

# Link Up and Learn

A conversation with  
five industry gurus  
about product  
management  
associations

Now that you've taken a Pragmatic Marketing® course—or perhaps several—where can you go to continue to exchange ideas, discover new resources, and network with your peers? It's easy—a local product management association (PMA). In recent years, PMAs have exploded across the country, offering an engaging and safe place to discuss product management issues and challenges, listen to informative speakers, access useful templates and plans, make valuable connections, and much more.

For this issue, *productmarketing.com* sat down with founders and leaders from five of the most active PMAs for a Q&A about the value of participating in a product management association and advice for those who want to start or grow a PMA. Taking part in the discussion were:

**BOB LEVY**, product manager for IBM Rational Software, co-founder and past president of the Boston Product Management Association ([www.bostonproducts.org](http://www.bostonproducts.org))

**KEITH BOSWELL**, 20-year software industry veteran, partner at Market Acuity, and moderator for the Triangle Product Management Association in Research Triangle, North Carolina (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/trianglepma>)

**JASMINE DE GAIA**, senior product manager for Lucent Technologies and executive director of the Silicon Valley Product Management Association ([www.svpma.org](http://www.svpma.org))

**ANTHONY HUMPHREYS**, product manager for Datatel, Inc. and president of the DC Product Management Association in ([www.dcpma.com](http://www.dcpma.com)) Washington, DC

**ALAN ARMSTRONG**, product manager for Wily Tech and co-founder and long-time leader of the Toronto Product Management Association ([www.tpma.ca](http://www.tpma.ca)) →

## Q&A on Participating in a Product Management Association

**Q** *What are the challenges facing product managers today that make a product management association viable and important?*

**BOB:** Product managers are challenged by the rate of change, the volume of information, and the professional scope required to uncover new business opportunities. Augmenting oneself by developing close ties with those who complement our skills and abilities is a compelling vehicle to overcome professional challenges. That was the fundamental premise motivating the founding of the Boston Product Management Association.

**ANTHONY:** The problem is two-fold: First, within the organization, the product manager's role and responsibilities are often misunderstood. So we need help making the company aware of what we do or should be doing. The second problem is the product manager being able to deliver on what he or she should be doing. Things like being an expert on the market, pricing, all the things that are so critical in product marketing and product management—but for which we often have no formal training. Much of the PMA's effort is placed on educational activities that help product managers know what they should be doing and improve on their skills.

**Q** *Why do you think a PMA is well-suited to helping product managers solve some of these challenges?*

**ALAN:** Product management is such a unique position; there haven't been the kinds of resources we need to grow and develop our careers. The PMAs have sprung up recently to fill that void. Most marketing courses, like AMA, are not particularly relevant to high-tech product managers. In terms of networking and learning, it's much more valuable to network with high-tech professionals.

**KEITH:** The typical marketing associations are heavily consumer-oriented and marcom-focused, where they deal with traditional aspects of marketing—rather than being geared to what most product managers do, which is setting product direction. How do you cross-manage all the different departments in a company to bring a product to market? How do you research new markets to potentially enter? Product management has the ultimate matrix management nightmare, where you need every department in the company to be on board to bring a release to market. Yet none of those departments reports directly to product management. Where do you get resources for that? Beyond Pragmatic Marketing® and a few books, there are very few tools out there to help product managers learn. That's where the PMAs come in.

**ANTHONY:** An association like this can bring an unbiased voice to a community of product managers. It can bring a level playing field to all product managers and make countless resources available for their use. An association brings community to an area where there is none. It is a

place where you can get together and learn, network, and share information surrounding that unique niche that is product management. At DCPMA, we're looking to give members a place where they can find great training, a place where they can come learn with great presentations, a discussion board, links to other resources, and more.

