

## CATS 'n DOGS...

There's a Polynesian saying that I love that goes "Standing on a whale, fishing for minnows." It is applicable in so many ways in our lives. It speaks to the fact that so often we are side-tracked by irrelevant issues or distractions and lose sight of the bigger issues or opportunities at hand.

When evaluating CAT systems, reporters have for years often ignored some of these more substantive issues such as efficiency of software operations and other hidden costs which, in my opinion, are of far greater importance than the purchase price and have a longer-lasting impact on one's income earning ability to say nothing of physical health.

Perhaps, it's time to "revalue" your CAT software based on what it will do for you over time.

There are many reasons why a company will undervalue its products in an attempt to generate extra sales:

- a. They may be desperate to maintain market share. In this case they are buying customers and that strategy never plays out well over time. Some companies realize that with their inability to compete on the basis of product functionality and productivity, the only way they can hold on is to play on the customers' natural inclination to pay the least that they can.
- b. They are planning on introducing some new software and/or writers that will essentially obsolete what they are selling now and create a future migration revenue stream. Hence, they are willing to take the hit now on the hope that those customers will stay with them through the next migration cycle.
- c. If the company is owned by a bigger company, maybe they are under a lot of pressure to make a profit or face being sold off or face layoffs or worse. So they drop prices trying to generate a quick buck at the expense of the financial health of their future business. And, we've all seen enough companies coming and going in this business to know it's not a lot of fun being the user of a product made by someone on their way out.
- e. Or, the company may have an excellent product and is simply attempting to "buy" into some market share to be more visible in an area.

Any and all of these, and other, reasons can be part of the purchase scenario and it's important to understand which dynamic is in play for your particular choice.

My recommendation is...never buy on price. It's simple. You've heard it before. But, so many people still do it. But this is your profession and your livelihood and it behooves you to make a more informed choice when you select the tools of your trade.

Search the whole universe of potential products and find the one you want, knowing what you want, without regard to the price. When you've selected the right product, THEN and only then, start the negotiations with the vendor you've selected.

You can't always go by what your friend has and is "so happy" with because he or she may have done the same thing without really looking at all there is out there. Some people are happy with something that works. Period. They aren't taught to expect much from their CAT software and usually they settle for what it does and think that's wonderful. But, there's a huge difference in the efficiency with which different software works and how much work is required of the user to do repetitive, tedious, or easily automated functions.

Times change, technology changes, and doing something because someone else did it a year or two before doesn't make a lot of sense. Remember that a few years ago, WordPerfect® ruled the word-processing world. Today, that has been changed and MS Word® rules.



And, don't be side-tracked by issues such as Windows® v. DOS operating systems. To my knowledge, Windows never did a darned thing for a reporter. It is the application software, the CAT software, that does the work for you (or lets you work on it), that matters. This is, after all, a text-based profession. Keyboard commands for document editing are far more efficient and productive than getting bogged down with pointers, mice and icons that you can click (or double click) on. A good 32-bit Windows CAT product will be written in such a way that virtually all of your old keyboard commands will work as efficiently in the Windows environment as in the DOS environment allowing you to bypass the negative aspects of the graphical-user-interface (GUI).

Times do change. And simply reconstituting an old CAT program as a new one, changing the look and name won't add any increased efficiency to your system. The bottom line is, no matter what some companies do to dress up their CAT if it's a dog..... Well, you get the picture.

If you are faced with learning a completely new program that does not operate anything like your old software, you've got some serious retraining to do. That being the case, now is probably a great time to look around at all of the available software today and make your choice based on what current technology and software offer. Don't

just purchase the next thing that your old CAT vendor has come up with. Times change and sometimes vendors don't maintain current methodologies or 'intelligent' methodologies in their software. You need to look around to get the software that will be with you for the coming years.

I've always encouraged my customers to spend the extra money and to get the computer that's the best they can afford if they plan on keeping it for two or three years. Because, after the money is spent and forgotten, they'll have the computer in front of them every day of their lives for as long as they keep it. And if they got something less than they wanted because it was cheap, they'll be reminded of it, unhappily, every day, long after they've forgotten about what they spent on it.

