

DATE	24 th August 2009
UNIQUE USERS	489,000



Keep it Simple, Stupid

by Alan Thorpe, Aug 24 2009, 02:04 PM

As August has progressed, so my wife's enthusiasm for the school holidays has diminished quicker than the national finances and our confidence in weather forecasting. Come the weekends, it's my turn to entertain the kids.

After visiting the pub to carry out a quick bit of 'research' I was pointed in the direction of a local farm that has children's entertainment. Next day, putting aside suspicions about the advice (said farm was apparently in the village of Bucklebury, famous for Prince William having landed an army helicopter in his girlfriend's garden) off we went: and the place was great.

The farm had an almost total lack of sophistication, staying true to its agricultural roots and focusing on the result – happy families. Big slides installed in farm buildings; food to feed a few donkeys and goats; simple refreshments (without a burger in sight); a peaceful location; a few go-karts on a rough track surrounded by casually placed tyres; a large playground castle to climb. What made it great was the staff. Even though the farmer must have driven a tractor- and trailer-load of parents and children through his deer park countless times, he remained patient, enthusiastic and entertaining (personally I enjoyed the 'has anyone got any questions' moment that arrived as the farmer finished an in-depth speech on the upcoming rut, a small girl sticking her hand up and asking 'how does your tractor go?'). The attraction is clearly a big success and it's based upon an honest brand of simple solutions to entertain young families combined with good people; and there is not a fancy hydraulic ride in sight.

I expect that, like me, you've sat (or yawned) through many data services presentations given by vendors, proud of the sophistication of their software and insights. I'm willing to bet that we've all lost count of the amount of times our interest has been lost in a plethora of PowerPoint software functionality and detailed stats when we only held the meeting to clarify answers to simple questions like 'can I create a trigger campaign', 'how easy is it to add a data set' or 'can I identify my best customers'. The dreaded combination of too much knowledge combined with in-depth software plus PowerPoint has doubtless killed many a valid business initiative.

Recently, I was lucky enough to be a judge for some industry awards. And guess what the common characteristics of the winning entries are? If you're thinking sophisticated techniques and complex software, then you're as far off of the mark as a British sprinter trying to catch Usain Bolt. The reality is that the winning entries share a lot in common with the farm entertainment. They demonstrate understandable and often uncomplicated usage of data to solve problems. They are projects that have made real differences to people: the services they receive from companies, charities and the public sector, the ways in which they receive them. Just like the farm, the winners are companies that have concentrated on what matters, keeping the technical processes simple. They have applied brains over software. Some of the winning entries are a joy simply because they are so simple, obvious even.

Ten years ago, I remember meeting the then IT director of Norwich Union for him to sign off a major database contract and the visit to the farm brought his words back to me. "Alan," he said, "I'll sign off this contract, but what I really want to know is how do I drive value from a customer data asset?" His simple question has driven my approach to data ever since.

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