

Is it a Mountain or a Mole Hill?

Quite often when a laboratory is approached with a seemingly straight-forward problem, rather than propose a simple test to provide some relevant information, they outline a research program instead.

I don't know if it's overzealous salesmanship or simply that they don't know how to answer the customer's question (remember, the real customer may be internal rather than external to the laboratory's organization). Too many times programs are based on the type of equipment available in the lab, or the specific expertise of the individual to whom the question has been posed. They immediately jump into familiar tests, sometimes with seemingly no regard as to the potential value the data will provide to the customer.

Whether you suspect that you might know the answer or not, testing programs should be approached simplistically. Like any other technical problem, the program should be approached in a scientific manner --- 1) form an hypothesis, 2) test the hypothesis, 3) form a decision about the hypothesis, and 4) either modify the hypothesis and repeat steps 1 through 3, or form a conclusion.

Problems should be addressed with an initial "quick-and-dirty" approach. Make a quick, yet thoughtful, assumption as to the problem. Perform one or two simple, inexpensive tests that could confirm or eliminate the hypothesis. Usually simple inexpensive tests don't provide all the information you need to answer the customer's question, but they can provide direction which can eliminate unnecessary, more expensive testing.

If the test doesn't confirm your hunch, now is a good time to rethink the problem, possibly get some fresh ideas from colleagues, and try another approach. If you hit a wall, honestly confront your customer --- don't continue testing in the hope that some answer will suddenly pop up.

If, however, the preliminary data supports the initial hypothesis, additional, more elegant testing may be substantiated --- but check with the customer. All too often the customer doesn't want the sophisticated answer; he too may only be looking for direction, and that "down-and-dirty" approach may be all that he needs.

Another advantage for keeping the customer in the loop is that new information is gained each time you talk. Sometimes it's because you may have misinterpreted some

information given, or more often than not, significant information is not revealed by the customer because he assumes it may not be relevant. Nevertheless, constant communication will help you get the information you need to solve the problem, as well as help you to better understand what level of sophistication your customer needs to satisfy his problem.

Remember, the purpose of a test program is to satisfy the needs of your customer, not to resolve all the scientific issues that may arise.

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