

Product Management Through the Eyes of a Cartoonist- With Innovation Manager Kriti Vichare

Speaker:
Chad McAllister
Kriti Vichare

Chad: Hi, this is Chad. I'd like to introduce you to Kriti Vichare. She's the Director of Innovation for The United States Postal Service. A cartoonist and an Innovation commentator at entrepreneurfail.com, which she cofounded. She has also worked for Pepsi Co. as a Senior Marketing Manager, and Kraft Foods as a Brand Manager. Kriti, you are the first innovation cartoonist that I've brought to the Everyday Innovators who are listening and I'm glad you're here! This is a real treat for us.

Kriti: Thank you! Thank you so much for having me.

Chad: You started your career in statistics and then somehow made your way to brand management. I'm personally fond of statistics myself; I have enjoyed that as an engineering student and have taught it for a bit as university teacher too. But what was your motivation for making that switch?

Kriti: Sure. I used to do statistics for a living and then I started selling juice for a living, and now I'm selling the mail for a living. So it is definitely a different trajectory all the way around. I started my career in technology and statistics because I really loved that investigative process. I loved digging through to find samples and evidence for actionable decision making. That was really exciting to me. A few years working in [roles](#) [00:01:48], in which I was able to do that...I actually got enamored by the customer and the client's side of everything—figuring out how to best present those statistics in a compelling way to really get customers and clients excited. That's what led me to pursue my MBA and as a result, to go deeper into marketing roles. Supposed MBA is when I delved into marketing and brand management for the first time. After six years doing that, I identified a really good opportunity to branch out on my own and provide some of the foundation processes that we took for granted in a large company and bring them to provide consulting for smaller to medium-sized businesses. And...go ahead.

Chad: So that change from statistics to brand management (going back to do the MBA to help facilitate that), were you able to find that the statistics background helped you any with brand management and product management?

Kriti: Yes, of course, because of that quantitative and strategic mindset. It is so helpful in any type of brand management role or marketing management role whether you're running your own business or you're driving innovation. I am really glad that I have that foundation because I probably couldn't do a lot of the stuff I could do today if I hadn't done that.

Chad: And there does seem to be a trend, especially in more technical product management—technical products like software—where the statistical aspect has kind of renewed. It has

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become very popular to have data driven decisions and being able to have a product manager or brand manager that understands the analyzed data. It is certainly a plus.

Kriti: Yup. I think data has made statistics sexy again and let's see what happens next.

Chad: Absolutely. I interrupted you earlier, there. So, you were at Kraft Foods doing work as brand management and then?

Kriti: And then at Pepsi working at Global marketing and international marketing roles. After that, I identified an opportunity to leverage some of those processes, skills, and foundation that I got from marketing at larger companies and working with smaller companies to provide that kind of structure. After a couple of years of doing that and also launching the comic strip, that's when I found this exciting role at the Postal Service. That has kind of been my trajectory. It's been an interesting journey for sure.

Chad: Absolutely. So let's focus on those corporate sort of positions first and then we'll dive into your entrepreneurial experiences. Between Kraft Foods, Pepsi Co., and USPS, where have you been and where have you felt that you learned the most about product innovation?

Kriti: Interestingly enough, I learned the most about product innovation during my entrepreneurial experiences—my external experiences. But I can share some of the interesting insights and take-away that I got from the larger companies.

Chad: Okay. Maybe there's a good example in one of them that is something you learned that would be really applicable to product managers and, thus, help them improve the job they're doing right now.