That is even more true with respect to a software decision! Many CAT systems have never saved a reporter a minute of time by:

- inserting correctly spelled words in the translated text even though those words weren't in their dictionaries.
- auto formatting then giving providing a choice of items from which to pick, to speed the process of filling out standard and repetitive information in places like title pages, appearance pages, etc.
- using the correct English grammar rules for presenting numbers (automatically inserting parentheses around an area codes, dashes in SS numbers, or a dash after the numeral in a phrase like '5-Mile Lane,' plain numerals, telephone numbers, currencies or written out numbers), making the whole process of translating numbers correctly easy rather than hard for you.
- offering Auto-Indexing for your transcript making that process automatic for you.
- correcting stacked strokes correctly rather than requiring you to stop and fix an untranslate. If the company making your software fails to acknowledge the existence of stacking as a problem, the likelihood of them having software that fixes it is relatively slim.

The difference between the purchase price of one CAT system today vs. another is nominal at best. When CAT systems used to cost twenty thousand dollars, the difference of \$5,000 between systems was a bigger issue.

The real costs or savings to you will be in the day-to-day use of the system, the efficiencies gained by the productivity-building features of one versus the manual manipulations required by another. Calculate the inefficiencies and other hidden-cost factors associated with making your software decision and you'll discover that the break-even-point for value is likely to be very short indeed. Having made some calculations on pages per day and price per page, it has been calculated that if one reporter paid \$3,500 for an efficient software and another reporter got a traditional type of CAT for free, the breakeven point would be in the range of only four months. After that, the costs for having made the wrong decision has only one way to go!

One way to figure it is to try to project your life a year or two from now. A year from now, which software purchase do you think will have saved you more money (calculating your initial costs, time spent or saved through the intelligent and automatic functions available in the products used, etc.)? Were you able to complete your work sooner on one system allowing you to actually take more jobs and make more money, or have more time for your family or hobbies?

Think also of how the products are sold, maintained and upgraded? Are there migration fees associated with moving from one version of someone's product to another? If so, add those costs into the costs of your product today, because you'll need to figure them in when making a comparison.

Some companies have done a lot to hurt the value and reputations of support relationships. The quality and availability of support can be a truly valuable asset to you when analyzing your product purchase options. A lot of users have found support contracts to be of little value because they find that in many cases they know more about their product than the people who are supposed to be supporting them do. Often this happens because the companies offering the support contracts are businesses that suffer high turnover rates in their organizations. When that happens, there's not only instability in the company but a lack of informational continuity and historical perspective available to users who are paying for the support that they don't always get. And when you figure that you're having to pay for upgrades anyway, there's not a lot of motivation to maintain a support contract.

Be careful, too, of the company that reminds you of all of the updates you've received since the introduction of their latest product. In many cases, those "updates" haven't been updates at all (i.e., new or enhanced features and functions). Rather, they have been bug fixes to make functional things you thought you were getting but didn't get and now you're getting bug fixes to get them so you can finally have what you thought you were getting in the beginning but never really got.

Other companies offer support benefits that truly are of value. They have support staffs who have been with them for years and who know the products well. They don't charge for every upgrade or update that comes along so you get them (real and new feature enhancements and productivity tools) automatically with a support contract. Having a support contract that gets you the update and then lets you call in to find out how the new things work and get help learning them is of real value. You'll find that some companies have user bases with a very high proportion of users on annual support contracts, not because they have to have them but because they want them and find them of value.

If you haven't thought about them already, you might want to consider including these items in the decision equation for the next time you go shopping for a CAT system.

Lastly, I'd offer some thoughts on training. Buy it. Whatever it costs. Buy it! There's nothing worse than having software you use to earn a living that you don't know how to use. In my opinion, the money spent on learning how to use your CAT software is the best spent money of the package after you've selected the right program to start with. If you have efficient software that is designed to enhance your productivity and you fail to utilize those features it's like trying to chop a tree with a chain saw (engine not running). You might want to start by learning how to fire it up and get it really working for you.

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