

Don't sell technology, satisfy needs

*Selling IT solutions might at first blush appear a terribly complex undertaking, but achieving success doesn't necessarily depend on the technical specifications. Instead, **Owen McCall**, independent IT consultant, shows that sometimes all that's required is a firm grasp of what the business really needs...*

I often get asked how I go about selling technology. Sometimes, the question comes from technology company sales teams, other times from leaders of organisational IT teams.

It doesn't really matter who is asking, because the answer is always the same: it depends on the needs of the customer.

I have learned this lesson several times, most memorably on presenting a business case for the implementation of a virtual desktop solution. Taking a user and business focus, we deliberately set out to highlight the potential benefits to users and the business as a whole. Consequently, the business case highlighted two key benefits.

The first was productivity improvements for team members resulting from increased flexibility around where and when they worked. A pilot provided insights into the impact this had on the team members' hours of work and output. The changes were impressive and supported the case that increased flexibility would increase productivity.

The second benefit was the potential to avoid a planned investment to increase the size of our offices, which were near to full capacity. We believed this investment could be deferred by embracing flexible working arrangements enabled by the virtual desktop, which would effectively increase building capacity by some 20 percent.

The case was well researched and had a very good return based on improved productivity and avoided costs.

The plan was rejected.

The project team and the users who worked with us were devastated. We went back and analysed what went wrong and two themes emerged:

- The executive did not see improved flexibility for employees as a need. They

didn't appreciate the link between improved flexibility, productivity and better results (after all, no jobs would be lost and no costs reduced).

- Remodelling the offices wasn't an obstacle for the executive as any cost was seen as a good investment for the future.

We had made a fundamental error: while the business case demonstrated substantial benefits to the company, they didn't match the needs of our colleagues. What we perceived to be advantages simply weren't on their list of requirements.

But that's not the end of the story.

While this process was underway we were also conducting a business continuity/disaster preparedness exercise, sponsored by the CFO and performed at the request of the board.

It didn't go all that well.

Among the many reasons for the difficulties experienced was the fact that being completely dependent on one office is a problem should that office suddenly not be available. We would have performed a lot better if our team had the flexibility to work from anywhere - something a virtual desktop infrastructure can provide.

We re-pitched the case: same costs, same timelines. Except this time, we emphasised the business continuity benefits it would provide, an issue fresh in the minds of our executives. No other benefits were discussed and the business case was approved inside 10 minutes.

Reflecting on what had transpired and what could be learned, the conclusion was pretty clear. By any rational measure, our first business case was the more robust proposition. Despite that, it



wasn't approved because it didn't meet a burning need of the executive. That's precisely where the second, pretty basic, business case differed. We could solve the business continuity problem staring the executives in the face, so they said 'yes please'.

The bottom line is that selling technology isn't the answer. Instead, satisfying people's needs is. **!**

ABOUT OWEN McCALL//

Passionate about using technology to make a real difference to businesses, communities, families and individuals, Owen McCall has focused his career on understanding and answering this question: "How do you harness the power of IT to deliver value?" An independent IT consultant, he is a former CIO of The Warehouse.

