confidentiality agreement because they want a successful product launch for their customer. The supplier’s success is tied to the success of their customer; they win when the company wins.
Understanding Product Development in Today’s Food Industry

Time Schedule

As long as you clearly communicate with suppliers about your project timetable and what is needed from the supplier, this should not be an impediment to moving through your product development cycle. Supplier companies are organized to respond quickly to customer requests. If you don’t inform the supplier about your timing requirement and the supplier responds later than your deadline, that’s your fault for not communicating. Keep your supplier company informed about your project schedule and what you need from them, by a specific date.

The “Not Invented Here” Syndrome

This was previously discussed in chapter 3 by Dr. Feicht. What we find is that it’s hard for people to take somebody else’s technical know-how and leverage it within their own company to get to the results faster. However, this is changing quite a bit these days in terms of further leveraging suppliers and their expertise on how they can get you to market faster. The companies who do not work with their suppliers leveraging their technology will lose out and take longer to get their product to market.

Understanding the Marketplace

Does the supplier really understand the marketplace in which you’re competing? Well, suppliers these days have become very savvy in what is going on in the marketplace. Suppliers often investigate new trends that are going on around the world, within a country, and with consumers—their needs and behaviors. They do understand the marketplace, and they can help you understand the marketplace and the competitive environment.

What If There’s a Problem Down the Line with a Technology Solution?

Will the supplier help me out? This is related to a concern about losing control of technology, especially if a problem occurs and the company needs to rely on the supplier to step in and resolve the technical issue. Suppliers are very responsive and readily assist with issues that arise.
The supplier’s business is on the line, and it wants to ensure your product success so its company can be successful as well.

**Job Insecurity**

This is linked with the “not invented here” syndrome. Internal product developers become concerned about their role when a supplier is perceived as having more knowledge and expertise. If development activities can be outsourced, what is the role of the branded goods company product developer? Well, the reality becomes that the role of the developer becomes one of managing the supplier. Developers are engaged in their company’s process for developing and launching products. They understand the internal issues, concerns, politics, and timeline. Their role is to provide the supplier with information needed to drive them in the right direction for completing the project. Often the developer works together with the supplier company and is intimately involved with evaluating the progress of the product, providing input and direction. It becomes a collaborative exchange of knowledge, expertise, and technology that leads to a faster end result.

**Does the Supplier Understand Your Company**

Suppliers often hear conversations from their customer that may be something like, “Well, you don’t understand what it is like in my company, one has to have every ‘i’ dotted and every ‘t’ crossed. Internal politics drive decision making. How could you really understand that?” It can be difficult to understand the internal work process and expectations within a customer company. However, communication can help solve this issue to a great extent. When working with a supplier, as long as the customer company identifies what it needs, what is acceptable for a result, when it is needed, as well as its overall expectations from the supplier, the supplier will work as hard as it can to achieve the result.

**A Shift in the Paradigm**

The business world today is global. Many companies have evolved from their original business to larger multibusiness organizations to compete in the global economy. An example is the communications industry.
Originally the communications industry was only made up of land line phones and the U.S. Postal system’s snail mail. In time, fax machines, pagers, and cell phones were introduced. Then came the new wireless communications world of extended cell phone functions and computers that allow you to be connected to anything to anywhere in the world. Today, it is possible to run the phone, computer, and television from the same cable connection. The question becomes, what defines a phone company, or a cell phone provider, or a cable company? Sometimes they are all one and the same.

The food industry reflects a paradigm shift in the relationship between suppliers and customers. I will illustrate from a supplier’s perspective the evolution of change over the years creating a paradigm shift (fig. 5.2).

In the 1980s, suppliers received requests from customers to submit their ingredient. The typical request was “I’m developing a product, I need these three flavors” or “I need an ingredient to help stabilize something.” Rarely would the supplier hear from the customer about the type of product the flavors or other ingredients were used for. The chance of success at this time was often 50:50: the supplier got lucky because it happened to submit the right ingredient, which the customer actually liked and used in their application.

In the early 1990s, we observed companies becoming more open with suppliers about what they were doing and there was more team collaboration. Suppliers started to become savvier and began conducting more extensive application work to demonstrate their ingredients more effec-

Figure 5.2. Paradigm shifts.
A Supplier Perspective

...tively for customers. While suppliers often did not know all the specifics of the customer’s application, they could provide the ingredient to them in a product form the customer could easily evaluate and determine if the ingredient met their need.

Throughout the 1990s, suppliers experienced an expanded role with their customers beyond just providing traditional technical and application information about their ingredient. The phenomenon of downsizing had started and branded good companies needed someone with expertise to work on the project, which their supplier could provide. The food industry experienced the intersection of a soft economy (companies were restructuring and jobs were eliminated), strong demand for innovative products, and faster product launches, which created “the perfect storm” for suppliers. This resulted in suppliers becoming more involved with customer projects and taking on activities that had been the domain of product developers in packaged goods companies.