Kriti: Absolutely. So while I was at Kraft, I was managing Tang—the orange powder which Astronauts made famous. It was a huge brand earlier in the century. It started declining after health and wellness took over and Tang is now not as big a product as it used to be. So when I took it over, it had gone through a bunch of reformulations. We dug into the data and we identified that the sugar and the artificial sweetener trend did not really apply to Tang die-hards. Tang consumers loved the sugar. They loved the taste of that original Tang. All of the reformulations, which were done for cost-cutting measures or to keep up with the trend of artificial sweeteners in these types of beverages, they weren't working. So it was a lot of insights and data and really going deep into the consumer psychology of that target market. From that we understood that we needed to reformulate back to the original Tang that people knew, loved, and remembered. That was my first foray into really deep consumer insight and development to attain that goal. The lesson learned from that was that everything has a time and a place. Perhaps later on in the future of Tang, artificial sweeteners may work. Perhaps in

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the history of Tang, a different formulation or a different packaging may work better. You just have to identify what works for your consumer at that time. That's what you have to execute on.

Chad: Absolutely. Watching those trends and recognizing a trend growing or decreasing is so important. I am, unfortunately, a bit of a recovering Mountain Dew drinker. I say "unfortunately" because I know it probably not that good for me and certainly not my overall health and fitness level. But they did a summer thing with Mountain Dew. They had the "throwback" all sugar version and I actually liked that better than the other one.

Kriti: Yup.

Chad: When you were digging into Tang, what was the catalyst there, to recognize that trend and that data? I don't know if it was custom interviews. How did that come about?

Kriti: It was a lot of serving data, a lot of research that was done as ethnographic data that we dove into their psychology of why they were even consuming it. Why did they decrease? Did they fall off the bandwagon? If they fell off the franchise? What really happened? I think that was so critical in finding those gems of insight because they were the catalyst to go forward and make the change.

Chad: I don't know if you were involved in this part or not but do you know how this actual data was collected and how you identified people that left the brand?

Kriti: Yeah. So we partnered with a consumer insights agency that actually tracks users of the Kraft Products and we were able to identify longitudinally what they were doing and what they weren't doing. [Inaudible] [00:09:54].

Chad: Okay. Yeah so the results of that survey was that data that helped you identify if there is an opportunity here to move back to real sugar and regrow a base of users.

Kriti: Yup. Something else that really stuck with me during my time at Kraft is that this is something that one of the senior leaders had said. I've always taken it to heart when it comes to driving innovation or new products. There was a senior leader there who said that for 20 years, Kraft Foods had been trying to commercialize single-serve powdered beverages. So you know the little [sashes](#) of Crystal light or Tang or the little single-serve sashes that have gotten more ubiquitous lately? For 20 years, they were trying to make the economics for it. They were trying to identify its demand. There was just never enough demand. People felt it was a good idea but time and time again, it kept getting shut down. Until the early 2000s when bottled water started to really have an up tic and all of a sudden, the single-serve sashes had a place in the world because as people were on the go and they had their bottled water and they would

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take their sashes with them. Whereas before that, they didn't really see the benefit of having a glass of water and if they're at home, why not just have a canister? That type of persistence in the fact that every idea has a time and a day can be identified as long as you can wait and be persistent. That really stuck with me because often when you're driving any type of innovation, you're shut down left and right and the time might just not be right. But if you continue long enough and pursue long enough, all the stars will align and you can get to the next level.

Chad: Yeah, absolutely. It's a good reminder that so many times we look inside of organizations for new ideas and they may already have been developed in a fairly coherent way but just got banned because it wasn't the right time for them. Right? It wasn't that it wasn't a good product, it was a "not now" sort of product.

Kriti: Yup.

Chad: Recognizing the trends and how those things come back around. There's a lot of mining that can be done from organizations on past ideas where the trend has changed.

Kriti: Absolutely.

Chad: Great, thanks for sharing that one with us. On the commercial side, is there any other stories that stand out as a learning experience for you?

