Bits & Bytes

Insider Tips On How To Use Technology To Make Your Business Run Faster, Easier, And More Profitably

How To Determine The TRUE Cost Of Any IT Upgrade, Transition Or Addition

I'm often asked about the ROI (return on investment) for technology. Truth is, I don't believe you "invest" in technology using the classic definition. Investments are things that provide a measurable, quantifiable return for your money.

Of course it can easily be argued that technology does provide a return for your money. If you don't think so, try communicating with your clients and market without e-mail or tracking inventory with pen and paper. And the right technology applied with a smart strategy can certainly give any business owner a strategic advantage in faster delivery of goods and services to customers, greater productivity, lowered production costs and the like. In fact, there aren't too many businesses that can operate without a few core IT applications. But the reality is that your bank account is going to be a bit lighter after you install that new upgrade or technology, so how do you know if that IT upgrade or project is worth the money?

The right way to look at the true price of any IT project or upgrade is to look at TCO or "total cost of ownership" and not just the PRICE of the project or upgrade. For example, if you buy a car, the price of the car is only one cost of owning it. You also have to consider insurance, gas and routine maintenance like new tires and oil changes to get an accurate look at what you'll pay. Therefore, the total COST of owning a car is far more than just the price tag – and a cheaper car up front can end up costing more in the long-haul if frequent repairs are needed.

In IT, the same principle applies. You have to look at the TOTAL cost of a particular IT decision, not just the price tag, when comparing options. For example, the real cost of not upgrading a network may actually be higher than spending several thousand dollars on new equipment and upgrades when you accurately assess the total cost of maintenance, service fees and poor performance. These days, many business owners are looking at "going to the cloud" because they want to save money. And in many cases, it will do just that, but the cost savings will often come in the form of cheaper devices, less maintenance and low (or no) upgrade costs over a 3 year period – not in a month to month service fee. So before you say "No" or "Yes" to that next IT project, make sure you are taking into consideration the TOTAL cost of your decision, and make sure you are talking to a true pro who understands the difference between the price of something and the total cost.

"As a business owner , I know you don't have time to waste on technical and operational issues. That's where we shine! Call us and put an end to your IT problems forever."

Joe Stoll, President
Technical Action Group (TAG)
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Inside this issue:

Here we are in April… how have you done with your New Year's commitment to "get in shape"? If you have fallen off the wagon (as I have) I have some good news for you. And even if you have stuck with it, this little tip can make your efforts even easier.

MyFitnessPal.com provides a FREE online tool for tracking your diet, exercise activity and fitness goals. This site makes it easy to set your weight loss goals and overall nutrition plan. Each day you can log in to track food you eat for a breakdown of calories, fat, carbs and protein of each item. Any exercise activity can be logged and will subtract from your daily calorie bank.

There is also a social element to this site. Much like Facebook, you can ask to "friend" other members, post on a common wall and share encouraging words throughout your journey to good health.

MyFitnessPal.com is easy to use on your computer or via apps available for iPhones and other Smartphone devices. As the saying goes, "That which is measured improves." By simply tracking and measuring your food and exercise results on a daily basis, you become accountable for everything you eat and for every activity—or lack thereof. Seeing your progress in black and white will surely boost your results!

www.MyFitnessPal.com

Finally. A Fortune 500 Class Disaster Recovery & Business Continuity Solution With An SMB Price Tag

Last winter TAG undertook a thorough evaluation of its current backup and disaster recovery offerings with a view to sourcing the next generation enterprise class solution that would allow our clients to leverage the advanced flexibility and security offered by "the cloud" (hosted services). In addition to features of the solution, financial accessibility to the SMB sector was also part of our measuring stick when analysing potential solutions.

After evaluating numerous options and vendors, TAG is excited to announce that it now offers a backup and disaster recover / business continuity solution that…

… can have all your employees working from home within hours of any disaster with your office.

Here's how it works:

⇒ **Cloud Backups**
For additional security and redundancy, data is transmitted directly from a client's server(s) on a regular frequency to multiple secure, off-site data centers located in different geographical areas to protect against a catastrophic event in one location.

⇒ **Cloud Disaster Recovery**
In the event of a server failure, losing a server or entire office due to fire, theft or flood:

♦ A virtual version (mirror image) of the client's server can be enabled which will provide all employees access to all data and applications that were on the server prior to the event.

♦ All that's needed to access the data is a computer and internet connection.

What does a solution like this mean for your business?

⇒ **If your server suffers a catastrophic failure / crash:**
The virtual version of the data that was being backed up to the cloud can be restored within hours. Data is then accessed by all employees via their office desktops so everyone can get back work quickly while the server is being repaired or replaced.

⇒ **If your entire office is destroyed by fire, flood or theft:**
The virtual version of the business' data that was being backed up to the cloud can be restored within a few hours. Data is then accessed by all employees via their home PCs so the business doesn't come to a complete halt while management is dealing with insurance issues and reestablishing office space.

Data erasing disasters ranging from a major server crash, to an office flood or fire does not discriminate. These can and have happened to small businesses with 20 employees, and Fortune 500 companies. I am so excited that the small business sector (even for my own company) can now affordably access a backup and disaster recovery / business continuity solution that in the past, only Fortune 500 companies could afford. TAG's solution levels the playing field so that a small business with even 10 employees can get the same protection from catastrophic events in their business (server crashes, fire, theft, flood) as the Fortune 500 companies. No longer does an SMB have to be a sitting duck in the face of business crippling disasters due to unaffordable best in class solutions of the past.

