

Want a More Simple Business? Start Here.

By David Brewster

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If you want to know where to start in the quest for a simpler business, you might give some thought to the story doing the rounds about NASA and the ballpoint pen.

The story goes that when NASA first started sending astronauts into space, they quickly discovered that ballpoint pens wouldn't work in zero gravity. To combat the problem, NASA scientists spent a decade and several million dollars developing a pen that writes in zero gravity, upside down, underwater, on almost any surface including glass and at temperatures ranging from below freezing to 300°C.

The Russians, faced with the same problem, used a pencil.

I don't know how much truth there is in this story. It doesn't really matter. We are all familiar with situations where 'what seemed like a good idea at the time' becomes 'Nightmare on Elm Street'.

Every time you make a decision to significantly change an aspect of your business, you are starting a new battle between complexity and simplicity. It's a battle fought on three fronts. Most of the time complexity wins.

The first battle front is the analytical one, of which financial justification is the major part. Complexity usually sneaks across this front unseen. The cost of complexity is hard to quantify so it is generally not considered. Major software implementations are a classic example as are a large proportion of government initiatives.

The gut-feel, emotional front is an easy one for complexity to get over. Complex options are nearly always more sexy than simple ones. You can imagine how attracted the high-tech boys at NASA would have been to sending something as simple as a grey-lead into space.

The only real chance that simplicity has of beating complexity is at the final 'values' front.

Ultimately, whether sub-consciously or otherwise, all our decisions are filtered by our personal and/or business values. For instance, if we commit to being honest, dishonest options will be filtered out early on.

Simplicity is a value which, like honesty, needs to be committed to. You need to test the simplicity of your decisions, as you do your other values. Questions need to be asked routinely like "is there a more simple way?" and "what will the impact of this decision be on the business in terms of added

complexity?"

Simplicity won't always win the war against complexity. But it has a much better chance of doing so if you take the first step and make the COMMITMENT to simplicity as a value. One small step for you, one giant step for your business.

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