Kriti: Yeah, when I was at Pepsi, I pursued one innovation—it was actually a supply-chain innovation—of streamlining a way to actually ship products internationally. I was working on Gatorade at the time. Gatorade is used by athletes around the world. For example, Serena Williams and Usain Bolt, they're both Gatorade athletes. If Serena is competing in Australia, she wants her Gatorade. If she's competing in China, she wants her Gatorade. She wants the flavor she likes and she wants what she's used to. For us to actually get the product and ship it to these different countries—often in a very quick turnaround—was quite challenging. So I let an initiative to alter some of the supply chain to make that process a really quick and small shipment into fast and easy in turnkey. It was quite challenging and for quite a bit of time it felt like it was going nowhere. It felt like that project was not going to the next level. But the unlock happened when I started working with the cross-functional teams, not as folks who were going to help make this happen, but I actually got them really vested in the whole process. I got them excited about serving Serena Williams and Usain Bolt with these products that we send them. It really got their vested interest. Only then, were they going over and beyond their day job to make this happen. Eventually, we did end up creating a process that cut that time by a significant amount and we were able to ship close to a million dollars a product to these athletes around the world, which earlier, these products never reached them, or they got stuck in customs, or there were some other issues. That was a really great turning point because I

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know that I have to engage and get buying from cross functional teams but this was the first time that I gave them that excitement and they really took the project on as their own because they had invested interest in it.

Chad: And you could make athletes happy.

Kriti: Yup.

Chad: So the cross-functional teams that you had involved sounds like they originally thought this project as an annoyance because it was falling into their day-to-day normal activities and responsibilities.

Kriti: Yup.

Chad: But you got them excited and bought into this idea of helping these athletes. What kinds of things did you do to convey that?

Kriti: The folks in supply chain, the folks in [IMD](#), even the folks at the plant, they never get to see the fancy commercials or the advertising that goes out. That's really exciting stuff that's happening at the frontend. But all the folks on the field and the backend, they may get to find out about it later on but that's not the forefront. So I shared with them a lot of these inspirational videos that we had and some of the outtakes of some of the advertising that was being done. I gave them some of the insider's scoop on something that they wouldn't have otherwise seen and I think that really was eye opening to them. It got them really excited and felt that they were part of something bigger and part of this elite crowd that can really get involved with these athletes.

Chad: You created a motivating goal for them.

Kriti: Yup.

Chad: So on those videos, did they get introduced to the actual athletes? Did they see the customers that would be impacted if you could get this system put in place?

Kriti: Who got to see the athletes?

Chad: The people on the cross-functional teams?

Kriti: They never actually met the athletes but they did get to see a lot of the videos and even sometimes news reels from the different countries. They got to see Usain Bolt carrying a bottle of Gatorade and they said, "Wow, we actually got him that. We actually got to ship that to him across the world to get that to him."

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Chad: Great. I think that's a really powerful tool to use when you're working with developers and engineers—to give them that customer experience in some form. In your case, that experience was through the videos of seeing the difference that the product made to the customer which helped generate that buy and why they're work is actually important and makes a difference.

Kriti: Yup.

Chad: Very good. You shared something that caught my attention which was the most valuable experience for learning about product management and product innovation came from your entrepreneurial activities. You should tell us more about that.

Kriti: Absolutely. Some years ago, I decided to take the plunge and resign from Pepsi to do my own startup and pursue entrepreneurial activities. I must say that in retrospect, I was quite naïve. I had three ideas. I thought I'd launched them all and I thought I could do it all myself. I thought I could do it without funding. How much money could I possibly need? All without really getting that first customer. I think I spent maybe six months of that pursuing an App idea that I had. I thought I'd figured out how to do it and I could work on the backend. Six months later, nothing had been done. The three ideas were all piece meal, little bits of it. I hadn't validated with customers because I was too busy trying to learn how to code. I don't know what I was thinking. It was then that I took a step back and finally read *The Lean Startup*. I then started to understand the concepts of iterative testing and learning before building instead of just building, building, building. This applies to both large and small companies. Building is usually the easiest part and it's the most tenable so we all just love to jump into that. But not enough is done in that fuzzy frontend, which is the assessment, the analysis, the strategy, the minimum viable product, confirming that that is actually what a customer wants and working with them step by step to determine what the features and functions would be. Those concepts, I guess I knew them in theory from working in larger companies. But when you're so close to the action in your own startup business, that's when you really understand that. I cannot waste a month coming up with a website that nobody is going to come to. That doesn't make sense. You have to have something that is compelling. That is the best marketing. It is to have a great product, not just a fancy website or a feature-filled act. That's is kind of my realization. In fact, in all those misadventures and all those inspirations, led me to create EntrepreneurialFail. That's how it all came together for me because I started doodling and documenting the mistakes I made as a new entrepreneur and sure enough it started resonating with who said that they did the exact same thing. It's so easy to get caught up in too many ideas; to not have that focus and think you can do it all yourself; to not validate each step with customers and not just the bigger picture. It is important to validate each iteration with

