

## Why UX Professionals Need to Care About Product-Market Fit

**Bill Albert, PhD**  
Founder / Principal  
Global UX Partners  
bill@globaluxpartners.com

### Introduction

Most UX professionals, at some point in their careers, find themselves evaluating a product or service that should have never seen the light of day. I am certainly one of those UX professionals, and in fact, on more than one occasion, I was left wondering why I was evaluating a product that the target audience clearly did not care about. It felt like a waste of time. Why should I ask about the position of a button, explore options for the name of a particular feature, or try to understand the workflow when it became obvious that users did not find the product even remotely useful? How did the product get to the point at which our stakeholders believed the product would be successful? Was I wasting time “putting lipstick on a pig?”

At first, I blamed myself for being in the position of evaluating a product that customers did not clearly care about. Why did I not attend the earlier meetings when we first talked about this product? Why did I not demand to see the data demonstrating a clear signal around the product’s desirability? Who should I have met to develop a strategy to assess desirability well before any design or development work had begun? How did I miss catching this one? I was clearly missing something!

Product-market fit, specifically the evaluation of product usefulness and desirability at the concept stage, should be within the scope of UX. In this essay, I will argue the following:

- What defines product-market fit, and why it matters
- When well-known products achieve or fail product-market fit, it illustrates the underlying reasons for their successes and failures
- Which metrics UX professionals can leverage to evaluate product-market fit
- Why UX professionals need to be passionate about product-market fit



### **What Is Product-Market Fit?**

Product-market fit (PMF) is a concept popularized by entrepreneur and venture capitalist Marc Andreessen (2007). PMF is the point at which the market validates a product's value proposition through its use, sales, and growth. Let's unpack this through describing several key aspects of PMF: When there is PMF, the product offers clear value that addresses specific pain points or needs of the target market (Blank, 2013). And there is a significant demand for the product among a large enough customer or user base (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010). Customers or users not only purchase the product but find it useful and recommend it to others (Cagan & Jones, 2021). Last, PMF is usually associated with steady and growing revenue streams. Essentially, PMF is reached once a product has achieved growing sales and an expanding market because of the value it delivers.

### **The Connection Between UX and PMF**

What is the connection between user experience and product-market fit? Usefulness—that is, solving a problem that matters—is the foundation of PMF. As UX professionals, we ensure the products we design are useful to a target audience. Without usefulness, there is no user desire, no customers, no sales, no recommendations, and no growth. The more invested the customer is in the solution to their problem, the greater the product's or service's usefulness will be. Of course, other factors beyond UX also drive the success or failure of PMF, including the execution of a solid go-to-market plan, the right business model, pricing, branding, and more. But designing a product that everyone loves does not necessarily guarantee success. Instead, PMF is the outcome of designing a great user experience.

Even if you or your organization routinely evaluates the usefulness or desirability of a product or service prior to design and development, you should be asking the following:

- Are you conducting the evaluation for desirability very early on, prior to design or development work, so you avoid any additional expenses in case the product is shelved?
- Are you measuring desirability and usefulness with a large, representative sample size based on multiple validated metrics that produce reliable results?
- What level of influence (direct or indirect) do you have on the decision to shelve a proposed product if the results of your research show a lack of strong desire for the product?

Ultimately, what matters is that your organization makes well-informed decisions, based on strong evidence, about the desirability of prospective products and services prior to the allocation of significant resources. As a UX professional, I highly recommend you learn more about your organization's process and look for ways it can be improved.

Why should your organization care about product-market fit? First, companies spend significant amounts of money on developing and marketing products that do not resonate with the target audience; this incurs costs related to research, development, production, and marketing campaigns. Development cycles can be long and resource-intensive. Focusing on a product that customers do not care about means lost time that could have been spent on more promising initiatives. When a product fails to meet market needs, potential users are less likely to adopt it, leading to poor sales and low engagement. Furthermore, products that do not align with user expectations often receive negative reviews and ratings, which deters potential customers. The result is that, when a company fails to test product-market fit methodically, the company runs significant financial risks, harms their brand, and misses critical opportunities to innovate.