Today in the 2000s, suppliers are experiencing a broader role with customers that sometimes includes the supplier as a member of the company’s business team. Oberoi and Khamba (2005) report several key reasons why suppliers are becoming more important to packaged goods companies. Packaged goods companies are focusing on their core competencies and have come to rely on suppliers to support non-core-competency project requirements. Suppliers can support a company’s effort to innovate in critical areas of product and process technology by filling the competency gaps.

By developing effective supply chain strategies, the package good company also counters competitive forces. As these companies continue to seek performance improvements, they consolidate their suppliers and manage suppliers as an extension of their business system.

Challenges in Today’s Environment

Figure 5.3 indicates the challenges faced in today’s customer-supplier relationship. There are both positive and negative implications from this new situation.

The first challenge is speed—everybody hears this all the time. We need to launch new products faster with fewer resources. Package good companies are getting very good at managing projects, figuring out how to multitask to get everything done. And companies that are leveraging
suppliers find that suppliers are willing and able to move faster and to take on risk alongside them. Suppliers want to see your company be successful and grow because their company will benefit and grow as well.

The next challenge is the *select suppliers list*, which is a growing occurrence in the industry. A supplier list is generated by packaged goods companies to focus purchasing among selected suppliers. Typically, ingredients and other product components are consolidated into categories. Supplier lists reduce complexity and are leveraged to save money on raw material costs. Select supplier lists impact the product developer in the package good company by limiting the toolbox. If the developer is allowed to work with only a handful of suppliers, it limits options to access only the ingredients and technology provided by the select suppliers. From a supplier perspective, if they are on the supplier list, they have the opportunity to work on projects and supply their ingredients, technology, and service to the packaged goods company. If a supplier is not on the list, they are typically not invited to present their ingredients and technology. The unlisted supplier may have the right ingredient or technology to solve a development issue in the packaged goods company, but the product developer will never know this supplier could help with the technical challenge. Benefits of supplier lists are mixed, both positive and negative to both parties.

The third challenge is *innovation*. All companies say they need innovative products but may not know how to get there. Does your company...
know how to create innovative products using novel technology to provide a new product for the consumer and satisfy unmet needs in the market? Suppliers have much to offer companies in developing on trend innovative products that consumers want. When suppliers communicate their capabilities and have a good relationship with their customers, they are often asked to collaborate with the company to develop product innovations.

Outsourcing job functions is the fourth challenge in the industry. Some companies outsource a small number of activities, while other companies outsource development of the complete product. Today, one can observe supplier organizations that are used like an external resource to develop products. Outsourcing project activities impacts the role of the package good company’s internal product development staff. The product developer’s role becomes more of a management function as they manage a supplier’s activities to keep them on track and keep internal team members and management informed. When there is strong communication with the supplier, this is not a major problem, however, when communication is not so good, it becomes more difficult for the product developer.

From a supplier’s perspective, we are more than willing to take on project requests as an outsourced resource. We have observed that outsource requests have become much more technologically complex. A project is not just a simple request, such as creating a carbonated soft drink for the company and then the project is done. Now project requests are more complex sometimes requiring a new technology be developed or extended to a new area. Suppliers need to have a good understanding of government regulations and an awareness of consumer trends. For example, a project request for a functional beverage may use amino acids, vitamins, minerals, and herbal ingredients to deliver a functional benefit. The supplier needs to know how to formulate with these types of ingredients to deliver a functional benefit and eliminate the bitter off-taste these types of ingredients typically have, as well as to be knowledgeable about usage regulations. In addition, the supplier may need to develop a new process to make the beverage.

Cost is a challenge that always factors into consideration. Finding ways to improve the bottom line is everyone’s goal. The customer company wants to maximize its profit margin potential and unfortunately its approach may impact the profit margin potential for the supplier.
Companies with select supplier lists in place work with the supplier to negotiate the best deal possible on raw materials they purchase. In addition, these companies also expect the supplier organization to step to the plate as an external resource (outsourcing replacement). It can become difficult for a supplier to make a reasonable profit, when the supplier is squeezed to provide a low price to retain business with the customer and needs to utilize significant internal resources to work on customer outsourced projects. With their net profit potential in mind, a supplier has to probe to understand the business potential and chance of success before agreeing to take on a customer project.

How Best to Utilize a Supplier Today

The best way to consider suppliers today is as willing team members or extensions of the company’s development teams. Suppliers have a wide range of expertise and personnel who can augment the skills in the packaged goods company’s organization. Suppliers can provide value to large and small companies throughout the product creation, development, and implementation phases.

Conceptual Stage

Use suppliers as a sounding board and a place to get ideas. Most supplier companies have a market research department; ask your supplier to provide your company with consumer insight and trend information that can assist your project, especially when you are on a tight timetable. Invite suppliers to participate in your brainstorm sessions for your company’s projects to develop new product ideas or to develop creative ways to solve a problem. Sometimes suppliers with international offices can assist your company in obtaining product samples through their multinational locations that would be difficult to otherwise obtain.

