

1.

Our product strategy has recently shifted based on our early user observations, data, and feedback.

Most importantly, we have found that we are able to generate “good” recommendations--recommendations that users are interested in trying (indicated by bookmarking) and ultimately like (indicated by their eventual ranking)--with *very* few users (15). This was not our original expectation, but we now understand that restaurants ranked per user and overlap between users are far more important to whether our algorithm generates recommendations than number of users on the platform. In terms of product strategy, this has informed our plan to spread within existing social networks by being invite-only--with new users being added by referral from existing users--and also highlighted the importance of targeting the *right* early users--the users that truly fit our persona and rank many restaurants.

The second observation that has been very impactful is that our users are very competitive with one another. For example, when a recent user joined and within 2 hours had surpassed all but me and Judy in terms of restaurants ranked, nearly every user started adding restaurants to keep up (or in my case, stay ahead)! We feel that this type of dynamic could be very powerful for engagement more broadly, and for generating recommendations more specifically, and we have made changes to the app to facilitate it. For example, our home screen prominently displays how many restaurants the user has ranked (overall and in the last week), and how the user ranks against the rest of Beli on that metric. We also introduced a newsfeed that displays friends' recently added restaurants and how they felt about them. We are actively thinking of more ways to “fuel the fire.”

I think both of these observations are illustrative of the importance of emotion in good (hopefully at some point, great) products. What, if anything, brings more emotion than getting a recommendation you are really excited about, or competitive social dynamics between friends?

2.

In terms of development process, our team did two things especially well: communication and division of responsibility.

Our team communicates constantly. We have a daily standup with our frontend engineer, text throughout the day, and have at least one longer team meeting per week. This communication has allowed us to iterate very quickly. We all see the user feedback that comes in and are able to raise ideas based on those observations whenever they occur to us, and then align on direction in our more extended meetings. This was really when we came up with the gift card initiative, which we came up with and turned around in about a day!

Constant communication has likewise helped us get more and more out of our external hires as the semester has gone on. When we have aligned on the key decision points, it makes it very easy to give clarity to hired members of the team.

Meanwhile division of responsibility has given each team member the opportunity to take ownership of an aspect of the product, and the results have been awesome. Robbie led the hiring and project management with our designer, Melissa led the hiring and manages the backlog and communication for the frontend engineer, and I did the same for the backend engineer. Judy has been an incredible leader/CEO, setting direction, getting into the details whenever needed, while allowing each of us the autonomy to do great work. That said, we have also done a great job of sitting in and staying informed on each workflow so we can support each other.

Contrary to the expectation set at the beginning of the semester, I felt like our team worked *extremely* hard this semester, and I am so so proud of everything we accomplished.

In terms of mistakes, I think the biggest one was a personal mistake. While we ultimately ended our contract with our backend engineer early, I think I could have raised my concerns even earlier, before more time was wasted. While I tried to approach the relationship with this contractor the same way that has worked well for our frontend engineer (daily standups, etc.), as soon as it was clear that our contractor was not able to complete even basic work on schedule--whether because of skill mismatch or competing priorities--and then was repeatedly dishonest about it, we should have taken action.

3.

This semester has been really exciting for me as a Beli founder, in spite of all the craziness going on. I think I and our team really hit our stride, and I felt like I could definitely see myself as a product manager/founder in the long-term.

I think where sometimes I struggled with testing and incorporating feedback in the more lo-fi stages of last semester, I feel a lot more comfortable getting to understand our users with the actual product as the medium for feedback. This is something I'd like to explore further. I find myself wondering if there are types of PMs that specialize in the dev stages of product development? I know the answer is "no good PMs" because even PMs on an existing product should always be looking for lo-fi ways to test hypotheses vs. always testing through the product!

With that in mind, I would like to get better at lo-fi testing, even if my comfort zone is on the development side of things. Would love any advice, especially if you have seen something work for people like me who really gravitate to other parts of the role.