

# enterprising solutions

WITH ROBERT GROSSMAN

## 'Trust Me' – A Guide to Honest Salespeople

I recently had occasion to speak at the Upper Midwest Intelligence Gathering in Hinckley, Minn. This is a group of security and surveillance professionals from casinos in that part of the country and represents a good cross-section of end users of medium to large enterprise video surveillance systems. My topic was on "Upgrading and Expanding Your CCTV System — What the Salesperson Won't Tell You."

That last part of the title raised the interest of the audience — and the ire of some of the exhibitors.

"I'm looking forward to hearing this," said one sales consultant who worked for an integrator exhibiting at the show. "I'll be here to keep you honest." Another sales engineer told me he resented the implication there might be a hidden side to upgrading your system. A third person (his business card said "technical advisor") just

glowered, his body language challenging me with contempt and disbelief.

The fact is that with larger system purchases, the end user is at odds with the salesperson. While you may have specific requirements, the salesperson is not necessarily there to solve your problems or meet those specific needs. They are there to sell you the product, earn a commission and feed their family.

If the offered product happens to perfectly suit your application, that's wonderful. However, if the product doesn't have the functionality you are looking for, some salespeople will try to convince you that you don't need that feature, that you need other features as well, or even misrepresent the product to convince you to buy it. They choose to worry about the consequences later, if at all.

This is clearly not the case with all salespeople but the higher the stakes,



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the more likely at least one of the companies trying to earn your business will exhibit this behavior.

It can be difficult to recognize unless you're more technically astute than the salesperson or know the warning signs. Reading this magazine regularly will help you with the former, and this column will help with the latter.

### Spot the Right Salesperson

It is important to note that most manufacturers do not encourage dishonesty, intentional or otherwise. In fact, the opposite is often true.

Product specification sheets are usually very conservative to ensure that a product is guaranteed to meet its specification. While they're not above beating up on sales management to "bring in the numbers," manufacturers do not want customers that will ultimately be unhappy with their product.

If a product is not a good fit, it will require a lot of time and money to make things right, or a hit to the manufacturers' reputation if the customer complains to others or demands it be replaced with a competitor's product.

So how can you spot the salesperson that is looking out for your interest?

First, understand their motivation. They are there to sell you a product or solution. Even if their title says "consultant," "engineer" or "advisor," they're likely none of the above.

A consultant or advisor should be independent and not earn a commission on their advice, while an engineer

## Don't Do As They Say, Do As You Should Do

WHEN THEY SAY ...	THEY REALLY MEAN ...	AND YOU SHOULD ...
Trust me on this ...	I'm making this up ...	Disregard the next sentence.
That feature will be in the next release.	That's a really good feature. I wish we had it. Maybe we will someday.	Decide if you can live without that feature.
It does that too, but it's not in the manual.	We've found a way to do that but it's really a work-around.	Don't depend on that feature working consistently, if at all.
We'll throw that in if you'd like (longer warranty, premium version, etc.)	We'll do whatever it takes to get the sale.	Get it in writing. This could be a good deal if you can hold them to it later.
I've looked at every model on the market, and ours is by far the best.	When the other guy starts paying me, his will be the best.	Disregard that statement. Three other competitors all told you the same thing.

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is a degreed position that few salespeople hold.

Once you understand their intentions, look out for the following:

**Do they understand your application?** To determine what product meets your specific needs, a salesperson first needs to understand your requirements. Do they ask you how the system will be used?

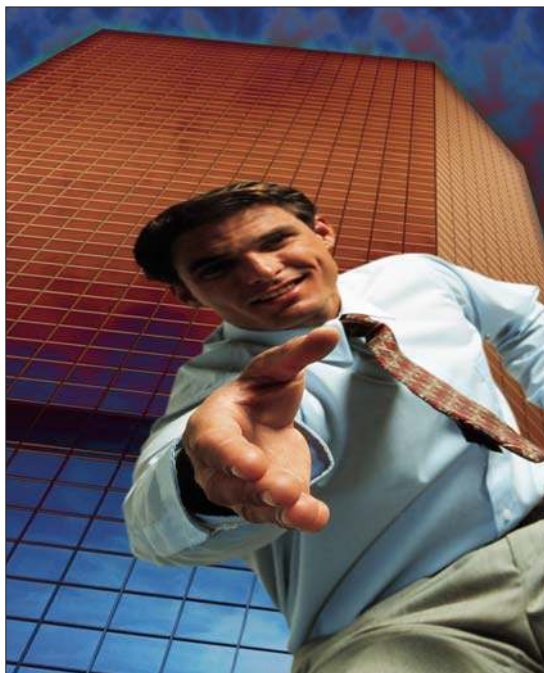
They should be concerned with the skill level of the people who will interact with your system. They should understand that gee-whiz features that add more complexity than your users can handle would not benefit you. Questions about expansion plans, as well as products and features that you have liked in the past, are all good signs.

**Do they focus on their competition?** If a salesperson keeps emphasizing features that they have that their competition lacks, beware.

Very often, they're just plain wrong. Their comparison may be based on a superficial demo they saw at a trade show, secondhand information or last year's model. Besides, you should be looking at the features their product has that meet your needs, not the features their competition lacks.

There is rarely a "perfect" system and you'll have to make some compromises, but you should be the one deciding what is important to you, not them.

**Everything should be in writing.** Any feature or specification that you are told about should be in writing in a published manual, data sheet or specification. Everyone has heard or experienced horror stories about fea-



**Can't trust the salesperson's smiling face? There are ways to see through what a salesperson says, and what they mean.**

tures that were promised but never delivered. If you don't get proof of the promise, you're unlikely to win this kind of battle.

**Buy the current version.** You're not interested in what will be available in a future version of the product. Preliminary data sheets are just that — early versions of what the manufacturer hopes to include at some point in the future.

If a feature is there but doesn't work right, you have a reasonable chance that it will be fixed. If you're relying on "it will be in the next release," you're sure to be disappointed. Make sure you can live with the product "as is," since that's all you can count on.

**What do they do when they're stumped?** If you've done your home-

work, you're likely to ask a question that the salesperson can't answer. If that doesn't happen and you perceive that the salesperson is avoiding the answer, beware.

Good salespeople know when to call for help. Hearing that they'll have to get back to you on a question is an excellent sign (if they do in fact get back to you). That means they're not making up answers when they're not sure.

**Do they keep their promises?** Little things mean a lot. Are they respectful of your time? Do they follow up when they say they will? Do they come through with demo equipment, literature or other requested information?

You want to feel that you're important to them and that the relationship will continue after the sale. If they're rushed to make a sale or fail to deliver as promised, they're not likely to be around when you need them and they've already been paid their commission.

## Go With Your Gut

If you find a salesperson who listens, focuses on their products and your particular needs, gives you a well-documented solution that is currently shipping, understands their limitations and follows up as promised, should you trust them?

The final test should be your gut instinct.

You wouldn't be in the position you're in unless you have had some experience taking the measure of a person. If your internal voice says they're all right and they meet the criteria above, you're probably in good hands.

If everything looks good but you feel uneasy, look elsewhere, or ask the manufacturer or integrator to send someone else.

Some people say that life would be a lot easier if it had a soundtrack like the movies, with ominous music when you're in danger. I'm a firm believer that there is always a soundtrack — you just have to listen for it! ■

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