

## Custom-Built Software for Dummies

We can go to a store and buy software package on a CD, stick it into our computer and off it goes. We're using them every day; Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Photoshop, email programs, even the remote for our VCR has software code in back of it. But despite the proliferation of boxed software available in stores there is still a demand for programs unique to a particular business. This is custom-built software.

We all know what software is these days, it's those gobbledygook lines of code that sit behind what we work and play with on the computer. They 'instruct' our computer to do stuff. Without it we're looking at a blank screen. We thankfully don't need to know how it is written in order to use it. Here's a bit to prove my point.

```
strSQL = "SELECT Customer.* FROM Customer WHERE (((Customer.CustomerID)=" & cboCustomer & "));"
```

You've got to hope your software developer knows what they are doing! It's a developer who will be constructing your custom-built software.

### So when do we need custom-built software?

It's what we order if we can't find the right package for our purposes. For instance an office administrator might become frustrated by the sheer complexity of his or her processes as the business expands. The off-the-shelf software package is no longer able to do just what they want. They know that if it only had a few tweaks done to it here and there their job would be a lot easier, take much less time and ultimately save dollars. This is where the custom software provider steps in.

### Partnering with a software provider

Few businesses today run without using software in one form or another. The larger or more unique your business the more you will need software systems support. There comes a time when you may ask yourself; "Do I need software specifically designed for my needs?"

Having been used to off-the-shelf software that is virtually bug free it may come as a surprise to find building custom software designed for your particular purposes is a lengthy process. Making something work well takes time.

### Putting it into perspective,

The software packages we all know and love (MS Word for instance) were written over many years by hundreds of people and tested by more hundreds of people at great cost. Then it was sold to millions of users worldwide making the final cost to the user minimal. This scenario does not exist for the purchaser of custom software. You may be the only customer. If you commissioned it, it belongs only to you. It can give you the competitive edge but it needs careful consideration.

### It is an excellent opportunity

It can take a business to the next level of efficiency. Buying some custom software is an interesting process, daunting even. Because in order to get just what you need to improve your business you have to tell someone else the intricacies of how you run your business. You might not even know yourself how you run your business – you just do it! Many a client has put off the need to get some custom software because they were strapped for time, and continue to

underestimate the need to spend time to save time. It's a process well worth doing even if it's just to tidy up your business systems.

### **Will custom-built software save me money?**

Custom software can cost anything from a few hundred dollars to \$20,000 and up. It all depends on what you want it to accomplish. It's weighing up the costs of not having it against the costs of building it. Knowing ahead of time what the costs will be is made possible by a good planning process.

### **Start with a plan**

The designing of the specifications that you want this software to perform can sometimes take longer than actually building the software. Formulating these requirements is like an architect drawing up plans. Without it, beginning the building process is very risky. And what's more any changes to these plans once building has begun can be costly. So the more time and effort put into specifying these requirements the better. You and your software provider do this together.

### **Checkpoints**

A good plan will have checkpoints built into it. As building software can take longer than you want it to (who doesn't still believe in magic when it comes to software?) being able to review progress at periodic intervals enables both client and provider to make any adjustments to the specifications. Since what you are building in collaboration with your software provider has never been built before, new problems and new solutions may pop up during the process. In the real world the creative process – and building software is a creative process – can kick up issues unforeseen at the outset. It's a clever client who can understand this.

### **Who builds it and can you trust them?**

Questions to ask when looking for a good custom-software provider:

- How well do they write plans in collaboration with you?
- How well do they test the software before they hand it over to you?
- How well do they support you through the implementation and training process?
- Are they able to stay calm as you fret over the amount of time it is taking?
- Do they help you become more informed about the nature of custom software so you can better understand the processes?
- Do they keep in touch during the entire process?

### **Typical custom software solutions**

Increasing the usability and customer interface possibilities of Web sites, data management, extracting practical information out of stored data, enhancing administrative processes and ... the list is endless. As computers and their related systems are used daily by the paid workforce in one way or another there will always be the need for a software building team, working quietly in the back room somewhere making your life easier and your business more profitable.

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