

Stick Together

Grade school brought simple methods and simple rules. Stand in line when you wait for the bus. Play fair. Apply the Golden Rule. Hold hands when crossing the street. Stick together. Even today this is all good advice.

Our kindergarten teacher organized us together to keep us from wandering off-- both literally and figuratively. In doing so, she encouraged us to interact with one another. I remember being crowded together in awe as Miss Waters opened the petals of a flower before us. We had all seen flowers before and the boys largely ignored them—limiting their interest to pulling one apart petal by petal.

She gently showed us how the petals were attached and how the shapes allowed moisture and nutrients to draw down into the stalk. She told us that some flowers opened and closed on a regular basis to either protect themselves or to capture more sunlight. She even told us about meat-eating plants. Of course, we didn't figure flies were much in the way of meat!

She then asked us about flowers and some of the girls talked about the different smells and the variety of colors. I really hadn't thought much about that. When I listened to the girls talk, I began to see many things I hadn't observed before. We had a lot to learn about flowers. The girls knew the flowers that their mothers liked best and why. They knew the funny names for many of the flowers that our teacher brought in as examples. I was amazed by how much they knew and how much they could share.

eBusiness has more than its share of misinformation. Most of it is from "reliable sources." I have loved watching the statements from the "experts" about the life expectancy of Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) over the last few years. A few years

ago it was “EDI is dead.” Usually this was said by people who had something to sell-- either products or ideas. Then it was “EDI has only a few more years.” Surprising, since it was already dead! More recently it has been “EDI and web-based B2B can go side-by-side.” Does that mean they are both dead?

Nobody asked me if EDI was dead. Nobody asked anyone within my circle of eBusiness colleagues who have a wide range of experience in B2B technologies in a variety of companies and industries if EDI was dead. Most importantly, nobody asked my customers if EDI was dead. They're the ones who matter. They're are the ones who have collectively spent millions of dollars and countless hours putting together their EDI platforms and surrounding processes for support, problem resolution, and trading partner interaction. They are the ones who have streamlined their business processes and integrated EDI into their applications and systems.

The reality is that EDI has been growing at twice the rate of the economy in the last few years and doesn't really show signs of slowing down. If anything, many users' first look at the web or exchanges point out glaring deficiencies in those technologies. Once those glaring deficiencies are exposed, EDI doesn't look so bad after all. It may be old and stogy, but it works.

EDI does some things well and, at other things, it is dismal. The key is to match the tool to the requirements. B2B is not an “either-or” proposition; it is an “and-and-and.” Sorry, one size does not fit all. One technology doesn't fit all, just as you will not find me hauling manure in my PT Cruiser!

The bottom line is that as long as trading partners see value in a technology, process, or method-- and it appears to be acceptable from a cost, speed, and complexity standpoint-- they will use it. It doesn't matter if it is smoke signals. And they will continue to use it until something substantially better comes along. Not just “faster, better, cheaper;” it has to exceed a certain threshold, far above that mark. A nebulous threshold called substantial improvement.

The lesson is: don't race ahead by yourself to a new technology solution. You go down the road with others, specifically your customers and suppliers. When we implemented web-based tools for B2B, it was amazing how many companies didn't have web browsers and Internet connectivity at their employees' desktops. Many were

concerned about the “distractions.” Some were concerned about pornography and other inappropriate use. Some were concerned about the cost and others about security. It didn’t matter that it was going to make life “faster, better, cheaper,” there were still social and implementation cost issues at stake. There was still this threshold that needed to be exceeded before adoption would become a reality. It wasn’t a matter of “could;” it was a matter of “would.”

It is hard work taking customers through the process of alleviating their concerns. It takes education, training, trust, and socialization to help them through it. It takes them understanding that we are going to go through this together. That their success is my success and their failure is my failure.

Don’t fall in love with a technology—“she will only break your heart.” The best technology I ever saw for doing Advance Ship Notice was an inexpensive, special type of bar code reader. It would have cost our customers under \$100 each in the mid-1980s for customers to “read” a special code attached to the bottom of their packing memo. We piloted with one customer. It worked well. However, it required a device to be hooked up to a PC to receive the data. Not all that many customers had PCs in those days and those who did were leery of hooking a device to it. The pilot was a success, but we were never able to implement the new technology. In other words, “The operation was a success, but the patient died.”

New B2B technologies come along all the time and I get excited about them. But all need to go through an acceptance process before they can become viable in the marketplace. Sometimes that acceptance is allowing some “fringe” development to take place from a technology standpoint, to add security and safety to the method. All require socialization to gain acceptance. It requires working through the issues together and talking out the concerns and questions.

