

Stop Whining and Get a Grip

by Pamela McIntyre

What happened to the M language is not new. In fact, the symptoms are classic: declining sales, a dwindling customer base, lack of interest, and a whole bunch of you out there whining about it. So what did you expect? Customers do not climb over one another chasing after what they perceive as a dying language. And you have only yourselves to blame.

Software is no different from any other product on the market. Most of you have lost sight of what's really important, the customer! Yet, in meeting after meeting and in paper after paper, I see and hear the same old things: "But M is easier to program in." "M has a standard." And so on.

Now, let's think about this a moment. To whom are these things really important? Programmers? Yes. Systems analysis and design people? Probably. But what about the vice president of finance or the hospital administrator who ultimately signs the check? What about the personnel who use the system day after day? Do you really think they care that M has a standard? I think not. It appears that M people spend a lot of time trying to convince themselves of something they already believe in. If you really want to make M mainstream, stop preaching to the choir and start listening to the customer.

That is, of course, provided you know who your customers are. I am not convinced you do. When was the last time anyone did a market survey? We all know that M has had a hold on the medical community for years (but even that is slipping). In the process of perusing the M news group on the Internet, there were several employment notices, one of which was for a credit union developing financial applications. Does anyone know where M stands in the financial industry?

What M needs is a solid dose of marketing. And by that I do not mean advertising per se. They are not the same thing. True marketing involves finding out exactly who your customers are and what they need that you can give them. Start by defining what the customer needs. (If there is no need, there is no market.) Then determine if your product can meet that need. Be careful here. I can see it coming. "But M is easier to program in." "M has a standard." Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! The "techweenies" of the world are rarely responsible for the overall bottom line of an organization. Those who are responsible have more important things to think about.

What you need to do, is to get to those decisionmakers and show them how M can meet their needs. What you do not tell them is that it will only take 10,000 lines of M code versus 50,000 lines of C code to produce the same application. That may be important to the applications manager but is important to no one else. What you do need to tell them is that they will be able to cut their staff by 25% because the system will make the existing staff that much more productive.

Am I getting through to anyone? Whether or not you want to believe it, the M community consists of far more than the small group of programmers who write the code. It also includes the people and organizations who use the applications and in turn their customers, whether they are patients or credit union members. When you think about it, the extended M community is quite large. We need to recognize and to serve all of its members, not just a privileged few. Keep that in mind, and M will be mainstream before you know it. **M**

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