Product Management

What Customer Workarounds Can Reveal About Your Business Model

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May 21, 2026

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Summary. Customer workarounds (such as customers sharing accounts, or teams stitching together third-party tools) are not merely signs of product friction but early evidence that a company's business model no longer matches how customers want to access, use, and pay for value. If firms fail to respond to customer workarounds, they leave themselves open to new competitors or to customers simply leaving. Companies should detect workaround patterns early, map them to distinct customer needs, build a portfolio of complementary business models, and monitor these signals continuously to capture demand before competitors do.

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Many businesses are familiar with customer workarounds: customers sharing accounts, employees using personal subscriptions for work, or teams stitching together third-party tools.

Companies usually treat these behaviors as annoyances, compliance problems, or signals for product improvement. A classic example is software users building elaborate spreadsheets or manual processes outside an enterprise system because the official tool does not quite support how the work actually gets done. Companies often use that feedback to improve the product in the next release.

But customer workarounds do not merely reveal unmet product needs. They often reveal already-operating shadow business models—informal arrangements around access, usage, and pricing—that customers have built because the firm's official model no longer fits their needs. By the time a workaround exists, customers have already built the prototype, proven willingness to pay, and pulled a new business model into existence. They are paying in effort rather than money.

That gap is what we call the business model void: the monetization gap that opens when existing models fail to match how customers want to access, use, and pay for products.

The Origins of Business Model Voids

Business model voids reveal themselves in three stages. To explain them, we will use the example of the tire company Michelin. In 2000, the company shifted from selling tires to selling tire performance: Fleet operators paid Michelin Fleet Solutions per kilometer driven. This was a genuine business model innovation—but one built around Michelin's offering, not the customers' reality. The business model void it created stayed open for nearly two decades.

The first stage occurs when customers perceive a mismatch. Operators didn't just want better tire economics; they wanted to connect tire performance to fuel consumption, routing, and driver behavior—the variables that actually determined whether a fleet was profitable.

In the second stage, customers begin to engineer workarounds. In Michelin's case, operators stitched together telematics vendors, ran manual data exports, and maintained disconnected dashboards. Each workaround was a signal: Customers weren't rejecting the product; they were complementing the business model at their own expense.

The third stage, which companies want to avoid, occurs when other companies step in to fill the void or customers move on. In Michelin's case, they preempted this stage by launching Michelin Connected Fleet in 2020, Michelin became the platform operators had been assembling themselves. According to recent company disclosures, it reached more than a million vehicles under contract.

Strategic Steps to Tap into the Business Model Void

Not every business model void closes on the company's terms. Spotting one is hard; closing it before someone else does is harder. GitHub Copilot launched in 2021 as a per-seat subscription, and the model fit until developers wanted more: model choice, deeper codebase context, agent-style execution. They installed third-party tools, piped code into external chats, and paid out of pocket for faster models. GitHub noticed but acted late. Cursor, on the other hand, did not. By pairing a subscription with usage-based pricing that scaled with consumption, it reached roughly $500 million in annualized revenue by mid-2025 (and several times that since), charging a premium to the same developers Copilot was supposedly already serving.

Indeed, the window for closing a business model void is narrower than it seems. Three steps separate companies that close them from companies that watch competitors do it.

Step 1. Detect and map it.

The business model void announces itself twice. First through friction: billing exceptions, enterprise tools on personal accounts, contract structures you don't offer. Then through workarounds—the real diagnostic. Employees pay privately for tools they use professionally, developers build unofficial integrations, customers stitch together partial solutions to avoid committing to your business model. A workaround isn't a complaint; it's a customer funding the R&D for your next business model, with willingness to pay already proven. Just not by you.

Mapping turns those signals into structure. Each workaround points to a distinct user with a distinct willingness to pay—the employee, the developer, the enterprise each buying a different business model. Together, they chart the portfolio the void is already demanding. Detection tells you the business model void exists. Mapping tells you what it's shaped like.

Business model voids unfold faster when market trends and technologies shift. Agentic AI may already be triggering the next one. One leading Swiss confectionery manufacturer once paid high per-hour consulting fees for strategic advice, but friction appeared first—generic deliverables, slipping timelines, bills disconnected from outcomes. Then the workarounds followed. Internal teams began running their own market analyses using generative AI at a fraction of the cost—first alongside the consultants, then in place of them. The willingness to pay didn't disappear—the willingness to pay *that way* did. Outcome-based pricing is no longer a prediction. It's what those workarounds are already demanding.

Step 2. Build a customer-centric portfolio.

A single business model is no longer an asset. It is a ceiling on potential. Tapping into the business model void does not require replacing legacy business models. If it works, keep it and build on it. A differentiated portfolio enables monetization of the same customer across multiple use cases while attracting new customers through additional access points.

ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini did not launch with their current business model portfolios. Personal subscriptions came first. Developer workarounds signaled the next business model to build. Enterprise adoption through personal accounts signaled the one after that. Each new business model was a response to a workaround that already existed, not a prediction of demand that did not yet exist. The resulting portfolio of tiered subscriptions, usage-based APIs, and organization-based agreements was innovated iteratively and diversified sequentially.

Once validated, traditional growth levers apply independently. Business models like subscriptions, usage-based APIs, or enterprise agreements have fundamentally different underlying economics and need to be treated accordingly. A single growth strategy across all three dilutes each one.

Step 3. Monitor it continuously and time your reaction.

The business model void cannot be closed once and for all. Assign ownership to these signals the same way you would any core growth metric, because by the time the business model void appears in revenue data, customers have already found a better fit elsewhere.

Netflix tolerated password sharing for nearly a decade, not because they missed the signal but because subscriber growth confirmed the workaround was expanding reach. When Q1 2022 brought a net loss of 200,000 subscribers, the first decline in a decade, alongside Netflix's own estimate that more than 100 million households were sharing accounts worldwide, the business model void became a liability. Paid sharing and an ad-supported tier followed, coinciding with a rise to 325 million paid memberships by the end of 2025—roughly 103 million above the Q1 2022 trough—and an additional $1.5 billion in advertising revenue generated in 2025 alone. The workaround had pre-validated both models. Execution was a matter of timing, not discovery.

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In periods of change, advantage shifts to the companies that treat customer workarounds as early market data, not policy violations or edge cases. Workarounds show where customers are already paying (in the form of effort) to get the access, outcomes, and pricing your current model can't provide. Firms that map those signals and respond with a portfolio of models close the void themselves; firms that don't leave it open for customers—or competitors—to close. In that sense, the "right" number of business models isn't an abstract preference. It's the number of distinct ways customers are already trying to buy and use the value you create.

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