One of the most cost effective methods at my company has been a voice-response application that has been around for thirty years. Everyone has a telephone, so there is no additional cost to the user. The application is simple and direct and customers, frankly, have low expectations of it. By that I don’t mean it can be of poor quality. I mean they don’t expect us to be upgrading it with new features and elaborate functions very often. They don’t anticipate that we will be changing it much at

all. Change of this application is probably a bad sign in their minds. It works, it is stable, and it is reliable. Why fool with it? And that is quite alright with both of us.

On the other end of the spectrum we have been tinkering with public and private exchanges. Customers are largely not ready yet, so we have some time to find the right value equation. So what are the best forums for discussing where we need to be going next? Obviously, you want to keep in regular communication with your customers about these issues, but there are other forums to consider to gain alternative perspectives and to challenge our assumptions.

Industry-wide conferences and technology specific conferences are usually good for the interchange of ideas. You need to make sure they are not too vendor specific, especially where the vendor has a narrow band of “real” offerings. Many have a grand vision for how their product sets must work— with only 30% of it really built out.

I prefer conferences that have many presentations by external, industry experts who have little to sell and plenty of real-live users. People who live and work in the trenches. People who “put it on the line” every day. People who live (and get fired) for their B2B decisions. They are the unsung heroes of B2B. They are not attracted to the limelight—they have to be dragged there. They’re the ones who will give you the straight answers you need. They’re the ones who will tell you the truth about the products and vendors.

America’s SAP Users Group (ASUG) eCommerce group is one, for example. This is not the company SAP selling their vaporware (that’s what their annual SAPPHIRE event is all about). This is real SAP users getting together to share their successes and failures in putting together their B2B solutions that integrate with their SAP back-end. This is real people helping other souls along the same road they have trudged. These folks “stick together” to help each other out, not just at conferences, but in email blast, web sites, and telephone calls.

Seminars can provide “intimate” contacts. Especially good are ones that are small and allow for a good deal of interchange between the speakers and the attendees. They can be low risk ways of being able to ask naive questions about how things work in a smaller, closer knit setting. Some of the best B2B seminars I have

attended have had 15-20 people. They need to have sufficient breaks and discussion sessions, which will not only allow, but also facilitate, random questions and answers.

The learning at these sessions is not always from the instructor. It is from fellow attendees who are at (or just beyond) the point you are. I pay particular attention to what companies or industries these attendees represent and how far along in their implementations they may be. If it appears they are a “good match” for the information I think I may need, I will strike up a conversation and volunteer some information on my experience or approach. People generally always reciprocate. If not, I haven’t invested too much. The amount of information that can be collected is striking.

Sometimes I gain far more from these “side bar” conversations than from the main seminar topic. Sometimes I gain friends who are willing to interact with me for years as our solutions go down separate paths and occasionally converge.

Cast a broad net with training. My boss in the late 1980s, Roger Rawden, had the best picture of training that I have ever run across. He insisted that his managers get out of the office one time a quarter for training. It could be a day or a week. The training needed to be only a “fair match”—in other words, it didn’t have to have a “hard business case” that would be used on the particular job I was doing then, but it needed to be just a reasonable match for my jobs or some responsibility the team might acquire. When he proposed this to us, we were more concerned about our “Travel and Entertainment” budget, since we shared that performance expectation. But we soon learned there were low cost ways of doing training. We didn’t need to fly cross-country and spend a week to get what we needed.

One part of this was just getting away from the office to gain a fresh perspective on the world. It was getting away from the daily grind to be able to tackle problems again in a different light. It is getting out with other companies that have successfully dealt with similar problems.

One two-day training I attended taught me some skills I use three or four times a year. Best \$400 seminar I ever attended. In hindsight, it has saved my company tens of thousands of dollars.

There are more opportunities today for training than there have ever been to get the training for B2B we need. But this typically excludes the connections we make with

other companies doing similar projects. On-line training can supplement, not replace, “live” training. Why? It leaves out a valuable level of engagement with others. It bypasses the opportunity to stick together.

Huddled together, we figure B2B out. We learn from one another. We expand our thinking, beyond that of which we are individually capable. We cut through the misinformation and drive to the practical solution. We can do it time and again, by sticking together.

“Snowflakes are one of nature’s most fragile things, but just look what they can do when they stick together.” –Vesta M. Kelly



Reprint provided courtesy of

Duane H. Cook

Copyright © 2004 Duane H. Cook and
Strategic eBusiness - Cook Consulting