**Q** *What is the core value product managers can gain from participating in this type of association?*

**KEITH:** It's like having a virtual mentor to go to when you don't have an answer to something. A lot of product managers operate alone, or they don't have a product management guru in their organizations. A PMA is a great source of information. It's like having your own library of templates and advisors you can tap when you run into a problem. You have the ability to tap resources you would never have access to or you would have to pay for. It's almost the open source effect. You benefit from the collective intelligence of the community—even for those of us who have been doing this a long time. I've been in product marketing for quite a few years, and I still learn things and am able to get information from my group. Plus, from a professional standpoint, it's good to network and see what other people are doing and make sure you're up to speed—especially in this extremely volatile and competitive job market. It's a fantastic way to advance your career. If you're an eloquent contributor, you'll get recognition and credibility among your peers in the region.

**ALAN:** The networking aspect is huge for members. As product managers, we can be pretty isolated. There is nobody else in the company who does our job and nobody to talk to



about the job itself. In Toronto, we wanted to create a place where people could find that personal and professional development—and maybe just a bit of group psychology. Product managers should look at these associations as a long-term investment in their professional network. You get to know who's who, which companies are which. If you need to collaborate with a company, you know where to look. And you know people, so if you get stumped or need a resource, you have someone to call. And the pizza isn't bad either.

**Q** *What's the value of a local or regional group versus just an online discussion group or a national association?*

**JASMINE:** I think you need that face-to-face interaction. The big benefit is that we are a community. People know each other now and can have meaningful conversations instead of just making small talk. And that is really beneficial because product management is fairly new as a profession or a specific career. It's not like you can go back to your alumni if you went to engineering school. Most of those people are engineers; they aren't product managers. So I think it's important that we help each other.

**ANTHONY:** It's getting product managers together with other product managers in their area. The value of a regional group is to shake someone's hand, to network for jobs, to meet new contacts, to discuss MRDs and product roadmaps—and ask questions and take off on other people's questions. Our mission statement is: the place to network, innovate, and share. That community is what everyone's looking for.

**Q** *What does a PMA offer that product managers can't get elsewhere?*

**JASMINE:** What we offer members is education, community, and networking. The monthly speakers we have are very high quality. For example, we had a great session by Marissa Mayer, Google™ product manager. We had Yahoo® host an event and they were recruiting, so we had a huge turnout, probably 150 people, because a lot of people are looking for jobs. Pragmatic Marketing® presented a workshop about how to position yourself as a product manager and a session based on best practices in product management, which drew both new and seasoned product managers. Every other month, on Saturday mornings, we hold an interactive workshop series with smaller groups. So you can learn something during the monthly speaker lecture, and then apply it hands-on during the workshop. We offer a host of other resources, including discussion forums, job postings, a newsletter, and a website with a lot of content, including presentations from all of our past events.

**KEITH:** First and foremost, my group provides a forum for people to share thoughts and ideas about product marketing. I wanted to create a watering hole for other product marketing people in the area. A second goal is to provide members with networking opportunities. It's great to get to know other people who are in the same role. The third thing is that Triangle PMA has become one of the go-to places for product marketing job postings in the Research Triangle Park. The fourth thing is the templates, providing people with a place to exchange tools. If you go to the file section of the site, there are things ranging from sample beta checklists, GA checklists, and tools

for releasing a product. One of the big things people ask for is the Launch of Product X Master Plan.

**ANTHONY:** At DCPMA, we have had numerous high-level outside speakers come in. It's a chance to get a vice president of marketing or a president of a company who clearly has some significant experience in areas where we, as product managers, might not. It's being able to get someone like Steve Johnson from Pragmatic Marketing®, who has been in the field for 20 years. Or it's Bob Martin from IFR Consulting, Inc. sharing knowledge that most product managers want but yet don't have. It's the ability to get expert resources from the outside to bring in fresh perspectives and ideas. About a year ago, we launched [www.dcpma.com](http://www.dcpma.com) as a way to have an events calendar, a link to our discussion board, resource links, board member contacts, and bios. That has worked extremely well as an archive for all the event presentations and as a home for templates, MRD documents, roadmaps, and all the tools that keep professionals coming back over and over.

