BETA TESTING IS DEAD

How **DELTA TESTING** Is Transforming the Way We Gather Customer Feedback



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Foreward: Beta Testing Is Dead

There was a time, just a few decades ago, when beta testing was the most effective way to evaluate how customers were using products in real homes. It was a simpler time — before smartphones, wireless internet, the mass migration of sales to e-commerce, the ubiquity of social media and online reviews, and before rapid, continuous iteration became the norm.

Back then, there was little demand for established and repeatable beta processes because there were fewer product updates and therefore much less demand for beta testing. Real-world validation happened once or twice a year before a once or twice-yearly release. It was a necessary and valuable practice that suited the pacing and demands of then-omnipresent Waterfall development.

But those days are long gone, and the viability of traditional beta testing died with them. Today's technologies are complex. Products are interconnected. Demanding audiences are flooded with market alternatives. And it takes constant iteration to keep up with it all.

Those beta processes that had little in common except that they maybe involved customers and usually took a lot of labor hours and time to churn out accurate results became, over time, more painful than useful. And then, slowly, beta died, run ragged by the demand for timely user insights it could no longer deliver.

This ebook contextualizes the failures of traditional beta testing in the current marketplace and how, if beta processes have kicked the bucket at your company (as they have at many others), you can finally move on to a solution that makes sense for modern audiences and development practices.

We'll look at:

- The birth and death of beta testing — why it gained popularity and how it fails to meet the demands of today's products, audiences, and organizations
- How the industry trends that are shaping modern development practices establish a need for a faster, more reliable, and more consistent means of user testing
- Nine signs your beta processes are no longer working and that it's time to move on — and into a new era of user testing automation, i.e., delta testing



The Growing Demand for Delta Testing

IN THE BEGINNING: BETA TESTING

Beta testing originated with IBM over 50 years ago. The concept was simple: By getting real-world feedback from customers before release, product development teams improved quality and generated new ideas for future products. Centering on the customer with practices like beta testing enabled these early titans of technology to rise in the ranks.

THE DOT-COM ERA AND AGILE DEVELOPMENT

While some companies had taken a page from IBM and started introducing beta testing practices earlier, its boon in popularity didn't start until the '90s and '00s. During the dot-com era and cloud computing boom, the importance of pre-release customer feedback was normalized, and beta testing became ubiquitous in the tech industry.

At the same time, companies were introducing a new way of developing products: Agile. As the Internet of Things eventually took hold, Agile overshadowed Waterfall, and product development became more rapid, lean, and continuous.

High-growth technology companies that "grew up" in this more modern tech landscape (like Apple, Google, and other startups of the time) quickly recognized that traditional, Waterfall-style beta processes weren't going to work and began iterating to make beta more agile. Not far behind were the technology enterprises of the mid-century (think Microsoft and Intel) who had already been doing beta tests for years, but who were now shifting development processes towards Agile.

The challenge? Despite the simultaneous popularity of beta testing and the clear need for more agile processes, beta testing as a field lacked a structured methodology and set of shared best practices. With nothing to draft off of, companies updated their beta processes in their own company-specific ways, at their own cost, and with varying levels of success.

Going it alone, most organizations were unable to implement beta tactics and strategies that truly supported the new Agile world order. The tools and processes in use continued to weigh user testing programs down. With so much manual effort involved in the process, it became impossible for test managers to collect, organize, and prioritize feedback fast enough to support the rapid pace of development. It was also difficult to deliver repeatable success, demonstrate program ROI, and identify trends.



Trends Driving Delta Testing Adoption

TODAY: THE RISE OF DELTA TESTING

In the age of digital transformation, the need for ongoing user testing has reached a fever pitch, as even the most traditional industries have introduced connected products. Overcoming the friction of beta testing products in today's fast-paced world has given rise to the ever-growing delta testing movement. Four major trends are putting delta testing in high demand as one of the most valuable functions for modern companies.

