

MacGyver It

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We recently had a situation arise where we on-boarded new banks to our software and they were frustrated right out of the gate that we were not servicing them in the way they expected. We clearly failed in meeting their expectations and the time for damage control was at hand. Of course, this prompted a meeting to discuss possible immediate actions. After swift actions were taken the banks were happier, and everyone was confident. The positive recovery, however; was ultimately short-lived. Why was that?

Most everyone has seen or heard of “MacGyver”, a TV series from the ‘80s about a non-violent problem solver with genius-level intellect. The term has flowed into social culture as a synonym for a “short term” fix. We celebrate those who can “MacGyver” a quick fix as heroes of the hour. There are many occasions in business when immediate action and relief is mandatory. In QA, we triage incoming software support requests. Much like the conveyors at a UPS transfer station, requests are routed by priority, complexity, and resource capacity. In classic left/right logistic fashion, requests turn left to receive a quick duct-tape and spray paint or turn right and go deeper into the development forge for programmers to hammer and weld, block, and sand. Each carry with it different levels of cost.

Duct Tape Debt

Wait a minute. Didn’t that sound like two distinct efforts? I thought we were discussing one crisis and one response? Answering a crisis with immediate relief is often a necessary tactical action in business. This buys a company time to properly analyze root cause, weigh options and ultimately develop a permanent solution, all without keeping the customer waiting. Wisely using the time it buys, to tune corporate strategy, avoids the buildup of what we call duct-tape debt.

I was fortunate enough to grow up in a family involved in both farming and industrial manufacturing. These are two businesses that hone MacGyver skillsets. I witnessed now nostalgic stories of a typical farmer’s primary tools of duct tape and baling wire. Unfortunately, I also experienced the difficulty in undoing these low cost, quick fixes to prepare for permanent solutions. Companies that always rely on a tactical approach become less competitive over time, as duct tape and baling wire solutions build up decreasing efficiency, quality, and customer value. Look around, how much duct tape do you see in your company? Are your customers tripping over your baling wire?

Heads or Tails

Every coin has two sides, and so does this story. Years ago, I acquired a company that had survived a decade by cutting corners. Tape and wire were everywhere. Convinced a more strategic approach was warranted we set about to change everything. We re-branded, formed strategic alliances and along the way, implemented a strategy for long term growth. Once our course was set, we were cultish at following our multi-year plan. Hypergrowth ensued and for nearly four years we were off and running, but when unexpected market changes occurred, there was no tape or wire to be found. We had not considered tactical responses as key components in our overall strategy. We

eventually sold out to one of our competitors due to our inability to respond quickly and cheaply.

Feather and Stone

Managing your tactical and strategic responses should never be left to chance. It should not be a coin toss, but rather a pre-defined evaluative process that balances the response.

Establishing such a process early is key. Firemen and EMTs constantly train so they intuitively know how to respond during a crisis. There is care the patient needs in the field and treatment best left to the hospital or follow up procedures. The same is true in business.

- Discuss possible scenarios
- Determine potential impact
- Realize actual cost of responses
- Consider short and long-term brand impact

It sounds like a lot to churn through but really, it's not that hard and becomes an automatic process. There is an artist named Michael Grab. When he was 24, he discovered he possessed a unique ability to balance objects. Starting with stones, he developed a process whereby he now performs all sorts of balancing feats, culminating with balancing a stone and a feather. See the impossible and do it anyway. Start from the top down and you will create an environment where decisions are appropriately tactical or strategic at all levels. This will keep your business humming along and your customers singing your praises, even if partially muffled from duct tape once in a while.

About the Author



Brad Evert

Dr. Brad R. Evert is the Director of Development at Automated Systems Inc. He is a business and technology evangelist with over 30 years of experience in the financial sector. Mr. Evert has served as a board member for 8 companies delivering products and services in financial, technical, real estate, travel and marketing call center markets.