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customers and it's so easy to get caught up in all that [inaudible] [00:22:46] without actually bringing in a dollar.

Chad: Yes, absolutely. I know I've gotten caught up more than once, I'm embarrassed to say, with doing this sort of thing. Thinking that, "Surely this is a great idea. People are going to value this idea." And I'll just start building the solution without doing that work to validate the more serious forefront and to make sure that I have customers that need this solution and to make sure I have more than one customer that needs this solution, as well as what is the value of it and what are they willing to pay for it. Thus, working through that.

Kriti: Yup.

Chad: I think it's more exciting for a lot of us innovators to dive into the building part and bypass that until we learn the hard lesson. It sounds like that was a pretty hard lesson for you—six months of time and no funding coming into this and at the same time, trying to make life work.

Kriti: Yup. Absolutely. Six months of time, no funding, no progress. I made miniscule progress on all of the ideas but that's not going to work. That's not going to help anyone. Once I came to that realization, I decided to focus on one concept: I hired people as necessary. I actually dove deeper into the customer and the consumer and that whole process really set the tone for me. It set the stage for product development. It just became so much clearer, even though I had done similar stuff at a larger company. It is so different when you're doing it for yourself and there is so much at stake and on the line.

Chad: Sometimes we lose track that it's real money when you're doing it for yourself. It's still money responsible for the larger organizations but if it is money that is the difference between you pursuing your business or keeping food on the table, it's really personal.

Kriti: Yup.

Chad: So what was that transitions then? What were you involved with when you realized your focus?

Kriti: The focus was the consulting that I was doing—providing innovation and ideation for small to medium-sized businesses. That was everything from helping to create an innovation pipeline to diving deeper into a competitive landscape to identify what products or services can outdo the competition, market sizing and assessing various concepts, running workshops and events to help organizations identify what those next steps would be. That, I felt was something that was an intersection of what I enjoyed and what I was passionate about, what there really was a need for, and what could propel my business to the next level.

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Chad: Yeah, great combination—looking for those things that you enjoy doing, people need, you add value and make money out of it. It's kind of a Jim Collins three-circle model he has for what we should do in life.

Kriti: Yup, yup.

Chad: I'm curious about when you started doing that. How many experiences did you lean on that made those ideation developments that you're doing? Did you lean on your corporate experiences versus the prior six months of recognizing that you didn't validate the product ideas that you had?

Kriti: A little bit of both because it was at Kraft that I had actually learned some of the techniques for generating ideas and assessing ideas. Even in business school, I did some of that. So that's where I initially learned a lot of the topics. But applying Lean Startup methodologies and the mindset of iterative development is something I didn't really understand until I went down the path of working on something that did not make sense in those first six months entrepreneurial ventures. The next stage was kind of the next conglomeration of my large company experience as well as my startup experience to date at that time.

Chad: So it turns out that those six months actually provided quite a bit of value in what you were doing.

Kriti: Absolutely.

Chad: Very good. And for the Everyday Innovators that are listening, back in episode ten, we dove into this aspect of lean and doing customer experiences more deeply with the author of the *Running Lean* book, Ash Maurya. We went through a lot of detail on how we do validate a product concept. Good reminder for everyone listening to check that out.

Okay, so you got your feet wet and you are putting together some startup and venturing out to do something on your own. This leads to offering innovation ideation services to companies. In the process, you were doodling and out came this entrepreneurial fail website. Tell us more about that.