## Q&A on Building a Product Management Association

**Q** *How did you get started building your PMA, and what are some of the secrets for early success?*

**BOB:** Success factors during our group's early growth included quality speakers and content, content aligned with group interests, clear vision, and focused networking opportunities. We began with the assumption that you can obtain the essentials your group needs to thrive either free or via corporate sponsorship. For example, one member's workplace will undoubtedly have meeting space,



another will have contact with quality presenters, and many online tools can be used free-of-charge. It's important to establish an online community early. While the BPMA has since graduated to a professionally developed site, Yahoo Groups (<http://groups.yahoo.com>) is free and meets early-stage requirements: email discussion group, online polling, and the ability to post files.

**KEITH:** I'm able to run the Triangle group by myself, because we're using Yahoo Groups. It's a fantastic place to set up calendars and events for a group. It also has the ability to let people easily add files or photos or links. It's low on graphics, but we're more content-focused, anyway. The downside is that Yahoo puts advertisements on every stream, and they automatically opt you in to numerous categories. So you need to tell people who subscribe how to opt out. I send all new members an article, *Protecting Your Privacy in the Yahoo Environment*.

**JASMINE:** We started over three years ago as a small group of people attending the Pragmatic Marketing® course. After the course was over, we wanted to continue to discuss ideas, problems, and issues. It was very grassroots, very free-form. We set it up as a monthly event, and the idea was to bring in speakers, local product managers, people who are having success in the industry to talk to the rest of the group and share ideas. All the speakers were volunteers, and the location was donated by companies. Once it got off the ground, we had 20 or 25 people at each meeting, most were mid-level product managers and some junior people starting out and looking for a network. As we grew, we defined what the mandates of

the organization were: a community for networking, education for product managers in the Bay area, and a safe place for people to express ideas and talk about issues.

**ALAN:** The Toronto PMA co-founder and I initially met each other through postings on a Pragmatic Marketing® forum. It took us three or four weeks to realize that we actually worked in the same building in Toronto. We pulled together our first meeting and had 35 or 40 people attend. I didn't know there were that many product managers in my area. It was amazing. And now three years later, the association has its own independent executive team, six or seven corporate sponsors, and a large and active membership base. We also set up a Yahoo Group, which is an effective way to host a discussion group and do polling. We had executive meetings to do planning. We relied on getting very good speakers at least every other month—for example, local marketing professors from universities.

**Q** *How do you go about recruiting volunteers and leaders?*

**BOB:** We allocated 20 minutes during our kickoff meeting to brainstorm next actions and roles. While not every volunteer will stick to his or her commitment, many long-term volunteers will have been those who suggested an idea you promptly insisted they implement. Delegation is a prerequisite of success and will be supported by those who buy in to the basic premise of the group. Be sure to socialize after this first meeting to begin the recruitment process. You can begin spotting candidates for your leadership team as the kickoff meeting winds down. Be sure to develop a leadership

pipeline to ensure the growth of your association. As you recruit volunteers, consider that you will undoubtedly elect one of them to assume the job you are currently performing, so be sure to coach and mentor appropriately.

**ANTHONY:** When you decide to build an organization, you do it just like you would in a corporate setting where you have to build support people. So we did. We have a president, VP of marketing who is our webmaster, a VP of membership, a VP of events, and a VP of development who is responsible for membership.

**JASMINE:** Having well-defined roles and responsibilities for your leadership team is incredibly important. We took a look at many successful associations, and structured our team roles around that model. [See the accompanying sidebar for the SVPMA's Roles and Responsibilities.] Because everyone's a volunteer and everyone's busy in their jobs, you have to spend time determining how to structure responsibilities, spread the work, and get people to do what they committed to. Early on, we spent a lot of time on that—just getting people to define their roles.

