



services

Think Differently: Stand Out in a Crowd with Smart Technology

By Wendy Gauntt, President

Let's face it: we all have competitors. Few business owners have a truly unique product or service. So how do you stand out in a crowded industry? What makes your company better than others? While technology is often considered an expense—a necessary cost of doing business—consider an alternative mindset: smart technology investments give you a distinct competitive advantage.

Automate for Speed, Accuracy, and Efficiency

No business owner has time to waste on administrative functions, missing paperwork, or repetitive data entry, and yet most of us endure these dreary tasks for lack of better options. Here's one: automate with software! A car provides faster, easier transport than a bike; likewise, the right software package beats paper-driven processes hands down.

There are terrific, affordable software packages available to handle all areas of your business, from sales and accounting to human resources and inventory management. Each of us runs our business in slightly different ways, but these packages are flexible and can be “configured” to meet differing needs. You'll often find industry-specific programs that offer a near-perfect fit for your business.

A category of features known as “workflow” provides additional automation. Consider it a computer assistant that routes electronic documents from one person to the next, offering polite reminders to people who are slow to respond. It's even smart enough to tell you the exact status of each e-document. No more lost forms or delayed approvals!

With new hosted options that require little hardware, it's easier and more affordable than ever to run sophisticated software for your business. Smoother processes cut costs and improve productivity—a clear benefit to any business. Start your automation enhancements by focusing on the business processes that take the most time, where you need greater accountability and faster results.

Offer Online Customer Self-Service

Online shopping and online banking have taken off in recent years due to the tremendous convenience and ease of use. Customers can make purchases and handle routine inquiries on their own, when they want, without being limited by time of day or staff availability. Want your business to take off? Find ways to leverage the same concepts in your own business. If you offer these services and your

competitors don't, you've just created an incredibly valuable competitive advantage.

Customer self-service encompasses a wide range of features. Beyond online sales and account management lie many more value-add services. Keep forms or contracts available for easy download. Create special, customized portals for each customer. Provide a knowledgebase with product documentation, installation instructions, or whatever else applies to your business. Use a team portal to manage projects and share information across the entire team. Set up email notifications so that customers automatically receive notification of updates.

There are many options for self-service, and the best way to choose what's right for your business is to ask your customers. Take a look at their most frequent requests, and ask what services they'd find most convenient and valuable.

Innovate with Custom Apps

Do you provide a unique or specialized service? Consider a custom application that helps you better deliver that service. Document templates can be automatically filled out with client information; custom programs can create sophisticated reports with



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detailed charts and graphs, or complex statistical analysis. Documents can be created directly in programs like Microsoft Word, allowing you the freedom to modify whatever you need. Why run the numbers yourself when your computer can do it faster, with greater accuracy?

Perhaps your service requires your clients to track specific information, like delivery times, performance measures, or other recurring events. A custom web-based application can facilitate data entry, ensuring that clients track the right information and providing you instant access to monitor what they do.

In many cases, your custom application can become a core part of your service, providing reports, calculations, and analysis that would be difficult to provide as quickly any other way. It may not replace your consulting expertise, but it can be a valuable supplement.

It's tough to give good examples of custom applications, because the whole point of customization is to create something unique. You can build nearly anything, given enough time, money, and creativity. So here's what you do: set aside uninterrupted time for brainstorming. Ask yourself, if you could add the perfect person to your staff, what would that person do? How would that person make your business better, faster, more profitable? Step two: can a computer be programmed to be that perfect person, and how valuable would that be? Finally, the reality check: how much does that

system cost, and does the value outweigh the costs? In a surprising number of cases, it does.

What's Your Competitive Advantage?

Are you thinking differently yet? Here's one last suggestion: before you invest in new technology, take a look at your core competencies, the differentiators that set you apart from your competitors. Now take a look at how technology can further strengthen those competencies. You are most likely to reap benefits from incremental, evolutionary change rather than an overwhelming revolutionary transformation. In other words, look for technology systems that strengthen and solidify your core competencies rather than systems that lead you in a completely new direction.

For example...are you focused on quality? Look into systems that automate and track your quality assurance programs, evaluate customer feedback systems, or build a custom app that provides greater consistency and accuracy in your service delivery.

Is it the personal touch that sets you apart? Invest in a robust customer relationship management (CRM) tool that helps you stay in touch and track your customers' needs.

Rapid response is your point of pride? Sophisticated smartphones backed by robust email, text messaging, GPS, and voice-over-

IP phone systems can route calls, track support requests, coordinate schedules, and more. Get there faster and more efficiently with systems designed around what you do.

No matter your business, no matter your specialty, there's a technology application that can help you do it better, faster, cheaper...it's up to you to think differently and find ways to stand out from the crowd.