

Understanding the Difference Between a Vendor and a Solutions Provider

With outsourcing becoming a necessity, it is more important than ever to understand the role of a vendor versus the role of a solutions provider. When is it a good idea to reach out to a vendor, and when are you better off retaining a solutions provider to help you achieve your objectives? Wait. Every vendor says they're a solutions provider. OK. Let's say that's true—which it isn't. Are you set up to leverage that resource?

For a solid overview of the issue, have a quick look at “The Middle Management Error Vendors Love Most.” It is a personal story about a famous director's request for a blue disco ball. It will make you smile, cringe ... or both.

The short version is that on my first job on a film set, the director asked for a 60-inch blue disco ball. An assistant producer ordered one from a vendor. It arrived on time and on budget. For reasons that I shall go into, it was never used.

Told this way, the “Blue Disco Ball” story doesn't sound like much of a case study. But I can assure you, there are lessons to be learned.

The vision

In the director's mind, he saw blue dots dancing on the set. His solution? A 60-inch blue disco ball hung out of frame. That would do the trick!

Lesson 1: If you're not a professional in a specific field (in this case lighting and real-time effects), do not assume your

solution is best—or even good. Share your goals with people schooled in the art and let them help you understand your options.

The meeting

The scene was scheduled to be shot in two days. In a production meeting with his department heads, the director asked for a 60-inch blue disco ball.

Lesson 2: If you are in charge, people will simply do what you tell them to do. It's their job. This is great under most circumstances, but if your outcomes are not aligned with this incentive structure, the results will be suboptimal.

Three key department heads were missing from this meeting: props, art and lighting. The three of them were each holding production meetings of their own in different locations. So key people who could have offered high-level solutions were completely out of the loop.

Lesson 3: If you have the wrong people in the meeting, you are having the wrong meeting.

The vendors

The vendors all came back with similar pricing, including a significant rush charge. The pricing, while inside of the total production budget, was clearly out of line with the value of the purchase. No one said anything except, "When do you need it?"

Lesson 4: Vendors say yes. That's how they get paid. That's how they keep clients. Vendors do not push back, except with rush charges or outlandish price quotes. From a vendor's point of view, you (the client) never seem to have the money to do it right, but you always seem to have the money to do it over. And when you need it in a hurry, money seems to magically appear. Vendors love orders for blue disco balls!

The alternative ending

In the real “Blue Disco Ball” story, the director threw a temper tantrum about an hour before the prop was scheduled to arrive. The property master, a solutions provider, just happened by in the middle of this tantrum and asked what the fuss was all about.

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