Distribution Tightens as PMs Sharpen Pilots, Specs, and Stakeholder Management

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This brief covers a tougher AI-era distribution environment, practical frameworks for design partnerships and spec-writing, a cautionary case on architecture vs. feature pressure, and why many PMs still learn primarily on the job.

Big Ideas

- **Distribution is tightening as AI makes building easier.** Lenny Rachitsky summarized the shift as: "distribution is the new moat" [1]. Sachin Rekhi pointed to a specific pattern in iOS apps: AI has increased app supply without a matching increase in demand, leaving each app with less attention, and concluded that distribution is getting harder as building gets easier [2]. The channels called out were straightforward: own an audience, pay for acquisition, or find creative guerilla-style distribution [3]. *Why it matters:* product advantage is not just about shipping faster anymore. *Apply it:* pair each roadmap bet with an explicit distribution path before calling it complete.

Tactical Playbook

Design partnerships

1. **Pick a small set of teams with the exact problem.** The advice was 3-5 teams, not a broad partner program [4].
2. **Define one painful workflow and one success bar.** Treat the engagement as a narrow learning contract, not vague unpaid consulting [4].
3. **Charge something, even if discounted.** The payment matters less than the signal that the customer will commit budget, time, and real data [4].

4. **Time-box the pilot.** A 30-60 day pilot with a conversion decision at the end was the recommended structure [4].
5. **If nobody commits, shrink the solution.** The fallback suggested was a smaller concierge or manual version, not a full product build [4].

Why it matters: this separates real demand from polite interest, while avoiding the trap of building custom work that does not generalize [4].

Turning messy inputs into a usable spec

A PM offering free help described a practical four-pass workflow:

1. Turn rough notes or call transcripts into a feature outline with **problem, goals, user stories, acceptance criteria, and priorities** [5].
2. Cluster interview notes into **themes and pull quotes** [5].
3. Tighten half-written PRDs by filling **gaps, vague ACs, and missing edge cases** [5].
4. Reduce broad feedback into **one focused MVP scope** [5].

Why it matters: it reduces ambiguity before engineering starts. *Apply it:* use the same sequence whenever discovery is spread across calls, Slack threads, support data, or scattered notes [5].

Case Studies & Lessons

- **AI prototype hype can make architecture work harder to defend.** One PM with a technical background described inheriting a project with bad architecture, weak standards, and major infrastructure issues, then pushing microservices, event-driven architecture, observability, and tech-debt reduction; support tickets dropped significantly as a result [6]. Despite that, the CEO kept weekly reviews focused on feature output and pointed to a one-day Lovable prototype as evidence the team should move faster [6]. The PM said they started slipping architecture tasks into the roadmap because explicitly labeling them led to pushback [6].

  > "The AI boom has made a lot of people who know nothing about software think they suddenly understand software." [6]

Lesson: architecture improvements may not speak for themselves in a feature-only review cadence. *Apply it:* bring operational outcomes already visible to the business—here, support-ticket reduction—into the same discussion as feature delivery [6].

Career Corner

- **PM learning still looks mostly apprenticeship-based.** In one discussion, a commenter described a 70/20/10 model: 70% on-the-job, 20% from colleagues or mentors, 10% from reading, courses, and certifications [7]. Others echoed the same direction more bluntly: upskilling comes from

doing the job and solving problems you do not yet fully know how to solve [8, 9]. Several commenters were skeptical of generic "how to PM" content, arguing that theory without live application is low-value, while suggesting a better loop: try one idea from social media at work, or use AI agents to surface relevant news with links during work hours [10, 11, 12, 13, 14].

Why it matters: skill growth appears to come more from applied reps and feedback than passive consumption. *Apply it:* pick one live problem, test one new method this week, and review the result with a colleague or mentor.

Tools & Resources

- **Underlying paper on AI-era app attention:** https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=6843118 [15]
- **Reusable spec checklist:** problem, goals, user stories, acceptance criteria, priorities, themes, pull quotes, edge cases, and a focused MVP scope [5]

Sources

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