Scoping and Definition Stage

Suppliers can provide your company with conceptual samples for use in qualitative work a company conducts during the product definition phase. Helping their customer bring a concept to life demonstrates
the supplier’s capabilities and illustrates to a customer company an opportunity to reduce project time. Suppliers have a broad spectrum of knowledge about ingredients and product systems and can provide good input during prototype development when package good companies consult with them. Suppliers can be particularly valuable assisting in identifying issues that should be addressed during the early stages of development, of which the company’s development staff is sometimes unaware. Suppliers can help bring a reality check to product concepts and provide suggestions for broadening the appeal of the concept or reining it in. Suppliers can prove to be a valuable, objective third party during early development.

**Product Development and Refinement Stage**

During the development stage, many suppliers can provide product developers in a packaged goods company with formulation guidance including the complete product system, not just recommended levels for the ingredient they supply. Preliminary assistance in developing product formulations can help a company get a faster start on the project than starting from scratch with a trial and error method. Leveraging a supplier’s expertise can lead toward earlier knowledge of project information, such as the nutrition data for a label—fat, carbohydrate, protein, and calories—or the ingredient list. Availability of such information allows companies to make earlier formula modifications to meet target parameters.

**Commercialization and Launch**

Product commercialization and launch sometimes run into glitches. Some suppliers can provide assistance during the commercialization stage to augment a company’s product development and engineering staff. Companies should consider tapping their suppliers as a resource composed of knowledgeable and capable technical personnel who could provide assistance with troubleshooting during production start-up or when issues occur during ongoing production. Suppliers sometimes provide assistance with identifying a copacker to manufacture the final product. They can also recommend quality assurance and auditing procedures and recommend quality control checks during product manufacturing.
Choosing the Right Supplier for the Right Reasons

Choosing the right supplier for a particular project is critical. You need to determine your supplier’s capabilities including their area of expertise, their core competencies, and then determine how they can assist with the project. Usually one supplier cannot solve every development issue a packaged goods company has nor can one supplier provide all the ingredients needed to make a food or beverage product.

When selecting a supplier, the packaged goods company product developer needs to determine the quality of service that will satisfy the project need and how the supplier’s service will be used—is it to provide bench-top formulations as a starting point, or is it more full service, working side by side with the developer throughout the project including the manufacturing stage?

Part of the supplier selection process is based on the ingredients the supplier has to sell and an understanding by the developer of project constraints that influence this choice. If the product to be developed has a target raw material cost guideline, communicate this to the supplier and they will work with the developer to meet the target cost. Sometimes a packaged goods company developer is trying to develop a product as cheaply as possible and is seeking a good deal—cheap ingredients, the cheaper the better—they should communicate this with the supplier and reconsider how much service they should expect from the supplier. When a supplier gets pushed on price, they are likely to pull away from providing multiple services because it is not cost effective, cutting into their profit margin.

The packaged goods company product developer should understand the priority of the project within the company and share this information with the selected supplier to increase success with the supplier. Suppliers get bombarded with multiple project requests from all of their customers, and they prioritize all the projects for effective use of their resource and expertise. Sometimes a supplier does not provide the service or focus the customer is seeking, perhaps because of poor communication or low priority status. This should be an indication to the product developer to better communicate needs, timing, and priority with the supplier or perhaps to seek another supplier. Through selective choice of suppliers for a project, a package good company can get its product launched faster into the marketplace.
The packaged goods company should determine its need to have a confidentiality agreement with its supplier. If a company is concerned about information leaking and potentially ending up with a competitor, a confidentiality agreement should be signed with the supplier. While suppliers maintain confidentiality about their customer products and projects as a business practice, a signed agreement is the legal approach for a company to ensure confidentiality from a supplier. The more information a package good company can share with its supplier, the better and faster the supplier can meet requirements. A supplier-packaged goods company partnership sealed with a confidentiality agreement leads to seamless collaboration on projects, shared information, and open discussion on issues.

As indicated earlier, communication is important, particularly regarding the overall project timeline as well as timing for completion of various activities within the project timeline. When the supplier is aware of what its customer needs and the related timing, it will work hard to deliver on the request. Effective communication can be accomplished through phone calls and e-mail messages. E-mail communication is becoming a convenient means of keeping people informed. An e-mail message can be forwarded to other people in an organization to keep them informed or to alert them that their assistance is needed.

Things to Think About Today with Respect to Suppliers

Suppliers can help speed up the product development process in packaged goods companies. Suppliers are organized to assist their customers in getting their products launched to market quickly. Suppliers have a broad range of expertise and depth of knowledge in multiple food categories. Suppliers can provide valuable perspective based on their experience working with many different types of food and beverage products. Suppliers can provide insight to avoid technical issues, project pitfalls, and delays during the product development process.

Suppliers will work closely with the developer to help develop a cost-effective formulation that keeps the product within the target cost parameter. Suppliers can provide a project resource, which is especially valuable for packaged goods companies that have been downsized.

Suppliers will work hard for their customers to meet project criteria and deliver product expectations. Suppliers help the packaged goods
company win in the marketplace. When their customer has a successful product, the supplier enjoys success and also wins.

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