

Product Management and sales: 5 key lessons from unicorn Aikido

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Nick Boucart

Product Management without willingness to spend isn’t a product-market fit

In early 2026, Aikido Security raised 60?million dollars in a Series B investment round. In the process, the Ghent-based cyber security company was valued at one billion dollars and gained unicorn status in just a few years. A remarkable growth story in a competitive market.

One of the factors behind that rapid growth is a distinct vision of Product Management and sales. During Product Day, a Sirris initiative, Roeland Delrue explained why he sees **Product Management and sales** as inextricably linked. Because a well-constructed product isn’t enough. The real test is simple: does anyone want to pay for it?

It sounds simple. But according to Delrue, in practice this test is not performed explicitly enough.



Product Management goes beyond building

Delrue worked as a Product Manager for many years, so he is as familiar as anybody with the discussions about UX, specifications, agile methods and roadmap structures. However, he offered a different perspective during his keynote.

> 'At many conferences, it's all about the “profession”, and not so much about why a customer will actually budget for it,' Delrue said.

Yet ultimately, that’s at the heart of zero-to-one: from idea to a viable product.

> 'If nobody is interested in it or wants to pay for it, then it’s a failed product.'

This is the reality that every start-up faces sooner or later. Resources are finite. If you can’t find any willingness to pay within a few months, that’s the end of the story. It is, as Delrue calls it, a race against time.

Why Product Managers need the courage to sell

Many professionals feel comfortable with guiding and supporting, but less so with explicitly discussing budgets or conducting a negotiation. Yet that is precisely what Delrue sees as a core skill for Product Managers. He literally puts this question to prospects:

> 'What’s stopping you from buying this?'
> 'How much would you pay for it?'

Such a conversation is confrontational, but it’s so important, according to Delrue. Willingness to pay is the most objective measure of value. It’s important to remember here that sales isn’t a separate phase after building. In strong Product Management and sales, commercial testing runs through the entire process, from problem definition to pricing and positioning.

Delrue himself sums it up this way:

> 'I act like a sales person with a PM hat on'.

A good Product Manager wears multiple hats

It’s not an isolated role. You’re constantly moving between different perspectives:

- The **sales hat**: testing whether value can also become revenue
- The **marketing hat**: translating features into a clear promise. Because a feature by itself doesn’t sell. It's about what it makes possible: time savings or less risk, for example
- The **developer's hat**. Product Managers work with engineers who rightly want to deliver quality. But without clear choices, there’s a danger of over-engineering

Delrue uses the metaphor of a house: not all the rooms have to be painted to be able to live in it. The art of a minimum viable product is exactly that: delivering enough value to get started, without finalising everything in detail.

This means that Product Management is also **stakeholder management**. Product Managers can rarely use their position to get things done. Developers, marketers and sales people don’t report to them, yet they need to move forward together.

> 'You have to get things done from people who don't report to you.'

This requires persuasiveness, clear communication and an understanding of each other's incentives. A developer is evaluated on code quality. Sales on revenue. Product Management needs to bridge these worlds.



Five principles for product-market fit

During his keynote, Delrue shared five principles that were decisive for Aikido.

1. Go for money

Ask the money question. Willingness to pay gives insight not just into pricing, but into the priorities for your start-up. Delrue does this explicitly, even in exploratory talks.

> 'I'm not here to sell - the price on the website still applies - but what would you really be willing to pay for it?'

2. Tighten the screws as you go

Several paywalls were built into the first version of Aikido. Users quickly came up against limitations and had to upgrade to experience the full value. The result: limited conversion. Only when those barriers were lowered or moved could it be seen how customers were actually using the product.

What should start-ups learn from this, in Delrue's view? Don't build too many walls in the beginning. You can always tighten up the monetisation later. *Tighten the screws as you go.*

3. Extreme proximity to customers

> 'Talk to the customer.'

It sounds banal. But according to Delrue, it happens too little - even among CTOs and co-founders of start-ups. If growth is lagging while the leadership is hardly talking to customers at all, it’s clear that there’s a gap between what’s being built and what’s in demand. The way customers use products is also sometimes different from what was intended. Or they run into frictions that are invisible internally.

At Aikido, that proximity is organised structurally. There is deliberately no chatbot layer between customer and team. Questions asked through the chat function in the product reach the team directly. Whenever possible, the conversation is quickly moved to Slack or Teams, a more stable and personal alternative than website chat, where customers often speak to someone else each time.

> 'And yes,' laughs Delrue, 'that means I'm in more than 1,600?channels.'

4. Make time-to-value as short as possible

Attention is scarce. Patience even scarcer. The time between first use and when the customer thinks ‘this works for me’ should be as short as possible. If your product needs extensive onboarding, support calls or implementation guidance to be understood, the costs rise quickly. Support is human work and therefore has limited scalability.

Delrue speaks of 'insanely short time to value.' The sooner the aha moment, the less you need to invest in explainers, demos and guidance. Long funnels and extended sales cycles not only slow down growth, but increase the cost per customer.

5. Throw it on the street

Finally, put it out there. You only really learn where the value is when people are actually using the product. Internal discussions and brainstorming sessions aren’t enough.

Deliberately choose to give maximum access in the early stages, even in the free version. Let users really integrate the product into their operations, without early barriers or restrictions.

This seems at odds with monetisation, but it's all about timing. First, understand how the product is used and what value users really get out of it. Then refine and hone, and only then monetise.

Because the reality is harsh: resources are finite. If there’s no willingness to pay after a while, it’s game over.

Why Product Managers need to experience sales

Delrue's conclusion is as clear as it is challenging: every Product Manager should do at least one month's or one quarter's sales.

To experience the discomfort of asking the money question. To feel what a 'no' means. To learn to explain why something is valuable.

It forces them to take responsibility for value (and messaging about it) and for the viability of the product. Because in the end, that's what it's all about: building a product that will be both supported

and paid for.

Who is Roeland Delrue?

Roeland Delrue is co-founder and COO & CRO of Aikido Security. He worked in Product Management for many years and today combines product and commercial responsibilities within the company.

Aikido Security, Belgian unicorn in cyber security

Aikido Security is a Belgian cyber security start-up that is developing an all-in-one platform for securing code, cloud and runtime environments. The company is integrating security directly into developers' workflow and focusing on automation and AI-assisted vulnerability detection.
Aikido Security has some 200?employees today, having grown into an international player in developer-first security in just a few years.

Discover more about Aikido Security

Authors



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