

THE BOTTOM LINE

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Surviving vendor demonstrations

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Have you spent way too much time sitting through vendor demonstrations? Were all the products a blur in the end? You're not alone. After having survived countless demonstrations, I have a few recommendations.

Be prepared

Before you have scheduled a demonstration, you should have already completed a preliminary vendor analysis that evaluated each vendor's degree of fit to each of your requirements. This means you should already have eliminated any systems from the demonstration if there are major problems with the system related to functionality, cost, technology and support.

Keep the first one brief

The first demonstration should be an introductory session for approximately four vendors. Share the priority of your requirements with each vendor. Each vendor will want to spend time with you to better understand your

business. Just as important from their perspective, they will want to establish a relationship with you.

Resist their request at this point. The vendors also have a lot to show you. They will want to spend as much time as you can give them during the demonstration. Keep the first demonstration up to two hours.

Tell the vendors they can forget about everything except your highest priority requirements. There's no point spending a lot of time with each vendor at this point as you hardly know them.

Over the Internet

Consider doing the first demonstration over the Internet, especially if some of the vendors are not local. The Net is a great tool to demonstrate systems over the Internet. In this way, it's a level playing field for all the vendors. And it's faster.

Create a team

You need to have a team of people to attend the demonstra-

tion that represent all the major business processes in the company. They don't need to stay for the entire demonstration. However, you should let all your people involved in the demonstration attend the introduction session as well as the session on generic features.

Keep a tight schedule

Provide a schedule, which shows exactly how much time they have on each section. In this way, you won't run out of time. As well, you will be able to schedule certain people to attend the sections that apply to them.

Keep score

You need a way to evaluate each vendor. Each person from your company attending the demonstration should be keeping score. Have each person complete the accompanying chart identifying strengths and weaknesses. Each person could score the vendor for each of the criteria (from 1 to 10) and its importance (from 1 to 10).

There will be follow-ups, so

these should be recorded, too.

At the end of the demonstrations, you need to bring all the participants together to decide which vendor should be evaluated in more detail.

Proof of concept

The idea is to narrow the field to only two vendors and focus your attention on them. Send them a script of a day in the life of your company. The script should contain the business processes that you want to see. Attach forms and reports to give the vendors a better understanding. Give them a tour of your facilities and answer all their questions before the proof of concept demonstration. Give them enough time to do justice to do the proof of concept. The vendors will do this at no charge to you. It's a significant investment and you don't want to waste anyone's time on vendors that are unlikely to win the day.

That's not all

You're not finished yet. You will also want to do reference checking. The vendors don't want

to give you references too early in the sales cycle. This is understandable as they don't want to bother their clients unless they are on your short list and have a decent probability of being successful. Other activities include contract negotiation and even more demonstrations if necessary.

Be honest

The vendors may have invested a lot of time with you. The least you can do is to tell them the real reason they have been eliminated. As well, you may have made a mistake in your evaluation. By telling the vendors the real reasons, you give the vendors a chance to come back with perhaps a different approach or clarification.

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