



53 County Clare Crescent, Fairport, NY 14450

cell: 585.230.6357  
office: 585.377.3439  
email: dcook@ebizk.com  
www.ebizk.com

## ***Walk In The Other Guy's Shoes***

*There was no doubt about it. It was going to happen again. All the guys knew something bad was coming. We eyed one another. We could tell it in her voice-- sugar sweet and higher pitched than usual. No doubt about it. Miss Waters was going to make us do "girlie things" again.*

*There was nothing worse than "girlie things." Last time she had us cutting out paper clothing to dress paper dolls. Yuck. The girls loved this stuff. They would patiently color coordinate the clothing and make matching patterns. With purses and hats and high heels. Necklaces and diamond rings. Belt buckles and bouquets. Could there be anything more boring?*

*For the guys it was white tee shirts, black tennis shoes, and blue jeans. We were done in two seconds. The girls could spend hours doing this junk. Of course, we would have to wait for them to finish. Here we go again.*

*Miss Waters pulled out a large bed sheet. She asked us to stand in the center of the classroom. She started by taking away all the fun, "Okay, boys, no rough housing." She had us doing some crazy things like bumping into each other (without rough housing, no less) and pressing our faces against the tautly held bed sheet. The girls liked this because they would squeeze up with their boyfriends. Double yuck.*

*We were getting a little rambunctious, so Miss Waters told Ronnie that he was excused from this activity and he sat down to watch. Miss Waters was always "playing favorites" with Ronnie. Hey, what do I have to do to get excused? We were always getting hurt, so maybe if I limped like Ronnie I could get out of doing this thing. When Ronnie walked he would swing his hip forward and catch himself with all his weight on*

*top of his leg. He was always getting out of doing stuff in class. He was also “too delicate” to play at recess, so we never asked him to play with us.*

*When we finally finished, I went over and sat next to Ronnie. He was telling me how he wished he could have played with the bed sheet with us. Yeah, right. I was mad. I asked him how come he always got out of things. “Miss Waters must be in love with you,” I snapped. “You always weasel out of the bad stuff.”*

*He had tears in his eyes. He didn’t say anything. He just reached down and pulled up his pant leg. I was shocked by what he showed me. His right leg was as skinny as a broomstick. He quietly explained it was a birth defect and that he never would have the chance to play like the rest of his classmates did.*

*I didn’t know what to say. I know I never saw Ronnie in the same way again. I even learned it was okay to play with him on the playground. He wasn’t so bad or so delicate after all.*

It is enlightening to take a look at a problem from another viewpoint. Sometimes what comes from that is unexpected; other times it confirms our own thinking. There is value either way. At times having missed the obvious clues shocks us. Other times we are enlightened with things that we will carry with us the rest of our business lives.

One customer introduced me to the concept of “value need “ (versus “value add”). We think in terms of adding the next feature or function, without necessarily understanding what the impact, or value, will be from the customer’s standpoint. The world is full of examples of “new and improved” features being added to products or services. The Ford Edsel was packed with the latest devices. It was a virtual cornucopia of “new and improved” features. Many of these were not highly valued by potential customers. Others were poorly designed or engineered. We need to understand how much (or how little) trading partners value our services and offerings. We need to differentiate in our minds their “wants” from their “needs.” We only get that when we go beyond just asking them to discover the underlying situation.

We also need to help the customer move from the paradigms of the present to see the future with different eyes. For example, if the customer is having some problems with your invoicing process, he may fixate on the problem in such a way that it

prevents him from seeing a different solution. He may be complaining that his paper invoice is too slow in getting to him. The solution may not be in re-working the paper invoicing, mailing, or internal handling processes at all, but rather may be in moving to electronic invoicing and facilitating a three-way, on-line match. Or maybe the solution should be to eliminate the invoice entirely and re-work the payment process.

**We need to understand the world from your customer's view of the world.**

There can be many forums for collecting Voice of Customer (VoC) information. My favorite is to do a "road show" and get onto the customer's turf. Then they can pull in the right expertise if they have questions about how changes may impact their business process.

A broader audience at the customer's site can also help others gain a full understanding of what you are trying to accomplish. Other times you will get little information during the VoC activity itself, yet gain valuable learning. We were conducting videotape interviews of a web order management application. The intention was to learn how intuitive our site was by turning the user loose to place an order, without giving him either training or printed instructions. After all, web pages don't always say what we expect them to say. The only instructions were on-line and they were very minimal.