**Q** *What steps can you take to ensure that speakers and topics resonate with members?*

**ALAN:** We treated our first meeting as a requirements-gathering session. We billed it as a get-together to talk about the problems that product managers face in everyday work environments. We got the group talking about what was going on in their everyday lives. What big problem did you have today or

yesterday or last month? What came out of that was a list of raw comments. And we stood back and looked at the list and said: These are the things product managers are struggling with, and we can use these themes to shape topics for future sessions. Come to think of it, we actually used the Pragmatic Marketing® Framework to build our PMA—it was a market-driven process. Some of those topics included: the basics of doing the job, requirements-gathering techniques, making business cases. Another big theme was negotiating with and presenting to executives. That was a big challenge.

**BOB:** Aligning future content with group interests can also be achieved via periodic online polling of the topic content ideas you have collected. Yahoo Groups or other online polling tools are adequate as long as you promote and reinforce polls during your meetings.

**Q** *How important is it to hold regular meetings?*

**BOB:** Consistency of timing and venue helps maximize the value of word-of-mouth and facilitates retention. The BPMA has established a tradition of meetings being held on the third Thursday of each month, except August and December when members are most inclined to take vacation. These meetings are most always hosted in the same location.

**ANTHONY:** When our group first started, the location moved around a good bit—primarily because we have members spread over two states and the District of Columbia. But we realized we needed to take down some of the potential barriers to people attending, where they might not remember when and where the

next meeting was. Now, we meet the third Thursday of every month at the same location to keep the continuity going. Most of our members are located in Virginia, so that's where we hold the meetings. We get a lot of the same people back, which is wonderful for richness. And we have been fortunate in having a lot of new members come. We are also in the process of trying to build more community activities, things like a twice-a-year barbeque or a social event.

**KEITH:** I hold group meetings once a quarter: usually two networking meetings and two topics. In the past, I've had speakers from Pragmatic Marketing® or a local consultant. Next time, I intend to have it about product automation tools. I'm convinced that will pack the house. Just the past few years, people in software have started paying attention to product lifecycle management. While there have been requirements management tools for quite a while, there haven't been many tools for product managers to manage the lifecycle of a product or manage a change request from beginning to end. And those tools are starting to appear.

**JASMINE:** I think you really need that face-to-face interaction to build the relationships and build people's commitment to the organization.

**Q** *How do you go about getting new members or attendees at the events?*

**BOB:** Word-of-mouth has proven the single most effective marketing vehicle to generate in-person attendance at BPMA monthly meetings. Runners-up include posting meeting detail in local trade publications.

**JASMINE:** It has really been organic, by word-of-mouth. Pragmatic Marketing® was also very helpful, because they point people to the PMAs after they take the courses.

**Q** *How do you handle recruiters and vendors?*

**KEITH:** I approve people to participate and keep tight controls over vendors and recruiters. I do not let them post directly to the list, and they will be automatically banned from my group if they do. I actually provide a very specific set of rules for all participants on the discussion list to prevent gross self-promotion.

**ALAN:** In Toronto, we made sure that the association was not a recruiting forum. We specifically discourage job postings to our lists; in fact, if somebody did that, we shut them down. The reason was two-fold: We wanted this to be focused on product management expertise and networking with peers; and we wanted companies to feel comfortable about their employees attending.

**Q** *Do you charge membership dues or fees to attend events?*

**JASMINE:** We set up a regular membership structure, which went a long way toward building member loyalty. In the beginning, membership in SVPMA was free. Then we started charging \$5 at the door of our events, just to pay for food and refreshments. But there was no real commitment. With our annual membership structure, it still works out to the same \$5 per event, but you pay your \$60 up front.



So we get much more of a community of people. We're seeing a lot more of the same faces at our events. We also started holding the events at a hotel, which has become our regular location. That way we aren't spending time trying to hunt down companies to host us, and we could free up our time to work on bigger things for the organization.

**ANTHONY:** We're looking at the idea of sponsorships for events, and we're actively considering membership dues. The purpose there is two-fold: number one to generate revenue in order to make the association have some staying power; but, more importantly to get commitment from membership. On our discussion list, we have up to 250 active members of DCPMA. But on any given month, we have only 40 members show up for a meeting. We want to get additional buy-in from our members. So we're considering instituting membership dues later this year.

