

Be a Keen Observer

The “Dick and Jane” series of schoolbooks was in common use when I was growing up. There usually was a single sentence on a page with a drawing to illustrate what the words said on the opposing page. They had no plot and lots of action. They weren’t “real” stories (Dick would have been running after Jane to kick her back) and it didn’t tell the whole story (Dick really liked Jane), but something was always on the move. Even the dog.

Typically we would start off our reading slowly, but soon the boys in particular were racing ahead and through the book. We were more intent at getting through than doing a good job. Miss Waters was patient. She would help us by writing on the chalkboard any new words. She would ask each of us to read to her and sometimes we would read a sentence out loud to the whole class.

Sometimes we faltered and forgot what those words meant. Initially we would just memorize the words, but eventually we would learn to sound them out and compare them with other words we had seen earlier (like ballpark from having seen ball and park).

The girls generally were methodical, reading the words and carefully looking at the pictures. They were taking the time to associate the pictures with the words. They would even see some of the things in the pictures that didn’t make sense (“Why weren’t there any fences in the pictures?” and “Mom would kill us if we ran in our Sunday best shoes”). The girls would keenly observe the stories and decide what did and what did not “ring true.”

It took diligence to think beyond the page. It was important to remember certain details to see how they “played out.” We all began to think about what we read and heard. The authors intended these books to teach us to read, but they were also teaching us to think objectively.

While we didn’t do any “substantial” reading in kindergarten, we were exposed to two things that could serve each of us all of our lives: reading and critical thinking.

During any stage of business upheaval, such as now while we are still in the formative years of eBusiness and while the “dot-com” implosion is behind us, we all need to be keen observers. We need to sharpen these skills even more than before. We need to methodically and thoroughly digest the information that is coming at us and do a better job of assessing its relevance and validity.

We need to be considering the hype that we are exposed to daily and to listen critically to the claims of success. We need to consider the source of information and reflect on “what they are selling to us and why.”

We need to understand the difference between teaching and selling. Weekly I am exposed to Webinars that are advertised as training vehicles, when in fact they are just the latest method of marketing. With training you should get a balanced view of products and services. You should be warned of the weak spots of a technology, method, or service. By nature, the marketing materials paint a rosy picture and comparisons are slanted to view the offering in the best possible light.

Many people flitter off to the latest technology, without understanding the potential impacts the technology will have. They gloss over the downsides. Their attitude is “we will deal with that when we get to it,” when they need to deal with it mentally and emotionally right now. The web was viewed that way about five years ago. If it was “on the web” it was automatically good. It was automatically advanced and considered forward thinking.

You need to be discerning in taking in the information. It can bias your view from that point forward.

Know with whom you are dealing. Know “where they are coming from” seems too obvious, too simple. When you are talking to vendors it is pretty clear. They have a

service or product to sell, and little is done externally to determine the next generation of offerings. So you know “up front” they are angling for the sale.

When you are talking to exchanges it may not be as clear. They can slip back and forth between their two roles: educator and vendor. This is especially true when we talk about channel related exchanges. I have yet to hear one of them say, “Use somebody else’s offering, we ain’t there yet.” Instead, everything is within their domain. Or they have strategic partnerships that can “fill in the gaps.” Or they are “in development” and the market isn’t ready yet, “so just wait a bit.”

But nearly all exchanges are in survival mode. They need the next sale to make it through the next quarter to make it to the next round of funding or sponsorship. They have no time to waste. They are angling for the sale more times than not. And what they have to sell is what they have on hand, not necessarily what you need. You need to be discerning.

Look for long lasting relationships. Strategic relationships can be instrumental to the success of your B2B program and in using a software suite. If you cannot get the attention of your vendor, you cannot be certain that their future offerings, services, and support model will align with your business strategy.

Of course, all vendors “talk” in terms of you being their strategic customer. But you need to be a keen observer to determine if their actions will mirror their “talk”. Ask them for specific details on how they will do this and tell them specifically what your expectations of them should be. Then document your agreement and pull it out of the drawer frequently with your vendor to make sure you are staying on the right course.

We were in a “strategic partnership” to co-design a procurement offering. We had done an assessment of their current business model and software offering and it was shaky at best. They needed to beef up many of the features and functions. They sold us on a strategic relationship, where we would co-design the next generation of software. However, their vision of co-design and develop and our vision were severely misaligned. We paid for a great deal more of their labor than we had expected. And when they got to the next generation of product, they had gone in a totally different direction, without considered much of our input. In hindsight we hadn’t laid out the specific expectations of both companies.

But we also hadn't been keen observers of their behaviors when they had droves of employees on our premises. We hadn't, for example, recognized that the people "on site" were not their most senior development staff. We hadn't recognized they were not getting back to us very quickly on feedback we had provided. We were cutting them too much slack, in thinking our feedback was winding its way through their channels. These should have been telltale signs that things were amiss.

Because we hadn't been keen observers early on in the process, we hadn't laid the correct foundation for what "co-design" really meant. We paid the price for our blunder.

This should not be construed to imply you don't want strategic relationships. They can be very valuable and save you money and time to market. But we need to ask ourselves, "How well does this vendor understand my eBusiness strategy?" and "How much does he care?" Actions make speak louder than words, but you have to be listening to both.

Strive for balance. Finding balance requires diligence and attention. It requires patience and a steady hand. It requires keen observations.

If it sounds easy, take another look. Remember, the technology is the easy part. Don't look for what "could be done." That's too easy. Look beneath the surface to see what level of acceptance you can drive. Read between the lines. Look for what "rings true" and what does not.

Don't look for "conceptual" acceptance. Look for willingness to put down hard dollars and other resources. Balance what you are hearing from your vendors and what you are hearing from your trading partners. Think critically and listen to yourself as well. Don't get carried away and enthusiastic until after you have seen the alignment.

It still takes diligence to think beyond the page. It is still important to remember the details and reflect on how they can "play out" in the business world.

Think critically when the hype and your enthusiasm and emotions are at the zenith. Be a keen observer.

*Never **trust** the judgment of an enthusiastic man; never **trust** the promises of a lazy one. -Mason Cooley*



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