1. Technology Is Increasingly Complex
2. Products Are Becoming More and More Connected
3. Tech Ecosystems Are Evolving Faster and Faster
4. Audiences Are Increasingly Mainstream and Influential

Trend #1: Technology Is Increasingly Complex

Today's technologies perform increasingly sophisticated tasks in less time and with less friction for the user. But a seamless user experience on the front-end means incredible complexity on the back-end. From machine learning, to AI, to voice and facial recognition, to cloud computing, each one is complex in its own right, and it's common for modern products to incorporate several — if not all — of these features.

For product developers, maintaining and improving that functionality is critical for achieving high customer satisfaction. And it gets more difficult every year, as both the possibilities for what technology ***could*** do and customer expectations for what it ***should*** be able to do continue to evolve.

Trend #2: Products Are Becoming More and More Connected

Today's tech products no longer live in a silo. When a customer brings your product home, they bring it into a diverse technological ecosystem, where many connected devices must work together to deliver convenience. It's important that your product functions well in these highly interconnected, real-world environments, since your customers expect your product to work seamlessly from day one.

With *more than ten smart products* in the average American household and endless variations of ecosystems growing alongside the expanding market, you need to test your products against an infinite combination of phones, tablets, WIFI-enabled speakers, and hundreds of other smart devices to ensure compatibility.



Trends Driving Delta Testing Adoption

Trend #3: Tech Ecosystems Are Evolving Faster and Faster

Since the initial adoption of Agile Development back in the late 90s, companies have been releasing new products and updates more and more often. *More than 80% of product development teams* are updating their products every few months, and half of them are releasing updates once a month.

These constant updates mean changes to the tech ecosystems of your customers that are unpredictable, out of your control, and have a significant impact on your product's success. So even if your product worked flawlessly with a broad collection of devices at launch, new products, features, and requirements mean the target is always moving.

All the while, your customers expect your product to deliver the same seamless user experience they get from their toothbrushes. It means you'll have to continuously iterate and test your product, again and again, to ensure it continues to meet consumers' high expectations as tech ecosystems continue to evolve.

Trend #4: Audiences Are Increasingly Mainstream and Influential

Today's market for IoT products has changed dramatically. Smart tech consumers aren't just the gadget lovers of the '90s anymore. And as sophisticated tech products gain popularity with larger audiences and become more easily accessible via online, review-driven marketplaces, it introduces new challenges.

Mainstream users are less patient, less tech-savvy, and have more social influence than ever. They're usually unwilling and often unable to work through a clunky setup or confusing interface. If your product isn't easy-to-use right off the bat, these customers are more likely to return your product and post a bad review.

And as shopping continues to shift from brick-and-mortar retail to e-commerce, those negative reviews do more to damage your product than ever before. Today's consumers are more empowered to do their own research, and they're using fewer and fewer channels to get information. They're relying less on brand names, in-store experiences, and sales recommendations, and are focusing instead on star ratings, reviews, and recommendations from a few recognizable sources. All of this means that bad reviews on Google, Amazon, or Best Buy impact e-commerce and in-store purchases alike.

With the boom in online retail also giving rise to more flexible return policies, like longer return windows and "Try Before You Buy," customers have fewer incentives to keep products that don't perform exactly as they expect. And with the amount of research that's going into these purchases, the alternative option (i.e., a competing product) is always top of mind.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Given this history of beta testing and the forces at play in today's marketplace, it's clear why forward-thinking companies are turning to delta testing.

But what does that friction look like in your company, and how do you know when it's time to move on?

BETA TESTING IS DEAD

Nine Signs It's Time to Upgrade Your Beta Testing Efforts

Here are nine leading indicators that it's time for beta testing to give way to delta testing in your organization.

