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Seeing Clearly by Bob Manna & Matt Manna • 005B0C6E(R03)

"The foundation of effective product development is the ability to make the obvious apparent before it becomes visible to others. No metric or calculus is capable of such a task."

Alfred North Whitehead was an English mathematician noted for saying, "It requires a very unusual mind to undertake an analysis of the obvious." Whitehead made this comment in connection to a method of thinking called Analytic Philosophy. The thesis of this method of thinking is that the solution to a problem will become obvious once the basic and invariable meaning of the problem is uncovered.

We accept that you might find it strange to find an opening paragraph about analytic philosophy in a Manna Groups article. We believe you will soon see its relevance. We begin with a question from the remittance processing industry. What is the basic and invariable function of mail sorter bins?

A word of caution, while there is no doubt that the sorting of mail is a necessary duty of mail sorter bins, you should reconsider if you think the basic and invariable function of mail sorter bins is to sort mail.

Before we reveal the answer please allow us to offer a little background.

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For years, the authors of this article were members of an ownership team that operated a business developing and selling products exclusively to the transaction processing industry. The strategy behind all product development in that organization was to uncover the basic and invariable function of the products we brought to market. In short, the success of the organization was dependent upon the talent to find answers to questions just like the one posed above. What is the basic and invariable function of a mail sorter?

Our answer to that question led to the introduction of a product that changed the remittance processing industry. This product's merit was so obvious that it literally "sold itself," even to remittance centers that already had mail sorter bins.

Our answer: the basic and invariable function of a mail sorter is to be able to see the mail once it has been sorted. The idea that sorting mail is trivial compared to the significance of seeing mail after it has been sorted, literally made our next step clear.

We developed a transparent mail sorter constructed from the material used at ice hockey rinks. We called it the Clear Vue mail sorter system. Our tag line for promoting the product, "Never loose an envelope again with the Clear Vue mail sorter system!"



The Clear Vue Mail Sorter System

The success of the Clear Vue was instant and widespread. After a single installation, articles about, and pictures of, the product appeared in trade magazines. Consultants mentioned the product to their customers, and those customers spread the word to others. In short, the product went viral.

In one case insurance rates were lowered because footstools were no longer needed to see into the bin's top row. In other cases the product's glistening appearance became a "high tech" selling point for a process that was traditionally seen as otherwise. In every case, visibility lowered the chance of missing processing deadlines.

Now you see why we elected to begin this article with Whitehead's quote. It concisely reveals the foundation of successful product development. Basic and invariable function becomes apparent once (and only if) one undertakes to analyze the obvious.

Nowadays it seems trivially apparent that the basic and invariable function of a mail sorter is to see mail once it has been sorted. Of course the obvious always seems trivial after the fact. An important lesson is that until the obvious is analyzed, basic and invariable meaning will not be apparent, regardless of how trivial it becomes after the fact.

Another important lesson is the effect analyzing the obvious has on the competition. Imagine the feeling a CEO of a metal or wooden mail bin company must have had the day after the Clear Vue was released.

The story of the Clear Vue mail sorter (just like the Weed Eater story) stands in direct opposition to the type of analyses usually undertaken during the product development process. Metrics like estimated sales volume, target market(s) growth forecasts, market penetration, etc., are incapable of measuring whether existing products have made the obvious apparent.

Metrics have a part to play in the product development process, but it's a subordinate part. Until basic and invariable meaning has been made apparent, no other data matters. After basic and invariable meaning has been made apparent, few, if any, data are required.

We can tell you with absolute certainty that every remittance processing center that purchased a Clear Vue mail sorter system had a solution already in place. Or to put it in typical marketing speak, Clear Vue was successfully sold into a market that was 100% penetrated. It was a total repeat of the situation that existed the day before the Weed Eater went on sale.

Until the obvious is analyzed there is no calculus capable of measuring market potential. And there is no limit to the potential success of newly developed products that make the obvious apparent, particularly when they stand in contrast to existing products which have not.



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