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GUEST COLUMNIST

IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT IT DOES. PRESENTATION IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN WE REALISE

Many commentators, much better informed than I in these matters, have recently described how geospatial technology is moving rapidly towards the mainstream marketplaces – beyond the days of supercomputers operated by professors to create a map of four colours. Instead the present and near future is one of Google Maps, in-car navigation and office workers consulting their mobile phone's Geographic Information (GI) system for the nearest pub to the taxi rank at a constant stumble of two steps a minute.

Having worked in the industry for around 10 years I'm ecstatic that our previously specialised niche is widening and I am looking forward to seeing the achievements of the skillful new workers that will now be attracted to GI. Moreover, I am really excited to see what will be the next big development within our industry, the next technology breakthrough? My fear is that, whilst the technology continues tearing down the highway to new marketplaces at breakneck speed, the communication services that are supposed to support these products are just stepping on to a rickshaw being pulled by an overweight eighty year old man – with one leg.

The geospatial industry is complicated; just try using the word 'geospatial' in conversation with someone outside the industry and it is likely you will lose them instantly. So whilst communication is key when talking to people within the GI industry, it will be the factor that decides success or failure when selling into new marketplaces (notice I took the time to define the abbreviation GI at the beginning of the article, just in case you are reading this magazine for the first time). However, it is far too convenient for me just to say that 'communication' is vital – what you communicate is key; far and away in front of how, where or when.

Currently, the 'what' in the GI industry is features, we are obsessed with advertising lists and lists of features. In GI, Product A is better than Product B because the literature that promotes it has a fold out section for all the features they have crammed in to the latest release. Product B responds by calling their printers and getting them to design a foldout extension to their foldout and lists even more features. Pretty soon adverts will double as tablecloths! To avoid confusion, my definition of a product feature is simply something that the product does, which is of course unimportant. That sentence finishes too soon, what is vital is what the product does for me.

Every salesman worth their job knows that 'feature-selling' gets you nowhere. Marketing departments should ask their sales team when they last opened a sales call: "Nice to talk to you Jim, we haven't spoken before but I just wanted you to know that we now support the Vulcan reverse upside-down datum and projection. You want to buy? Great!" Sounds ridiculous and yet how many GI companies' marketing carry exactly those kind of messages to customers, they have never met? Presentation is much more important than what the product does and 'what the product does for me' is what the presentation should convey.

I have heard the argument that GI is a technical industry with technical products for technical people and hence the need to stress the technical advantages of your products. There are two arguments against this; firstly it is wrong and secondly it is wrong. Some of the most staggeringly complicated products are sold to the general public every day in vast numbers without any reference at all to the technology involved. Would in-car navigation have become standard in most new cars if it were sold to drivers as 'a vector based, real-time GPS integrated road model'? Unsurprisingly, 'it gets you where you need to go' worked a lot better. I really believe that so many other concepts, products and services in the GI industry are not reaching a wider audience because the wider audience doesn't

understand why they are of use to them. There certainly is a time and a place for technical information it's just that advertising is not that place (if you are thinking when is the time and where is the place, it is when someone asks for it).

In exactly the same way that good software is initially designed as far away from a computer as possible, so should marketing campaigns and especially adverts be created in the same way. Marketing must come from an idea and answer the questions; 'how can we convey what this will do for our users and how can we put this across clearly, memorably, excitingly, efficiently, enticingly and in a way that separates it from the competition?' Discovering that Microsoft Word allows you to change the colour of text or that Adobe Photoshop can create some really cool shading effects, will not answer these questions.

Once the 'what' of a product or service has been worked out, the next leap is to understand that the 'how', 'where' and 'when' are also specialised skills. Creating an advert or brochure or direct mailing piece or company profile by learning how to use a desktop publishing package (once a niche industry of its own) will result in your advert, brochure, mailing and company profile looking like you produced it after learning how to use a desktop publishing package. Just like writing the software or designing GI services, publicising these offerings requires its own set of skills and experience. Getting the right people or organisation to work on the communication side of the GI industry is just as important as employing the right technical and consultancy staff.