



Softbucks

As the software industry continues to mature we often look for examples or analogies from industries that have experienced similar evolution. While studying the coffee industry as a commodity investment, I found some interesting similarities between the coffee and software industries.

Old Brew, New Brew, or Strange Brew

The coffee industry started by shipping ground coffee beans in cans to home and restaurant percolators. Customers chose between Juan Valdez and Maxwell House's "good to the last drop" coffees. It was all about volume.

Coffee epicureans emerged out of the search for the perfect cup of joe. Not trusting peasant production, epicureans bought beans, roasters, grinders, and high-end percolators. This new market was about margins – making a lot of money on a smaller group of affluent buyers.

Out of the northwest came the pretentious coffee crowd. This new market had little to do with coffee and more to do with where and with whom you drank your coffee. Suppliers integrated bean, brew, backdrop, and boutique to create ambiance. It was about selling an experience.

Instead of forcing a single market delivery system, coffee suppliers grew markets around their customer's lifestyles and desires, strengthening the industry as a whole. This made room for more industry participants and serviced percolators, epicureans, and the pretentious alike.

The software industry materialized from the need to tame monolithic computing machines. Solutions, like our patrons, were simple and similar. The market was seen with an eye single to software – one problem, one method, one process, one technique, all solved by the Holy Grail of software. During the industry's myopic search, its customers have matured with a plethora of software uses and desires.

We can learn from the coffee industry's divide-and-conquer strategy. Divide and conquer, found in algorithms like Heapify, Merge Sort, Quicksort, and Fast Fourier Transforms, yields elegant, simple, and often efficient solutions. It allows software suppliers, like coffee suppliers, to compliment customer lifestyles and desires, and strengthen the market.

This is not requirements management – determining what a customer wants – but

macro-requirements management: determining what a market wants and will bear. It requires focus on specific domains and tailoring processes, skills, and techniques to serve each market. It's a best-of-breeds versus best-of-show approach.

Available vs. Fresh

How do restaurants balance the desire for quick and fresh coffee? Do they brew a lot of coffee that gets stale or make customers wait for each fresh pot? The solution was to place a one-third-full line on each pot. When the coffee reaches the line, a new pot would be started and available when the current pot ran out. A simple process change resolved the competing requirements of quick and fresh.



Software customers also want their applications quick and fresh (latest features). The software industry offers speed or quality but seldom both. Let's take a cue from coffee servers and focus on effective, memorable, and easy-to-implement processes rather than defining processes ad infinitum. The complexity of serving coffee does not compare to software development but in reality software is developed using process habits versus a process cookbook.

Good Beans

With coffee, taste begins with the bean. Delivery processes make little difference if you have bad beans. To deliver quality coffee, you have to start with quality beans.

Quality software begins with good people. A good process implemented by inept managers, engineers, and personnel will produce poor software every time. A poor process, while limited in capability, can be overcome by a good team. In fact, in the long

run a good team leads to the development of good processes. More time, resources, and effort should be spent on hiring, retaining, and motivating first-class software teams.

Don't Forget the Caffeine

Coffee has taken many forms like espresso, latte, mocha, cappuccino, and frappuccino. Customer wants and needs have led to variations on a basic way to deliver the energizing kick of caffeine. Extracting and prioritizing customer wants and needs helps to develop a good coffee menu.

Extracting and prioritizing software requirements lead to customer satisfaction. While trivialized, customer requirements extraction can be extremely difficult. Prioritizing requirements can be hard and tying them together even harder. Like coffee's basic premise of delivering the energizing kick of caffeine, software's basic premise is effective automation and one should not stray from that principle. Always ask yourself how are you making your customer's life easier.

Would You Like Coffee With Your Condiments?

Watching modern day coffee preparation is like watching Dustin Hoffman in the movie "Rain Man" preparing for the Wheel of Fortune. It's all about ritual, timing, and the condiments. Adding cream, sugar, steam, ice, whipped cream, and flavorings it's often hard to find the coffee for the condiment. What happened to "give it to me black?"

It's time to face the fact that software, an enabling technology, is more a condiment than main course. It is useless in and of itself but makes that which it enables better. Software should develop its own variation of BASF's marketing slogan: "We don't make a lot of the products you buy. We make a lot of the products you buy better®." In our industry, we don't make the computer; we make the computer interactive. We don't make the network; we make the network communicate. We don't make the bombs; we make the bombs smart. We don't make the espresso; we make the espresso machine accurate.

Let's strive to make software good to the last bit.

– Gary Petersen
Shim Enterprise, Inc.

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