



The Race for the Mercedes

By Shawn McKenzie, MPA

“Consumerism sets each person against them self in an endless quest for the attainment of material things or the imaginary world conjured up and made possible by things yet to be purchased.”

— Unknown

Physicians want to practice and patients want to seek treatment in an organization dedicated to staying on the forefront of medical technology. Therefore, the pressure to purchase the latest and greatest gizmo is extremely intense.

The healthcare industry is under constant pressure by those we serve to keep up with the latest and greatest equipment available in the market. We are subject to the expectations of our partnering physicians and the patients we serve. The public perception of a healthcare organization is often derived on the organization’s ability to claim the title of “cutting edge.” Because this sentiment exists, the healthcare environment is ripe to fall into the trap of buying from emotion and extremely susceptible to the concept of upselling from the vendor.

The push to buy is everywhere. In magazines; on television, radio, and the Internet; and at dinner parties, we are enticed to feed the consumer virus implanted in us during the early phases of life. The practice of cyclic consumerism is as natural to many of us as closing the refrigerator door. It is habit and second nature; you rarely think about it, but it happens nonetheless. Occasionally, we consider a purchase much in the way we ponder

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whether or not the light goes off when you shut the door, a mere fleeting moment of whimsical analysis ending with a shrug or grunt (does this apply to men only?).

As a society, we are constantly reminded to purchase. Marketing and the science of consumerism study the psychology behind purchase decision-making. Purchase decisions begin with a real or perceived need. The process takes us through the evaluation of product and eventually ends in the purchase and re-evaluation of our purchasing decision.

I wonder how much many of us really understand the promised advantages in the technology purchase decisions we are making. We rely heavily on our vendors to articulate the clinical advantages the gizmos bring to enhance patient care, but we really have little capability of confirming the claim.

My career provides me the opportunity of looking around quite a lot. I visit many healthcare organizations from very small community based facilities to large-scale healthcare delivery systems, all with a variety of complexity and services. The one thing that rings true to all of them (with very little exception) is the planned purchase of the latest and greatest equipment or systems available in the market. The 64-slice computed tomography (CT) scanner, the 3.0 Tesla magnetic resonance imaging (3T MRI) scanner, the integrated radiology information system/picture archiving and communication system (RIS/PACS)—complete with an attached voice activated cappuccino maker, foot massager, and a set of steak knives. All of this technology is available at a “buy today price” (watch out for the service costs).

Do you think of a purchase in terms of a hierarchy of benefits? A

64-slice CT scanner produces an incredible amount of data. This data is usually accompanied by a workstation loaded with advanced application software capable of processing the data in multiple formats, pretty colors, and a really cool 3D image. What percentage of cases will require the advanced applications for diagnosis? How much of the purchase decision was influenced by "a" radiologist? How much work is actually completed on the workstation? If I had to calculate my return on investment (ROI) on the number of billable cases done on the workstation, how would it look? I may be missing the boat. Is it the case that no one will take us seriously if we don't have the ability to do volume rendering, fly through and fusion imaging?

We buy because that is what we are expected, or told to do, in the health-care industry. "Don't fall behind," we are warned. I wonder how often we look at the purchase as a truly good business decision. Are we buying from a practical need or do we let emotion and "GotToHaveItitis" drain the capital coffers. I know I am sure to get my share of push back from my constituents for making the assumption that a great deal of purchases are made through emotion and not a healthy business case and even better ROI. But, I would challenge my peers and task them with the ability to articulate the advantage that some of the latest technology brings to the table.

All Buying Decisions Are Emotional

People have both logical and emotional buying motives. Recent consumer surveys show that, in most cases, 20% of the decision to make a purchase is logical, and 80% is emotional. Logic is reason supported by facts. Emotions are feelings that cause us to act and react and can be a large influence in our buying habits. For more information, see www.grokdotcom.com/buyingdecisions.htm.

It is not enough to ask "if" the system can perform specific tasks. In almost all cases the answer is "yes." The question should be "how" the system will perform the tasks you feel are critical to a successful purchase.

I can point to many instances in my own life and professional career where the push to purchase up to the latest model or next generation of software release was greatly influenced by the buzz or banter of those around me. I am ashamed to say that some purchases were made without a great deal of due diligence on my part. I purchased prior to really understanding the differences between what I currently had and how the new product would add value to my particular needs.

Ask the Right Questions

Many of us boast the industry knowledge and expertise of engaging in strong discussions around the technologies as they pertain to modality acquisition devices. How many feel comfortable in the evaluation process required when purchasing a RIS or PACS? Without understanding the technology and establishing some clearly articulated functional guidelines, you rely on the vendor to determine whether the system is a fit for your needs. It is not enough to ask "if" the system can perform specific tasks. In almost all cases the answer is "yes." The question should be "how" the system will perform the tasks you feel are critical to a successful purchase. Without knowing what and how you wish the system to perform, you may be spending a great deal of cash on "nice to haves" that yield very little result without designing work around solutions.

The advances in our industry continue at mach speed. It is impossible to be an expert in all areas.

Even the day of the full line sales representatives from the vendor is near gone. Specialties and subspecialties are required to understand the complexity of the technology in the imaging sciences today.

Knowledge is power. We place our business firmly in the hands of our vendors and trust that a consultative sales philosophy is guiding their representatives. Are we being advised to purchase that which best fits our needs...or that which best fits theirs?

The Home Shopping Network is coming on the TV...gotta go. ♣

Shawn McKenzie is president and CEO of McKenzie Stephenson, Inc., a PACS and medical informatics consulting company. He has more than 25 years of operational experience in diagnostic imaging and is a certified radiology administrator. McKenzie holds a master's degree in public administration (health administration) from California State University Hayward and a bachelor's of arts degree in political science from the University of California Davis. He is a member of AHRA and may be contacted at smckenzie@mckenziestephenson.com.

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