**ALAN:** At first, we were charging \$2 a session just to cover the cost of the pizza. But we needed funds to create a more professional structure and some resources. So we ended up going with \$10 per session, or \$50 per year. That boost did not hurt

attendance in any way. Plus with an annual receipt for membership, people are sometimes more inclined to expense the \$50 than they are \$2.

**Q** *What about the decision to become a non-profit organization?*

**JASMINE:** We stayed at the grassroots level for a year and a half. We had considerable discussion over whether we wanted to continue at that level or grow to something bigger. If we were going to grow, everybody needed to be on board. We also went through all of the normal group issues: your forming and your storming (we spent a lot of time on storming). Then we finally got to norming, and now I would say we're performing. Then we reorganized the board, defined roles, and started to have structured meetings. We have one in-person board meeting and one conference call every month. We also make sure everyone on board makes it a priority to attend the events, as well. The other piece is assigning responsibilities and action items and holding people accountable to them. All of those things started coming together. We became more professional as an organization and started gaining momentum and growth.

**JASMINE:** We had a bit of a debate over becoming a non-profit organization. There were some members who felt we should stay at the grassroots level and keep things simple and low key. Of course, the group was still somewhat unstructured at that point. Once we got a lot more order to the organization, it instilled a level of confidence that we needed to grow up and become what we really could be. I got a California NOLO book and handled the process myself. The benefits we saw for the organization becoming a non-profit were: 1) we wanted to get the credibility of a non-profit association, 2) it actually helps you get discounts on things like meeting space if you are a non-profit, 3) it's easier to get sponsors, and 4) it's also a bit easier to justify the annual membership.

**Q** *Any lessons learned or advice to those starting a new association or growing one?*

**JASMINE:** I would say be patient. It takes some time. Surround yourself with a good team that has well-defined roles. That's really important, because there's a lot of work involved, and you don't want people stepping

## SVPMA Board Roles and Responsibilities

**President.** Ensures organization operates to meet goals and acts as spokesperson for organization.

**Director of Communications.** Responsible for newsletter, meeting minutes and event summaries.

**Director of Events.** Selects meeting topics, coordinates and schedules speakers and sets logistics agenda.

**Director of Membership.** Owns communications with members about events, as well as managing membership list.


**Director of Web.** Updates SVPMA.org website, maintains event and presentation archive, administers forum and makes technology recommendations to Board.

**Director of Finance.** Accountable for collecting event revenue and paying expenses and for ensuring that SVPMA operates in a fiscally-responsible manner.

**Director of Marketing.** Three words: branding, promotion and partnership.

over each other. I would also say just let it grow as it is. It will take shape by itself. If we had tried to push our organization to become a non-profit a year ago, I don't think we would have been as successful as we are now.

**ANTHONY:** I recommend having regular, standalone board meetings where you can focus on setting strategy to make the association better. Don't try to rely on meeting with your board during or after meetings. The second thing is to try to engage sponsors right off the bat. The third thing is to make sure you have continuity—that your meeting is always in the same place at the same time. Another critical piece is to always focus on what your membership wants to get from the association. Finally, learn from and adopt best practices from other successful PMAs.

**ALAN:** I think I speak for the group in saying that anybody who has built a product management association would be glad to help out others with ideas or to talk things over. Touch base with someone who's already lived through it and learned the pitfalls. Send us a note—we'll be glad to help out. 

# The Strategic Role of Product Management™

- As a high-tech executive, are you unclear about the strategic role of product management?
- Does the role of product manager in your company need to be defined to the CEO so support can be given to strategic activities?
- As a product manager, do you strive to lead the organization rather than react to it?

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## How to Find a Product Management Association in Your Area

For a complete list of regional PMAs, visit <http://productmarketing.com/assoc.htm>.

## Make Connections

Discover how you can make connections and share knowledge with your product management peers. Get involved in your local PMA. Come to an event...join an online discussion... volunteer. If there's not an association in your area, start one. For inspiration and information about launching a new PMA, contact Pragmatic Marketing or any of the board members of existing associations.