Faster, Better is Marketeer Speak

By: Ken Hanley (31 May 2002)

If you find that I'm going over a subject here that I've written about before, I apologize in advance. I prefer to use the rationalization of thoroughness in dealing with a matter rather than the excuse of a failing memory.

Be that as it may, let's talk about speed and let's talk about value in the IT world - two words that usually don't belong together at the same time, unless of course you're reading a document/listening to a presentation from a marketeer type.

Yes, I said "marketeer," and no, that wasn't a spelling mistake - with all due respect to the best sales and marketing people in the IT business, and there are plenty, calling some of these glad-handers and shysters marketeers, like mouseketeers, if you hadn't picked it up already, is entirely deliberate. If I hear one more custom development sales guy say his solution is "faster and better" without proof to back it up I swear I'm going to… But I digress.

In my experience, "speed" generally means having to make compromises: compromises in control, compromises in quality, compromises in cost - i.e. speed costs money, my friend.

The next time someone tells you that their IT solution is both "faster and better" than anyone else's, approach with caution. And if they start giving you a spiel about working in Web time, hit 'em with a big stick. And then hit 'em again for me.

"Value," on the other hand, is a word that has historically been associated with the kind of things that took time - paintings by Renoir, symphonies by Beethoven, Sinatra during the Capitol years, and big beefy Cabernets.

Unfortunately, it seems that in our broad expectation to get things/get things done faster than ever before, value is one of the things we're expecting, without thinking through the implications of that expectation.

I have clients who talk "time to market" - the implication here is that the opportunity to earn value is really only out there for those who get there first.

I'm not so sure - how many times have you seen the market leader blow their brains out rushing a product or service to market, only to exhaust their cash and people and have their competitors sweep in behind and walk away with the market/the gold cup/the girl?

I've heard these sweep-in-behind types called fast followers, and I imagine they're like the NASCAR drivers who draft in behind the leader for most of a race (saving fuel, letting the leader blaze the trail) and then slingshot ahead at the last moment to take the chequered flag.

Sorta sounds like Netscape and Microsoft Explorer, doesn't it?

That being said, there are legitimate reasons to go in first, as long as you acknowledge the tradeoffs. Amazon.com was all about being first and fast with an online bookseller, all about getting customer mind share early, all about what Internet publisher Chuck Martin called "launch and learn."

In the book Cyber Rules, Thomas Siebel and Pat House make the point succinctly: "In the computer world, you simply can't wait until everything's perfect…assume that things will go wrong, and catch them before they do. The "launch and learn" principle may not be conservative, but it's not reckless either."

Whether Jeff Bezos admits it or not, the first iterations of his launch and learn site were not about quality and value (unless your measure of value is IPO proceeds) - do you remember how unreliable the first versions of Amazon.com were? To build a business, Bezos needed speed over quality - a legitimate approach in some circumstances. Of course, speed costs - I haven't looked lately, is Amazon actually making money today?

Yes, you can have speed, and yes you can have value, and yes one often leads to the other, but I'd suggest that you be very suspicious when someone in our business promises both at the same time.

P.S. Believe it or not, my MS Word spellchecker choked on "Sinatra" - I'm sure that has some deeper meaning here, but I'm not sure what it is…

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