Google Apps, Office 365 And Apple's iCloud: Which One Do You Choose?

With all the hype around cloud computing, you've certainly heard about the cloud-based office applications being offered by Microsoft, Google and Apple. All are promising cheap, easy and convenient computing…but are they REALLY all they're cracked up to be?

The most important thing you need to know is that these are relatively new technologies with new features being added on a monthly, even weekly, basis. And like any new technology, there are things that will not work as well as a very mature desktop application hosted on your machine. If you are a power user of Microsoft Office, you'll quickly get frustrated when you discover Office 365 can't perform some of the more sophisticated functions such as creating Macros in Excel or the advanced markup in Word.

Google Apps is a good platform for those businesses that need simple, inexpensive cloud-based collaboration software. However, if your company has been using Microsoft Office for years, you have a big investment to consider since all those documents will change when switched to Google Apps. Therefore, most companies will want to stick with Microsoft Office 365 rather than go through the pain of having all their documents slightly "off." Additionally, Google Apps doesn't always play well with certain line of business applications that were designed to integrate seamlessly with Microsoft Office.

Then we have Apple's iCloud. While this is a cloud-based service, it shouldn't be compared to Office 365 or Google Apps since it's geared towards organizing, storing and accessing media (music, videos and pictures). While they do have some applications for e-mail and calendaring, it's not designed to replace an office productivity suite.

But the war is far from over yet, and in the grand scheme of things Google may resolve all the above mentioned issues. Again, these are new technologies that are changing rapidly; what might be a good choice today could be a second rate choice next week. So which one should you choose? That depends on your own unique situation. No two companies are alike in the way they communicate, store information and work; therefore, it's important you work with an IT consultant who takes a custom approach to solving your organization's needs—not a one-size-fits-all company that only sells hammers and treats every client like a nail.

Dealing Crack? There's An App For That

Not too surprisingly, drug dealers and criminals are using the latest technology to run their "business." Recently an iPhone developer, A-Steroids, created an application known as "Drug Lords," a program that would enable both drug-dealers and users to find one another in real time and space using their smart phone's built-in GPS. This application allows dealers to post prices of the various drugs they are selling, the amounts available and even comes with a convenient calculator that determines the prices per gram. They can even raise or lower the prices by location and supply so the price per gram is cheaper in Paris than New York.

Using Google maps, buyers (a.k.a. customers) can quickly find the location of the nearest dealer and compare prices to make sure they're getting the best deal possible. And like any good "market" online, it contains a star rating system allowing buyers to post feedback on the quality of the products and customer service. More recently, A-Steroids added a point system that allows you to pull some strings, like to gain full police protection for some period, to postpone your loan shark pay off or even to get a full refund for your equipment upgrades so you can rearrange them. There is a free version of this app and a more robust paid version.

Fortunately, Apple rejected the application to be sold on iTunes stating that "anything that involved or implicated the trafficking of illegal commodities would not pass the bar or be accepted for sale."

The developer, A-Steroids, claims the application was meant only as a game and that it was not designed to assist real-world drug deals; but since the application worked exactly as advertised, it could have easily become the perfect app for drug dealers.

Not to be discouraged, A-Steroids rebranded the game as "Underworld: Sweet Deal." While all the basic features and objectives of "Drug Lords" remained intact, the products being sold were changed from cocaine, heroin and marijuana to donuts and lollipops. Naturally, this can still be used by drug dealers provided all the users agree that "lollipops" is code for heroin.

Attention Parents: The above story is a good reminder to make sure you are constantly monitoring your children's phones, Internet usage and other devices. You also need to keep yourself up-to-date on the latest scams and threats so you know what to look for to keep you and your family safe.

How To Get Your E-Mail Broadcasts Delivered, Opened And Responded To

Despite all the spam, e-mail is still the workhorse of online marketing. As a business owner, the lure of fast, cheap and easy communication to hundreds if not thousands of customers is too hard to resist. But e-mail is certainly not a "perfect" media. Response percentages are low to non-existent and you can quickly make a lot of people angry if you don't use it properly.

First and foremost, get your customers to give you their permission to e-mail them. Sounds obvious, but many salespeople are using LinkedIn or other sneaky ways to garner e-mails online for prospects they've never met or talked to. If you don't mind making a handful of people REALLY angry with you, this might be an okay strategy. However, if you want to build a good relationship with the people you are trying to sell your services to, then work hard to EARN their attention, not steal it.

So how do you do that? By offering some type of valuable information or entertaining content to them in exchange for their e-mail address. This could be a "how to" webinar, white paper, eBook or buyers guide. For example, a realtor could offer a monthly newsletter on home sales and home values for their neighborhood. A vet could offer a free report on "How To Solve The Top 3 Misbehaviours In Dogs," or "How To Choose The Perfect Cat." A restaurant could offer coupons and specials exclusively for their newsletter subscribers along with recipes and invitations to VIP client events. This type of information should be offered on what's called an "opt-in" page.

Once you have their e-mail address, don't abuse it by sending boring, off-target spam. That means you'll have to work hard to consistently come up with good, valuable and interesting content or subscribers will ignore, delete and opt out of your list fast. And finally, make sure you have clear opt-out instructions on every e-mail you send along with your full contact information; the law requires this and it's just good online etiquette.