URL: https://stvp.stanford.edu/blog/videos/learning-from-mistakes-2

Madonna had The Sex Book. Apple had the Newton. Marissa Mayer, Vice President of Search Products & User Experience for Google, points out that all the best brands, including her own, have made some tremendous product errors. But what allows an enterprise to endure, she says, is its ability to learn from its mistakes and make corrections. Performance is what's important, even if it's not instantaneous.

Transcript

Innovation, not instant perfection.. So I think it's been interesting to watch, as Google has scaled up, the expectations of our users and of the public of our products, because, you know, now when we launch something, you know, people immediately say, "Well, you know, it's so rough it's not very good".. Right, like you know, and it turns out when we were small we launched really rough things that weren't very good all the time.. But the key is iteration.. When you launch something, can you learn enough about the mistakes that you made and learn enough from your users that you ultimately iterate really quickly? I call this my Max and Madonna theory.. We look at, like, Apple, Madonna.. They were cool in 1983, they're still cool today, 2006, 23 years later.. And that's really amazing to look at, and people think of them as very innovative and very inventive.. How do they do it? And the answer is, they don't do it being perfect every single time.. You know, there's lots of mess-ups along the way..

Apple had the Newton, Madonna had The Sex Book.. There's been all kinds of controversies and mistakes made.. But the answer is, you know, when they make a mistake, your way out of it or you re-invent yourself.. And I think that's ultimately the charge that we have, is to launch these innovations and then make them better.. And there's a lot of instances where we've launched, you know, laughable products.. When we did Google News, we made laughable mistakes.. When we did Google News, I remember we really wanted to launch on the first part of the week.. It's something we learned early on, that it's better to launch a product, you know, sometime between Monday and Wednesday than it is later in the week, and we sort of missed - we realized we weren't going to launch by Wednesday, so we decided we would take another four days to make the product better.. So we had this meeting on Wednesday, and we said, "Okay, well, we've got a couple of extra days.. Should we implement a new feature?" And there were six people on the team, and we got into a big argument..

If we had more time to launch this extra feature, should we put in the feature sort by date, or should we have search by location? Would people want to see the freshest news, or would they want to see news that was relevant to their location? And it turns out this might be obvious to some of you, and it's certainly obvious to the journalists which one is going to be more useful, but being computer scientists we didn't really know.. And because there were six of us, we ended up in a dead heat.. Three people said we should do sort by date, three people said we should do search by location, and the team got locked in an hour-long argument about which one was more important, and in the end I had to sort of step up and say, "Okay, guys, we don't know which one is more important, and we're not going to end up doing either now because we can't make up our minds, so let's just spend four days polishing the thing up and then we'll see what the users say." So we launched on Monday morning, and when we looked at the e-mail that had come in by about 5:00 p.m., we had gotten about 305 messages, and 300 of them asked for sort by date and 3 of them asked for search by location and 2 of them could have been loosely defined to maybe be asking for search by location.. But the users answered this question 100 to 1 really easily for us, and it turned out that it was really the right thing to do, to just get the product out there and then have the users tell us where it was most important for us to spend our time.. And, you know, we've done other things, like Google Video, I think, is really funny.. Now we launched Google Video, and the funniest thing about it is we called it Google Video, but you couldn't actually watch video, so people found this very counterintuitive.. It turns out that users really do want to watch video.. That was the first feature they asked for.. And we - that one isn't as much of a shocker to me.. And, you know, so one of our first iterations was actually getting the rights to play video and having a really great player experience in the browser so people could watch the video as opposed to just searching the closed captions..

But a lot of times, you know, people would say, "Oh, look at Google, and there's all these innovative things." And they remembered the high points, and they laugh, and I was like, "Have you ever made mistakes?" And the answer is we make mistakes every time, every day, thousands of things wrong with Google and this product that we know we could fix, but if you launch things and iterate really quickly, people forget about those mistakes and they have a lot of respect for how quickly you build the product up and make it better...