Use Beta Testing to Avoid Product Crashes

by M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP
Associate Professor of Information Assurance
School of Business & Management
Norwich University, Northfield VT

Akhan Almagambetov was one of the best students I’ve had at Norwich University; he is now pursuing his PhD at Syracuse University. Recently he sent me what he considered a draft of an idea for an article; instead, with a couple of tweaks, it was ready for publication. Everything that follows is Akhan’s own work with minor edits.

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Thinking back to Apple’s “Antennagate”<https://www.networkworld.com/news/2010/071910-the-iphone-4-antenna-gate.html> problem of earlier this summer, I kept contemplating as to why one of the most powerful computer equipment companies—Apple—failed to see the things wrong with iPhone 4’s antenna before the public did. Numerous sources told me one thing: Apple does very limited outside beta testing of their new hardware solutions.

Beta testing (BT) is the second step in product development testing (which comes after the product has been internally tested, via a process commonly referred to as alpha testing). This step usually involves a limited audience of potential consumers, most of whom are outsiders and who have signed a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) with the company. These tests are usually administered by the manufacturers themselves, through custom-built BT portals (such as NETGEAR<https://www.beta.netgear.com/login.html> or a beta test administrator, such as Centercode<https://www.centercode.com>.

In the industry, Centercode is regarded as one of the best beta test companies in existence today. With over eight years of experience, they have a number of solutions—ranging from custom-designed BT portals to managed betas—to get you on your way to building a better, more robust product. If you choose to have Centercode administer your beta test, rest assured that you’re going to get an overwhelming number of problem reports and feedback in the shortest time possible: Centercode specifically matches the best beta testers from its extensive pool of over 45,000 candidates to your specific beta.

From a tester’s perspective, all beta tests generally run for about 2-3 weeks (and sometimes longer, depending on the requirements set forth by the customer). Once you’ve updated your profile in Centercode’s system, you are periodically matched to hardware (or software) betas and are notified of it via e-mail. Once you apply for a particular beta, it takes about a week to see whether you’re accepted into it (or are rejected, in which case you get no notification). If accepted, you are required to verify your shipping information and agree to the NDA. Once you’ve done all of the above, the product usually arrives the next day via an overnight shipment—you are on your way to making some company’s product even better. As an incentive, you usually receive some sort of compensation later on, be it monetary or material in nature (usually it’s the latter, in the form of a retail version of the product you’ve tested).

Beta testing is a rewarding experience, both for the testers involved, as well as for the company which receives invaluable feedback that would otherwise be overlooked. Soon, manufacturers will realize the drawbacks to using only internal resources for testing of new products. BT is essential to the development of solid, bug-free products—be it hardware or software—and a
surefire way of minimizing incidents like the infamous “Antennagate”.

[Disclosure: Akhan has been involved with Centercode solely as a beta tester.]

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Akhan Almagambetov< http://www.linkedin.com/in/akhanalmagambetov > is a Teaching Associate at Syracuse University. He has also served as an Information Operations Intern with the USAF 102nd Information Warfare Squadron and was Senior Managing Editor for the Norwich University Yearbook. He graduated from Norwich University in 2008 with a BSc in Computer Engineering and minors in mathematics, information assurance and computer science).


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