The user needed to rely on the names of the buttons on the web page to navigate through the application. We asked the users to "chat away" as they did things on the screens to know what they were thinking and especially what questions came to mind. If users had questions, even if they successfully made it through the labyrinth, we would spot the difficulties and make changes to the wording on the screen.

Usually this worked very well. But one time the customer was going from screen to screen, entering data (correctly) and not saying a word the whole time. We kept prompting him to comment, but he remained silent. He was concentrating so hard, he didn't hear us, I guess. When he successfully had completed all the tasks, he only had one comment: "Now don't screw it up." That was a message we hadn't considered and we recognized the need to repress the impulse to monkey with things too much.

One customer told me he wanted to take out some price, but "not that much price." That was surprising as I had always been warned that in that channel, the

dealers would extract blood until we were extinct, if we let them. But he explained to me that competition was a good thing because it drove price down and service up. But when there was no profit to be had, competitors would begin dropping out of the game. When there was only one supplier remaining, he would then be at the mercy of that supplier. He didn't care as much about winning the battle as he did about winning the war.

I like to document our "understanding" by writing customer scenarios. Another way of handling this is to incorporate this material in your application functional use case. These can then be confirmed with the customer to make sure you have captured the key points and have found any "stop signs." This allows for a mutual understanding of the design and also helps the customer see that his VoC contribution has not been in vain. It doesn't mean that this will be the final design, as you will want to collect input from a variety of sources and you also may have technical roadblocks or inaccurate data with which to contend. It just means, at that point in time, this was your vision.

**It is the basis upon which trust is built.** Walking in the other guy's shoes leads to greater understanding, compassion, and commitment. You have to ask yourself: What does it mean to walk in the other guy's shoes?

There is great value in just listening, just having your trading partner explain his hopes, issues, and concerns. There is also great value in creating and maintaining user councils, to get the same group of people together to talk through processing and problems. I ran a user council that talked through supply chain issues and packaging problems. Over time these led to entirely different packaging for a major line of products and enhanced bar coding. This made the products move more quickly and smoothly through the supply chain and far easier to identify on the retailer's shelf.

Often user councils are created for the wrong reason, however. This user council, which was so successful in revamping packaging, was created for absolutely the wrong reason. It was created to deliver a message to the dealers that to reduce cost we were eliminating some warehouses. User councils are not for lectures and one-way messages. User councils are for coming together and improving understanding.

People want to help. People want you to value their input. They want to be consulted and to participate in user councils, pilots, and prototypes. They don't always

have the time to participate, so you may need to figure out different ways they can. Maybe you just offer to keep them abreast of what you discover from other users' input. Maybe you can offer to give them a quick call once a month to "touch base" and keep them posted on developments. In any event, be judicious in what you ask them to do. It needs to be more of a hobby for them than a full time job.

This regularly managed process, when consistently done, demonstrates trust to your trading partner. Over time, you can move far beyond where you have been in your customer relationships. The opposite is also true. If you don't follow through, don't communicate, or don't behave according to what you have discussed, there is no longer a reason to trust you. They will, however, understand when things are out of your control. Communication is the key. It also works to take away the fears we have of one another.

Users are smart people. You want to reward those who commit the time and energy to pass along their experience to you. They can also understand how to put the puzzle together differently-- in ways you haven't seen. Some of these will not be appropriate and will not "pan out." Others will only give you a kernel of what you need. Your trading partners can be rich assets, which you will want to tap frequently for mutual benefit.

**It tells us how we are to negotiate.** This is not figuring out how to take advantage of a situation. This is figuring out how you and your trading partner can together take best advantage. We then know what value the customer places on certain things and we have part of the equation complete. We then need to determine, within the confines of what the customer values, what value we can extract.

Buyers frequently want to receive invoices electronically. It helps facilitate their matching of the invoice to the purchase order. Sellers frequently want electronic payment. It reduces complexity, handling, and DSO. Knowing what you want and what your trading partner wants allows you to "bundle" your offering: Giving something to get something.

Walking in the other guy's shoes is a journey. But we still have to walk. The next time we go down the same (or a similar) path, we can see the world from two viewpoints, not just one.

When we walk in the other guy's shoes, we see the world from his viewpoint and we experience life in a different way. It opens our minds to different possibilities. It allows us to apply new and different methods and examples of how others have been successful.

*Example is the school of mankind, and they will learn at no other.* - Edmund Burke  
(1729–1797)



*Reprint provided courtesy of*

**Duane H. Cook**

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