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Architecture du Jour, Sir?

Whil Hentzen

Software must be tough these days. I dunno myself, of course, I'm just making a guess.

Remember when software manufacturers used to be able to rely on new markets to increase sales and profits? But now everyone has a computer, everyone has a copy of Office or Oracle, and everyone gets their music and email for free.

So how do you grow at 40% a year when there aren't any new customers? Well, you could sell into foreign markets. You could invent new products. You could decide that 5% growth a year is OK.

Or you could sell upgrades to people. Planned obsolescence is what some manufacturers called it. But how do you plan the obsolescence of something that doesn't break? I mean, except for some timing issues (which have been pretty much resolved), the Fox DOS app you wrote in 1992 is still running today. Walk into any video store and you'll see a FoxPro for DOS app running its POS.

So how do you obsolete something that doesn't break? There's two ways. You create something so much incredibly better that they just gotta trade in their old model for something new. Color TVs. IBM PCs. Horseless carriages. Copiers that automatically collate, staple, fold, and mutilate with the push of one button. And you let everyone decide if the benefits are enough to warrant a new purchase

The second way is that you conjure up some contrived benefits (that means that either they don't really exist, or that they can't really be shown to worth the pain and agony of acquiring the new product.) Then you make it sound like everyone has already adopted this new product and is experiencing these new benefits – everyone but you, of course.

There are some things that are no-brainers for customers. For example, Automation – I've integrated automated email into applications for my customers (at least for customers who have a stable email system) and they love it. Upgrading to Outlook 2000 is an easy decision when they see they can email 90% of their purchase orders and shipping confirmations as soon as the Save button is clicked.

But other things make you scratch your head and say, "Huh?" A company we work with just installed a new version of Oracle. It was supposed to take a weekend. It's been a month and a half, and the reports we receive still aren't correct. What was the big win for this upgrade?

Microsoft will talk about nothing else but NGWS (Next Generation Windows Services.) I'd like to imagine a truly seamless architecture for developing all of my applications – from LAN to C/S to Web to handheld – but I'm not interested in being a guinea pig while they experiment to figure out what works.

I watched Automation evolve from the earliest versions of DDE, where the functionality was so rudimentary and feature-incomplete that it was unusable except for the most desperate of uses. It's a great tool now, and it was worth the wait. I'm a little skeptical of yet another architecture being thrown at us before it's ready – with requirements that make the implementation truly Herculean. (Do you really want to install Windows 2000 on 1400 enterprise machines from scratch?)

What's my point???

Most vendors provide lip service to the installed base – there's even a knowledge base article for Windows 2000 that recommends that you do clean installs (instead of upgrades) for the best performance.

There's gotta be a big win for a wholesale overhaul of your IS system – most of you have just barely gotten the current systems working on NT4, Service Pack 6. The 8% speed improvement and the reduction of bugs and some new features that only 7 DBAs in one industry will ever use aren't worth it.

Rise above the hype – what cold hard benefits is the architecture du jour going to bring you?