

"What do I care what my client thinks?"

We IT guys have never had it better. The only problem is that our clients never seem to understand us. My question is, "Do we understand our clients? Do we care about what they think?" My short answer is, "No."

I heard a recent speech by Anu Aga, former chairperson of the Thermax Group, where she borrowed a thought from Miles Kington, "Knowledge tells you that a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom tells you not to put it in the fruit salad!" Although she used it in a different context, I found it appropriate in the context of IT. Wise IT entrepreneurs (however much of an oxymoron that might seem) know that technology is a tomato. Their wisdom, however, tells them that it is not the business itself.

Now you're thinking, "Who's this guy who's trying to get my attention—does he think we don't know our stuff?" Let me hasten to introduce myself. My credentials are of little significance; my philosophy is what matters—sustainability, innovation, globalisation and culture are the cornerstones of successful entrepreneurship. Since I now have your attention, I am going to try my utmost to keep it.

No offence meant here, but the 'technology' in IT is really the easy part. Software, solutions, whatever... The difficult part is to understand what the client really meant when he was explaining his need. While the multitasking ability is rare, and it is a great skill to have on our side, we have to learn to listen, and listen hard. The reason I say this is because when I am talking to a potential client, I suddenly find myself digging into my memory, making connections from the past, and furiously trying to quickly assemble what I have done sometime before in my life, into a solution. Sometimes, I find that


even waiting for my client to finish can be tiresome, but I have learnt the basic courtesy of allowing him to finish.

I have also learnt the value of empathetic listening—showing others that I'm trying to understand where they're coming from; understanding that they are not techies, and probably don't want to be techies; understanding that they don't need to care about 'how' the problem can be solved, but only about 'what' they can do with the solution we deliver. (Have you ever noticed that 'listen' is an anagram for 'silent'?)

I will try to illustrate what this really means. At work, we gradually find ourselves becoming 'experts' in a particular technology, or a set of technologies. We are seen as *the* people who know how to solve a problem using our IT prowess. Therefore, we expect our client to clearly define the problem. We believe that the client ought to have understood exactly what solution to expect. Clients, on the other hand, believe that they are talking to a consultant—much like I believe in my doctor's abilities—and are looking for more than Java programming abilities. My point is that a general physician performs an initial diagnosis, and then recommends that I see a specialist—perhaps a neurosurgeon. Imagine if I decided, on my own, to go directly to a neurosurgeon, when I actually suffered from a heart condition. This might sound far-fetched, but I would suggest that we consider becoming 'general technologists'! Once we know what

the problem is, we can always use our technology knowledge to find the expertise needed for the solution. In fact, this is how we do it (and have done it before), here at Ideafarms. We have built high levels of confidence on the client's side, by recommending that some other IT company is better suited to deliver a solution that we have designed!

In the final diagnosis, it has become clear that the information age is going the way of the automobile age; it's just that the lifecycle has been considerably shortened. This analogy has always aroused scepticism, right since a decade ago, when I first used it. I have been the target of sidelong glances that seemed to say, "It is too simplistic a view to take—and an ill-fitting analogy, at that!" My view has not changed; I am now absolutely certain that technology will become invisible to the user, like a car's engine; under the hood is where it should be. We have to design a good hood for IT as well.

Perhaps this is what my clients want to hear from me—because that is what they already think! Clients are sick of having to pander to our 'know-it-all' attitudes; they are past the curve of frustration. They have options today, and the promise of Web 2.0 shows them that they do not need to suffer our shortcomings much longer. We would be better off being "listeningly silent"! 

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