It's always great fun until the makeup comes off.

Don MacVittie, 2008-26-08

So we were discussing relationships today, and I got to thinking of the parallels between relationships and vendor relations. Lots has been written on the topic, but I'm never shy about throwing my two bits out.

It's interesting to me that when a person sets their sites on you they are often putting on a mask - the first six or eight or twelve weeks of a romantic relationship are sometimes different than reality. People are on their best behavior at the start of a relationship, and you see the world through somewhat tinted glasses - most of us rose-colored, but no doubt some of you are analytical enough that I'll just say tinted. You trip along merrily thinking the world is a very cool place and wishing you could spend all of your free time with this person.

For some of us lucky ducklings, that feeling continues on unabated. I'm one of those. Thirteen years in and I still think Lori's the perfect woman for me. She's not the perfect woman for you though, she's married. ;-) For most relationships, once the make-up comes off and you have to deal with this person on a daily basis - without the shield of perception but in the harsh light of reality, you find faults. For most relationships those faults are condemning. That's why most of us date a lot more people than we marry.

The same is true of IT purchases. The problem is that it's far easier to lose a girlfriend/boyfriend that turns out to be difficult than it is to lose a technology that isn't all that you expected. And the same type of hype goes on during the sales cycle as goes on during the courting cycle. It is the sales representative's job to sell you products, not to point out the weaknesses in those products. And third-party accreditation has become a market unto itself, so while some test labs and analysts go out of their way to be truthful, for most taking their word is like asking your new girlfriend's best friend if she's a worthy person. Of course the answer is yes, they're invested in each other.

So the conversations are somewhat parallel...

You: I like stock car racing.

Her (in an evening gown): Me too!

Is functionally equivalent to

You: We have this business problem.

Sales rep: Our product is designed form the ground up to solve that problem!

Is it all sales reps? No, there are a fair number out there that are trying to help you solve your problems and believe that their products will do just that. Of course, they wouldn't be very good sales reps if they didn't believe that, so the question of applicability to your problems is still valid.

The reason that relationships end up with you finding faults is simple, this person wasn't hand-made for you, they grew up in a different environment with different inputs and experiences. That makes for great variety but also causes a lot of seemingly promising relationships to bottom out quickly.

Have no doubt, the same is true of your IT purchases. That product wasn't made for you, you're going to find things that you wish were better. After all, a database or an Application Delivery Controller are not going to solve your business problem, only give you the tools to solve it yourself. You have to work at it, much as you do at a real-life after-the-makeup relationship. So be aware of that, lots of things sound great in the sales pitch that don't pan out long-term, or that the work required to get there is too much.

The best you can do is some research to try and ferret out the weaknesses others have encountered - see what others who have dated your vendor think after the makeup came off. After all, there is no eHarmony for vendors.

The other thing you can do is ask some questions about how to work around unknown weaknesses. Ask about adaptability and programmatic interfaces - see if you can make your long-term relationship with this vendor into what you want with a bit of extra work. iRules, profiles, and iControl are part of our answer to the "we can't be your perfect life-partner out of the box" market reality of ADCs, which means you can make us into your perfect mate. Other vendors in every space should be doing the same - just ask them, because *should be* is not the same as *are*.

If you don't ask those questions, you may find yourself sitting in your datacenter late at night, trying to resolve your issues and listening to the blues.

And that's a great question for your next date too - "Are you adaptable to become whatever I want, whenever I want, even if it changes over time?"

/Just sayin'

Don.

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