

Building Value Through Long-Term Relationships

Information Builders helps customers realize measurable returns on their BI investments.

Pablo Picasso once said, “Computers are useless. They can only give you answers.” Granted, when Picasso passed away in 1973, information technology as we know it today was virtually non-existent for general business users. Still, the artist’s cynical assertion has some truth in it. In today’s business world, companies need tangible solutions that deliver quantifiable results. But it’s impossible to provide useful answers if you don’t ask the right questions.

When a company purchases a technology solution, stakeholders typically desire a quick return on the investment. The shortsighted assumption some companies make is that merely installing the software and training users will yield tangible business results. Those miscalculations can lead to failures in business intelligence (BI) initiatives.

That’s why, at Information Builders Professional Services, the first question we ask new customers is, “What problems are you trying to solve?” After helping them identify specific business needs, we suggest the best ways to obtain value from our technology. This builds a foundation for continuous success with the software.

Personalized Service Leads to Real-World Results

Eastern Mountain Sports sought out a BI environment to improve the efficiency of its merchandising operation. Over a series of meetings with the Boston-based retailer, we helped them pose the key question: “How do we get a real-time view of our inventory?” That question guided the creation and deployment of a Web-based dashboard that lets store managers view inventory levels with a simple Web browser. Their operation is much more efficient, and they have developed a mindset for continuous improvement using BI.

One of the things that distinguishes Information Builders is our focus on implementation services. We believe closing the sale is merely the first step in a long-term relationship, and we look for ways to boost the value of each project. For example, when the State of Louisiana came to us asking for help detecting fraud in its Food Stamp program, we didn’t simply use our BI tools to automate their

existing processes. We also helped them devise a new analytic system to detect patterns of abuse among the population, then integrated it with a geographic information system so they could quickly spot pockets of fraudulent activity on a map. Our solution saved the state \$70 million in the first year.

Our relationship with the State of Louisiana didn't end there. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, one of our consultants realized that the Food Stamp system could be extended and modified to assist with hurricane relief efforts. This led to a BI application for managing funds distributed by FEMA for important reconstruction projects. The long-term relationship translated into continuing benefits for the organization.

The Value of Clear-Cut Objectives

We strive to be involved in what our customers are doing, but our overriding goal is to help customers help themselves. For example, we used our technology to help a major U.S. truck manufacturer streamline the process of taking orders and obtaining custom specifications from its dealers. This client had a mishmash of disparate ERP systems, which made it difficult to exchange information. They first asked themselves, "How do we integrate our ERP systems?" We guided them to a more relevant question: "How can you leverage real-time information to more quickly respond to customer demands?"

It used to take this manufacturer several days to review and approve custom specifications. Now sales representatives use WebFOCUS to spec out custom designs and share them with production personnel while the customer waits. The ROI has been astronomical because sales representatives can close deals much more quickly. Once again, the right answer came from asking the right question.

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Using Insight to Exceed Expectations

Picasso created his works through sheer inspiration. While we don't rule out the occasional breakthrough in inventive thinking, in most cases our consultants succeed by taking a sincere interest in what each customer wants to accomplish. It's an open process of questioning, leading to information systems that are sometimes beyond what customers initially envisioned. Such was the case with one of nation's largest police departments.

Officers did a good job of collecting information about domestic violence, but their paper-based logs of home visits were difficult to analyze and share. They knew they needed a better reporting system, so we helped them develop a system to put these paper files online. We also created analytics to categorize the severity of each incident, helping the city prioritize the work of field officers.

Because of our close involvement with such clients, unique innovations often end up in our products for other customers to enjoy. Our customers have tremendous influence over product directions. In addition to our meetings with individual customers, we hold dozens of national and regional Customer Advisory Council events each year. It's not uncommon for customers to suggest modifications that will consequently appear in the product six months later.

Perhaps Picasso had some insight into information technology after all. We certainly agree with him on one important point: our ability to provide answers is only useful if we know how to ask the right questions. ●

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