Kriti: Absolutely. So as I mentioned, I made every mistake in the book. I've always been a doodler, not really an artist. I've always loved doodling. I just wanted to capture the misadventures and the learnings that I was going through. I kind of just doodled that out. Humor was one way that I kept propelling myself towards. You kind of have to laugh at yourself and then you can move on to the next level. It was a way for me to make fun of what I had done and then move on and learn from that. So I started doodling my experiences as an entrepreneur and the foolish things that I had done. I casually started sharing them and the

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response was completely unexpected because so many people started reaching out to me and saying that it resonated with them so much and they did the exact same thing and they loved the perspective that it brings because everyone is going through it. It's not just them and you kind of need that reassurance when you're in that entrepreneurship vortex. This is how it kind of got started. It started off as just something that I doodled for fun and it almost started to become a business development tool because it generated a lot of attention. It started generating a lot of emails and questions. People were interested to know some of the back story and it resolved into a sort of tool for entrepreneurs. A fun-sized, easy to digest, quick lesson on some of the common mishaps in entrepreneurship. And it grew from there. Soon thereafter, I published a book of cartoons comparing the hilarious differences between big companies and small companies. I still continue drawing them today. My husband is also an entrepreneur and he and I both generate the content together and I create the illustrations. But the actual story and concepts—the copy—is something we work on together.

Chad: So you have someone to share the experiences with and discuss these headaches that you run into.

Kriti: Absolutely. He was an entrepreneur before I was. So when I started doodling them, it was partially his encouragement because he says, "I've been there! I've done that. That captures that emotion and that mental state very well." Soon together, we were brainstorming a lot of ideas.

Chad: That website is entrepreneurialfail.com.

Kriti: Yup. [Entrepreneurialfail.com](http://entrepreneurialfail.com). The joke is that there shouldn't be such a stigma on failure because failure is actually awesome and you can actually laugh at it. It is so universal it is almost like a rite of passage. Join us and laugh, learn, and launch while you're at it.

Chad: That's how we learn right? Unfortunately it is the painful experiences in life that we look back on and go, "Oh. That was really valuable." The happy-go-lucky ones are the ones we take for granted and we don't learn from them as much I don't think. That might be a shame but we need some pain in our lives. Any mission in the process? You put together a publication to book. Is that "Cheating on your Corporate Job"?

Kriti: Yup. That book was inspired by the fact that many folks that I had met who were in corporate jobs and were in large companies such as Kraft and Pepsi and other established organizations, kept saying, "I just want to start my own business. I just want to start my own thing!" They just wanted to get out and do their own thing. What they didn't realize is that each scenario and each organization has its own challenges. Whether you're working in a tiny company or a huge company, it's not going to be perfect. There are so many things in my

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startup experience that made me appreciate what I had in a larger organization. We definitely take it for granted when we're in a larger company while in a smaller company you take other things for granted. It's kind of poking fun at that mindset and sharing the hilarious differences between those large companies and the smaller companies in things you wouldn't have even thought of as you're making that transition.

Chad: Sounds like a great insight for people to read as you're thinking about making that jump. I like the tagline on your site which is, "Laugh to Launch".

Kriti: Yup.

Chad: Great. The grass is always greener on the other side, right?

Kriti: Yes, some folks say the grass is always brown but hopefully we can be more optimistic than that.

Chad: Very good. So in this audience of Everyday Innovators, there is certainly lots of people that have the same thoughts about coming up with new ideas and that know how to test those and validate them with customers in order to lead us to something that is very valuable. Especially for those that are thinking about doing that jump and making it on their own. This sounds like a good resource for people to go and look at, laugh as they read through it and think through what that might actually look like if they actually made that leap.

Kriti: Absolutely.

Chad: Okay. So I just wanted to make sure we has the right persona, the right avatar, the right person in mind when thinking about who would be looking at your sites.

Kriti: You got it.

Chad: Very good. I'm just curious. Did this initially start as a personal blog? Because you said you were just writing it for yourself in the lessons that you learned.

