



Raiders of Best Value - Search for the Holy Acquisition Grail

While attending college in the northern wilderness of Utah at Utah State University, one reprieve from the pursuit of knowledge that the local constable considered legal was to go to the movies. Although the crowds flocked to blockbuster movies like *Star Wars* and *Jaws*, the movie experience I cherish the most comes from a guy wearing a dusty fedora.

I was pouring over electromagnetism when a friend asked if I wanted to go to a movie about pirates searching for Noah's lost dinghy. Interesting concept, I thought. "Who is in the movie?"

"I think Han Solo," he replied.

"Anybody else I would know?" I asked.

"No, but the *Jaws* guy and the *Star Wars* guy got together and created it," he said.

"Will I have to wait in line?"

"I doubt it," he said. "There hasn't been much hype for the movie, and it was released yesterday."

We arrived at the theatre two minutes before show time, walked right in, and confiscated prime seats. The opening scene absolutely captivated my attention. With sweat beading on his brow, Indiana Jones replaced a golden idol with a bag of sand of equal weight and then, all hell broke loose. There was a giant rolling boulder, breakaway floor, spring loaded spikes, headhunters, darts, arrows, and ... well you know the story. In five minutes I felt like I had watched an entire movie.

That started my fascination with the persistent man who often ended up short of his intention. While most reminiscent of Indiana Jones as a hero, if you think about it, he often fell short of his goal. The ark ended up in a massive government warehouse next to the Ada mandate, only one Sankara stone out of four was recovered, and the Holy Grail was lost in an earthquake – didn't he learn anything from Monty Python? Time after time, Jones has a hard time retaining his treasures.

Indiana's honorable futility reminds me of government acquisition, software or otherwise, and the search for the best way to acquire goods and services. While the acquisition process rarely entails mortal peril, it is as unpredictable as a

ride through the Temple of Doom and in the end, whether buyer or seller, you feel like the high priest of the temple has reached in and ripped out your heart. The government's intentions and theories are admirable but their adventures, like Indy's, often run astray.

It amazes me that the same government that owes its prosperity, growth, and wealth to Adam Smith's invisible hand of the market bites the very hand that feeds it. When the government becomes the consumer, it does everything but trust the market, resembling Python's "so-called Arthur-king," bumbling across the landscape looking for the Holy Grail of acquisition best value.

What is best value, and where did it come from? I propose that the concept of best value rose out of the government's lack of trust in the market and its great mediator – money – also known by its acquisition name, *price*. After experiencing \$5,000 hammers and the "lowball bid," (the wrecking ball of the acquisition process that contractors use to get their foot in the door), they must have concluded that price alone would not suffice. Smith must have been wrong and the government, with its vast knowledge and resources, would correct the volatility of the market.

Ignoring their role in the debacle, the government turned to acquisition alchemists who were confident they could add elements to price that would produce best-value gold. The most popular ingredients were technical approach, management approach, and a pinch of past performance. Has it worked? Not in my experience. Instead they created a gaming system that rivals Las Vegas.

Take technical approach. In order to evaluate technical approach, you have to articulate what you want and understand the differences and nuances in the technologies that could meet that need. In reality, most Request for Proposals (RFP) and solicitations are harder to decipher than teenage chat room dialogue. They are seldom evaluated by anyone who could recognize a valid technical approach from a Tom Clancy novel. This leads to contractors who forego creativity for mimicking. The worst-kept secret in developing proposals is that contractors are taking techni-

cal requirements from the RFP and feeding them back to evaluators, like a cheap pet-store parrot asking for a cracker.

Next comes management approach. In this case, leave the parrot at home and pick up a standard management book or better yet, hire a PMI-certified consultant. Hit all the key words and throw in a unique buzzword that demonstrates you are on the cutting edge of management. Business experts can't agree on the best management approach, but government evaluators can?

Finally, past performance references, like job references, are a dying breed: Who's not going to give you anything but references that will provide a shining review of your company?

The next step is to statistically aggregate, interpret, and manipulate the evaluation data and come up with a remedy. Enter weighting, algorithms, and a whole lot of hand-waving. So now we are spinning evaluation data more than Michael Jackson hits in the '80s. If we keep it up, we will have more evaluation criteria and statistical algorithms than advertisement patches on a NASCAR driver's jumpsuit.

It reminds me of Herbert's father in Monty Python's *Holy Grail*. He built a castle in the swamp and it sank. He built a second castle in the swamp, and it sank too. He built a third and it burned down, fell over, and then sank into the swamp, and he can't understand why Herbert doesn't want to inherit a fourth castle. When will we stop chasing best value through the swamp and return to our roots – price?

As Smith points out, money or price is not just the simplistic instrument of commerce, but in a free market it is "the measure of value." Does it give you best value? No. It doesn't protect those who don't do their homework. Too many variables are involved to assure best value, but in an unconstrained market, a wise consumer can get good value.

Given experience with both, I'll take the market's good value over the government's best value.

— Gary Petersen
Shim Enterprise, Inc.