### **Failures and Successes in PMF**

Consider the following examples of companies and products that failed to achieve product-market fit. Google™ Glass, despite innovative technology, failed to present a compelling value proposition to a broad market (Yoon, 2018). Eventually, it was pulled from the consumer market and repurposed for niche enterprise applications. Juicero, a startup selling expensive juicing machines and proprietary juice packs, failed because consumers realized they could squeeze the juice packs by hand without the machine. The high cost and limited value proposition led to its failure (Janczer, 2019). Last, a company called Drinkworks, funded by

Keurig™, produced a machine that was branded as “Keurig for cocktails,” but it failed because the machine was not solving any customer pain points around preparing cocktails. It was a technology in search of a problem (McGrath, 2022).

There are many underlying factors why companies fail to achieve product-market fit (Albert, 2024). First, not conducting user research can lead to misaligned product features and capabilities. Disregarding or undervaluing user feedback during the product development process can result in products that do not meet user needs. Focusing too much on technical innovation rather than solving real user problems can result in products that are impressive but not practical or desired by users. Or, despite all the best intentions, not listening carefully to your customers, speaking to the wrong customers, asking biased questions, or even failing to ask the right questions can result in the wrong conclusion that people care about your product. But perhaps the biggest issue is not understanding and measuring the magnitude of the problem you are trying to solve with your new product or service. If you are not solving a big problem, user desire won't be there, and neither will the product-market fit.

Conversely, some very well-known companies were successful in their product-market fit. They specifically focused on understanding customer pain points and designing a solution around those pain points (Riani, 2024). Airbnb™ identified a need for affordable and flexible lodging options. By allowing people to rent out their homes, they provided a unique value proposition that resonated with both travelers and hosts. Dropbox™ offered a simple and intuitive way to store and share files in the cloud, solving a common problem for both individuals and businesses. Slack™ identified a need for better team communication and collaboration tools. Its user-friendly interface and integration with other workplace tools made it indispensable to many organizations.

All of these successes have one thing in common: They solved customer pains that people cared about, whether that was creating more flexible lodging options, sharing data and files, or collaborating with colleagues. Of course, these companies also figured out an effective business model, set the right pricing, marketed the product, and so forth. But, when a product solves a problem elegantly, the rest follows. I believe the best way to achieve PMF is by solving customer pain points that matter, even though an alternative method is to design a new product or service that creates such joy that it generates enough desirability to take over the market.

### **UX Contributions to PMF**

What can we, as UX professionals, do to ensure that products and services achieve product-market fit? There are two ways to answer this question. From a strategic perspective, achieving PMF starts by building relationships with relevant stakeholders (product, marketing, business, engineering, and senior leadership). Once a level of trust is established, you will need to understand how the decision-making process works for new products. Who ultimately owns that decision? What inputs are needed to make that decision? What are the factors that influence the decision? How is customer desirability for the new product evaluated? From an operational perspective, adapt the decision-making process to build in a rigorous step that evaluates and measures product desirability and the pain points that the product solves. Institutionalize the new process and set targets for what qualifies as acceptable, or non-acceptable, levels of desirability.

Many of the existing user research methods can be easily adapted to gather reliability data on product desirability. I recommend taking a mixed methods approach to leverage both qualitative and quantitative methods. Regularly involving prospective customers in the design and development process through methods like usability testing, interviews, and surveys helps ensure that the product meets their needs. Achieving PMF is a continuous process of understanding market needs, validating assumptions, and iterating based on feedback. For UX professionals, it ensures that the products we design are usable, desirable, and valuable to the target market. This alignment is critical for the product's success and sustainability in a competitive market.

### **UX Metrics**

Sean Ellis introduced a widely recognized metric for measuring product desirability called the “Sean Ellis Test,” or the “40% Rule” (Ellis, n.d.). This metric is based on a single survey

question designed to gauge how indispensable a product is to its users. The central question of the Sean Ellis Test is this: "How would you feel if you could no longer use this product?" Respondents can choose from the following options: Very disappointed; Somewhat disappointed; Not disappointed (it isn't really that useful); N/A – I no longer use the product. According to Ellis's research, if at least 40% of respondents indicate that they would be "very disappointed" if they could no longer use the product, it suggests that the product has achieved product-market fit and it is highly desirable. This threshold was determined based on Ellis's experience with various startups and his observation that successful companies typically reach or exceed this level of user engagement and satisfaction. Ellis's methodology has been widely adopted in the startup community because it provides a straightforward and quantitative way to assess product desirability. His research showed that reaching this 40% benchmark correlates strongly with a product's potential for growth and success. However, it should be noted that the Sean Ellis Test, according to Lewis and Sauro (2022), has yet to be validated in any published research. Also, it is more suited to products currently in the market, not those in the process of being developed.