Kriti: Yeah, I was actually doodling it. I started adding a little paragraph or two as an explainer. But initially, it started off as doodles. I wasn't even sure if I wanted to publish them. I am not an artist by any means so it was a little but intimidating to even want to share something that I drew. If you ever ask me, if I would ever consider myself a cartoonist, five years ago I would have said you're crazy.

Chad: You say that but they have a nice consistent style and I like the way they look.

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Kriti: Thank you. I still prefer to say doodler instead of cartoonist. It seems a little more unofficial. But yes, it didn't really start as a personal blog, it just started off as a creative outlet for me to share my experiences with anyone who would listen.

Chad: It sounds like a form of journaling.

Kriti: Yeah, absolutely.

Chad: Which is another takeaway for us. Only through the experiences of developing a product inside an organization or on your own (whatever the case may be), keeping track of the notes and having that journaling experience—in your case, a doodling experience—is really valuable for our own reflection and that can actually come to be a product of its own at some point in the future.

Kriti: Absolutely. There has been so many times that I go back to it. That's another benefit of journaling or doodling or capturing your thoughts. There is constant inspiration to go back to it.

Chad: Yeah, there is new problems that arise. Thank you so much for sharing that. Again, that's entrepreneurialfail.com for people that want to go look at the comics or doodles as you say. But really nicely done comics with important messages for people thinking about making that leap to entrepreneurship and startups. I always like finishing up with my guest by asking for a quote related to innovation. I want to ask you for one and why you chose that.

Kriti: Yeah. I have a couple that I'm a fan of but I'll share both of them and then you can...

Chad: Sounds good.

Kriti: One is a Hemingway quote which is, "Never confuse motion with action." That is so relevant because as I shared in my entrepreneurial experiences and even in the past, so many times we are doing things for the sake of doing things because it feels like we're accomplishing things. But at the end of the day, if it's not bring more customers or increasing your revenue or anything else like that, it's just motion and not action. That has kind of signified a lot of things because it's very easy to fall into the trap of doing things and feeling busy but it's not really accomplishing anything.

Chad: Yeah, that's a good reflection of your six months where you decided to go off on your own. Confusing that motion for action.

Kriti: Yup. Another one is, "Those who fail to plan, plan to fail." That kind of ladders back up to EntrepreneurialFail. EntrepreneurialFail is almost a way for folks to plan in advanced, be aware that these are the pitfalls, understand them in an easy to understand manner, and accordingly

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be ready and be more prepared than they would have otherwise. Those are the two quotes that really stick with me.

Chad: Yeah, I really like that one too, “Those who fail to plan, plan to fail.” It almost seems like at times in our agile development communities, that taking time to plan is looked at as not a good use of time because plans do change. But I personally don’t think it’s the plan that is as important as the process of planning because that is where you learn so much.

Kriti: Absolutely.

Chad: That’s a great quote. Thanks so much for sharing those with us. It’s been great to talk with you. Is there anything that makes this interview a win for you that you would like to share with us? Also, I’m sure there are people that would like to follow up and check out the cartoons. So can you share your contact information that you would like to?

Kriti: Yeah, absolutely. You can find me on Twitter at [kritter2b](#). If you want to check out the comics. There are links to my email there so, [entrepreneurialfail.com](#). If you’d like to email me, you can. The comics themselves are on Facebook and Instagram. Feel free to browse them and if you have ideas for comics, that would be great. Send them over. Any mishaps and misadventures that you’ve experienced in your startup careers you can send my way.

About making this session a win, if anyone takes home the fact that innovation, entrepreneurship, and driving change is not easy and it takes a lot of time. If my comments today reiterated that in any way, I think that is a win because it’s a long haul process but it’s worth it at the end.

Chad: Excellent. Thank you so much. I will also include that contact information—your Twitter name and your website UR—in the show notes for this episode. So for everyone listening, that will be there. I do appreciate your time and I also want to thank the Everyday Innovators who are listening. The reason why we do this show is to help get more information out for product innovators and product managers and developers. Without you listening, that would not happen. Thank you very much!