



Systems Engineering and Shoe Polish

I am writing this column on a flight from Albuquerque to Salt Lake City on route to the 2004 Systems and Software Technology Conference. Before we took off, the pilot triggered the microphone and made basically the following announcement: “Good morning ... uh ... this is your captain. We’re on flight ... uh, 1577 ... from, uh, ...” The speech seemed to go on forever, punctuated at frequent intervals by long pauses and “uhs.” The person sitting in the seat next to me remarked, “I sure hope that he can fly the plane better than he can talk!”

I guess I am getting old and crotchety (no e-mail acknowledgements, please!). But I have noticed that when cockpit personnel key the mike to give us updates, sometimes it appears that they don’t understand that speaking skills convey an impression. Having a competent airline pilot unable to form a complete sentence in less than 90 seconds of mike time – well, it makes me worry. (Before I get banned from future airline flights, I do understand that the pilot was probably completing a checklist and making the announcement at the same time. And the checklist was much more important. Still, the rambling announcement did little to inspire passenger confidence).

You’ve all heard the expression, “Put your best foot forward.” Well, sometimes it helps to put a bit of shoe polish on the foot, too. Oftentimes, we forget that appearances really count. Many, many years ago, I had the opportunity to make a proposal for some consulting work. While I did the background material, one of my co-workers was responsible for the sales pitch itself. I had crunched the numbers and submitted accurate and up-to-date information for the sales pitch. Imagine my amazement to find out that the sales pitch was accomplished on hand-scribbled overheads. The company we were presenting our sales pitch to was also probably amazed to find the name of their company incorrectly capitalized! Needless to say, we

were not overwhelmed by their desire to give us business!

I think that as engineers we sometimes forget that format is at least as important as content. As a software engineer, I often need to present information and documents to customers



and users. I recently watched another engineer give a presentation using an out-of-focus projector that was partially blocked by his own laptop. After his 15-minute presentation was over, the next speaker moved and focused the projector – and many in the audience applauded. Nobody had really been listening to the presentation; they were concentrating on the annoyingly out-of-focus projector.

Documentation falls under the same umbrella. Tables of content, lists of figures, easy-to-use indexes – these all give you a good feeling about the content of the material. If it looks good then there is the perception that it also contains good information. While I am not suggesting for a moment that a glitzy color cover and fancy formatting will cover up poor quality material, I am suggesting that misspellings and sloppy formatting *will* cover up good quality material. Recently, I presented a report to a customer, and accompanying the report was a backup CD with data. I had labeled the CD with a felt-tip marker. My co-worker saw what I was doing, and without saying a word, went and printed a CD label with some simple artwork. It made a world of difference! The message was that I had taken care of the details – and it made the cus-

tomers have more confidence in everything else!

And, last but not least – recognize that not every person has been given the ability to speak in front of an audience. I have worked on team presentations where the senior team member gave the briefing. Unfortunately, being the senior member didn’t translate into speaking ability. A mumbling, stumbling monotonic report did little to impress the listeners; the important message our team was trying to convey was quickly lost due to lack of interest.

Impressions are quick to form, and hard to forget. Do not let good research and good work go ignored because of a lack of follow-through. No matter how you present your work to others, you want the presentation to convey this message, “This is high-quality work!”

So, when you go to put your best foot forward, consider that a good coat of shoe polish will help make a good impression.

— David A. Cook

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