Alternatively, many researchers use well-known experience metrics to assess PMF. For example, Net Promoter Score® (NPS) and Customer Satisfaction Score (CSAT) are high level metrics that measure overall satisfaction. Although these metrics tell us something about the current experience, they are not well suited to test desirability with early design concepts because respondents cannot easily comprehend or visualize the value proposition. There simply is not enough detail or richness of the product or service to indicate anything about consumer satisfaction, let alone their likelihood to use, adopt, or purchase it. Some researchers look to analytics such as customer retention rate, churn rate, or daily active users. While these might be useful metrics to gauge interest after the product is live, they cannot be used at the earliest stages of design.

### ***Evaluating Product-Market Fit at the Conceptual Stage***

My personal perspective on measuring product desirability at the conceptual stage is based on a ladder of interest or commitment, ranging from no commitment to high commitment. At the earliest stage, when assessing just a basic concept for a new product, I ask three survey rating questions (Likert-type scale): "I would like to learn more about this product or service" (no commitment), "I would share information about this product or service with a colleague (or friend)" (low commitment), and "I would schedule a demo when this product or service becomes available" (moderate commitment). As you can see, these questions try to identify the level of user desire or interest in a concept. The results provide a relative indication of interest or desire, not a predictor of future behavior.

Once a concept is fleshed out in the form of an interactive prototype, two additional desirability questions may be asked: "I would sign up for a free trial to use this product or service" (moderate commitment) and "I would consider purchasing this product if it were available today" (moderate commitment). Keep in mind that self-reported intentions may only be moderately correlated with future behavior (Armitage & Connor, 2001). But these questions do provide some signals on desirability. Notice that there are no questions which express a high level of commitment. That is because, when a product is still in the early stages of design and development, respondents don't have any basis to decide how much they might be willing to pay.

## **Conclusion**

UX researchers hold the key to unlocking the true potential of products and services. Yet, too often, the critical evaluation of product-market fit—particularly in terms of usefulness and desirability—is sorely missing. This oversight can lead to the development of products that, while technically brilliant, fail to resonate with users. We must shift our focus to understanding and validating the real needs and desires of our target audience before diving into the complexities of design and development. By prioritizing the evaluation of usefulness and desirability, UX researchers can ensure that the solutions we create are functional and genuinely valued by the people who use them. Let's avoid the situations I described at the start of this essay; no more "putting lipstick on a pig."

UX researchers who embrace the responsibility of ensuring product-market fit stand to make a profound impact on their organizations while elevating their own careers. By championing the evaluation of usefulness and desirability from the earliest stages of product development, you will position yourself as a strategic partner in the innovation process. Your skills and insights will become invaluable, informing critical decisions that can save your company millions in misdirected resources and potentially failed launches. As UX researchers demonstrate their ability to identify and validate market opportunities, you will be brought into higher-level strategic discussions, gaining increased visibility and influence within your organization. This expanded role not only enhances your professional growth but also opens doors to leadership positions in which you can shape product strategy and drive innovation. Ultimately, by focusing on product-market fit, UX researchers transform from tactical executors to strategic visionaries and become indispensable assets in creating products that truly resonate with users and drive business success.

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## About the Author



### Bill Albert, PhD

Dr. Albert is Founder and Principal of Global UX Partners, a consultancy providing user experience research, design, and strategy services to global businesses. Prior to Global UX Partners, Bill was Senior Vice President and Global Head of User Experience at Mach49, a growth incubator for global businesses, and Executive Director of the User Experience Center and Adjunct Professor in Human Factors in Information Design at Bentley University. He has more than 20 peer-reviewed publications and has presented his work in user experience at more than 50 national and international conferences. He co-wrote (with Tom Tullis) the first book on UX metrics, *Measuring the User Experience: Collecting, Analyzing, and Presenting UX Metrics* (third edition published in 2022). He also co-wrote (with Tom Tullis and Donna Tedesco) *Beyond the Usability Lab: Conducting Large-Scale Online User Experience Studies* in 2010. He received his PhD from Boston University. He completed a post-doc at Nissan Cambridge Basic Research with a focus on cognitive demands in the use of navigation systems.