1. Hard to Find the Right Testers
2. Not Getting Enough Feedback
3. No Prioritized, Actionable Insights
4. Beta Eats Up Too Much of Your Time
5. Development Schedules Don't Account for Beta
6. Processes Being Reinvented Often
7. Difficult to Demonstrate ROI
8. Privacy and Confidentiality Keeping You Up at Night
9. Poor Product Reviews and Ratings



Nine Signs It's Time to Upgrade Your Beta Testing Efforts

1. UNABLE TO FIND THE RIGHT TESTERS

If you're like most people who have run a beta test, you've likely sent test units to friends, family, or a group of random testers, who then didn't provide you with usable feedback — if they were invested enough to send any feedback at all. In this situation, you can say goodbye to any hope of delivering value for the time spent on beta testing.

It's why delta testing uses a community model with tools and processes for building your own network of testers and profiling each member. With your tester community in place, finding testers who have the right demographics, technographics, and a *genuine interest* in helping improve your products is a matter of being selective, not taking whoever you can get.

2. NOT GETTING ENOUGH FEEDBACK

The amount of feedback you're getting during beta testing is the direct result of how much your testers are participating in your project. But when it comes to engagement, you get out what you put in. It takes providing testers with a frictionless experience and maintaining consistent communication so they understand what they're supposed to be doing at any given time during your project.

If you've already realized this, you've likely also learned that there simply aren't enough hours in the day to actually maintain that constant communication. This is precisely why *more than half of test managers* say it's difficult to keep testers engaged.

Delta testing helps you tackle this challenge by incorporating engagement automation from a centralized source in the testing process. The technology uses machine learning to provide testers with personalized updates and reminders that keep them engaged. At the same time, it takes these low-level but critically important tasks off your plate. The result is more feedback — plus more time for you to focus on customer-driven recommendations that move the needle for your product.

3. NO PRIORITIZED, ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS

Raw tester feedback doesn't provide the value you're looking for. What you need are insights — and not just any insights. You have to know which ones are going to be the most impactful for your development teams to act on. But creating a sustainable, bias-free way to prioritize and present these kinds of insights is easier said than done.

Delta testing shows the impact that specific issues will have on the success of your product by using signals from across the test. These signals include how important the feature is to the overall product experience, how often issues occur, and how severe those instances are. From there, it provides a step-by-step path for which insights to address in order to reach key targets, like increased star ratings.

Nine Signs It's Time to Upgrade Your Beta Testing Efforts

4. BETA EATS UP TOO MUCH OF YOUR TIME

Part of what makes beta testing feel so time consuming is being bogged down by manual tasks, like responding to a ton of email and copy/pasting data between tools.

Because many companies first initiate their beta testing programs on a small scale out of need, it's common to use generic productivity tools or point solutions for the work, even as the program starts to expand. But with the amount of data and range of tasks involved with customer testing, the busy work created through the use of those tools is simply unsustainable.

It's why the centralized tools used during delta testing are so critical to program success, especially as you take on more tests and drive more organizational value. Technologies that are purpose-built for user testing *eliminate 40% of the time spent on testing* because they allow you to execute your entire program from one place. They target solutions to common problem areas and keep tester, project, and feedback data from becoming siloed in separate tools.

5. DEVELOPMENT SCHEDULES DON'T ACCOUNT FOR BETA

Beta tends to be the last domino to fall during product development, since it happens right before a product or feature is released. But because release dates are firm, delays earlier in development result in time crunches that make delivering effective beta results difficult.

The delta testing methodology addresses the issue by breaking the customer testing period out into more manageable chunks and spreading them out across the entire development process. By evaluating just the most recent changes to your product and aligning customer testing with development sprints, it eliminates additional time crunches and provides real-time results.

6. PROCESSES BEING REINVENTED OFTEN

Before Agile normalized continuous testing and iteration, it was common to only run beta tests before an annual product launch — leaving enough time between tests to forget the processes that worked and leading test managers to start from scratch each year.

But with constant iteration and much shorter release cycles, your customer tests need repeatable processes. These allow you to accurately benchmark and improve, avoid missteps across projects, and repeatedly execute on what's working to deliver consistent results.

Delta testing also increases consistency throughout your program by providing structured, repeatable steps for running your projects. Through its framework, delta provides the ability to maintain high-value results, even as responsibilities change hands in your organization. It also allows you to scale your program and expand testing as your program's success puts it more in demand within your organization.

Nine Signs It's Time to Upgrade Your Beta Testing Efforts

7. DIFFICULT TO DEMONSTRATE ROI

If you identify with the challenges we've already discussed, you're also likely struggling to demonstrate the ROI of your program (*70% of beta testing programs do*). After all, how are you supposed to showcase the customer insights you've delivered when your data is decentralized, your processes aren't consistent, and you're not sure how your stakeholders are using the insights you ***are*** able to send over?

The tactics and tools used during delta testing are all designed to underscore the value your program brings to your product. It highlights the features and experiences that mean the most to your customers, then makes them easy to both disseminate and track as they travel throughout your organization.

In addition, the metrics provided by delta processes and technologies allow you to pursue consistent program improvement and readily share specifics about that growth to demonstrate ROI and increase buy-in across your organization.

8. PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY KEEPING YOU UP AT NIGHT

Discretion is key during beta testing for a few reasons. For one thing, you don't want confidential details about your next big release to end up on social media. For another, there are strict regulations regarding user privacy that you can't afford to ignore.

Test managers rely on delta testing technologies that simplify and minimize risk. These platforms use features like tester agreement management and confidentiality reminders. Forums also give testers a private place to express their excitement about your products and the project so they're less tempted to share those thoughts publicly.

Finally, constant changes to privacy make compliance a moving target. The GDPR and CCPA compliance features that are part of delta testing help you manage PII and the right to be forgotten, without nullifying confidentially agreements or forcing you to throw out valuable research and insights.

9. POOR PRODUCT REVIEWS AND RATINGS

The truth is that there will always be small issues that crop up in your product or that weren't worth delaying the release over. But if your customers are discovering surprise bugs that lower star ratings or flood review sites with complaints, it's a clear sign that your beta tests aren't doing their job.

Given the challenges we've just described, there are many reasons that beta could be failing your product. But the delta testing model addresses all of those obstacles by surfacing critical issues — so your customers don't have to. It also delivers prioritized recommendations for product fixes and improvements that will drive customer satisfaction. You'll sleep well and be confident in every release with the improved efficiency, prioritization, and coverage offered by delta testing.

Conclusion

Now that you're familiar with the challenges we've just described, you can see that there are many reasons that traditional betas could be failing your product. But the delta testing model addresses all of those obstacles by surfacing critical issues — so your customers don't have to.

If you've determined that your beta testing processes aren't working, you're ready for the next step: embracing delta testing. Delta testing delivers prioritized recommendations for product fixes and improvements that drive customer satisfaction. You'll sleep well and be confident in every release with the improved efficiency, prioritization, and coverage it offers.

Take your knowledge to the next level with *The Definitive Guide to Delta Testing*, your everything-you-need-to-know companion for user testing automation.

If you'd like to talk with us about automating your user testing program, *put some time on our calendar today*.



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Delta Testing Solutions



WHY CENTERCODE?

Increase Revenue
½ ☆ INCREASE
in product ratings

Release Sooner
50% FASTER
test cycles

Gain Participation
75% INCREASE
in tester engagement

Save Time
40%+ DECREASE
in time managing tests

The Centercode Platform equips you with the automation and best practices you need to get actionable user insights for any use case.

PRODUCT LAUNCH

Engage your **Target Market** to successfully bring new products and services to market

USE CASES:

- Beta Tests
- User Acceptance Tests
- Field Tests

PRODUCT GROWTH

Recruit **Existing Customers** to continuously mature live products and services

USE CASES:

- Progressive Delivery
- Early Access
- Customer Advisory Boards

CUSTOMER ZERO

Gather **Employee** feedback to enhance your products while fostering a product culture

USE CASES:

- Alpha Tests
- Dogfooding
- Employee Tests

COMPETITIVE EDGE

Enlist **Competitors' Customers** to rapidly gain actionable intel about their products

USE CASES:

- Competitive Intelligence
- Market Testing
- Comparative Research