Selling Virtualization

Let's talk a little about selling virtualization. I'm writing this assuming you're an SMB consultant of some kind and you sell solutions to end-user customers.

Let me start by saying I don't believe in selling technology. I don't sell features to customers. It's like beating your head against a wall--it hurts a lot and all you do is cause some bleeding. Customers don't have the same weakness as technology professionals--they aren't dazzled by shiny things like technical people are. While a simple lesson, I think this is important to start off.

Virtualization is a technology. It's a tool, and as a SMB consultant, you want to be in the solutions business, not the tools business.

Let's present an analogy that gives you some perspective. You have a house and one day you look longingly out the back window and have a desire to sit outside and drink a cool iced drink and enjoy the views. You don't have a deck, however, and decide that the solution to your problem is to put a nice deck on the back of your house.

You bring a contractor out, who sits down with you and starts talking about the great hammers he has, and how he'll use 2 X 4 lumber, and these great new nails that allow him to work faster at setting it up for you. He goes into great detail about how the wood fits together.

You really don't care, do you?

You want a deck. You want him to talk about how you'll be able to use it to put deck chairs on, to find out what size you need, and to understand what your intention with it is. Maybe you want to be able to ensure that you're protected from the rain in the fall when it gets wet more often, or maybe you want a way to prop your feet up. You care more about what it does for you than the specifics of how it's made.

Don't get me wrong, you want it well made. You want some level of confidence that what you're getting meets the building code, and you want to know it's put together with solid materials and by a contractor who is an expert in building decks like this. But do you really care if it's oak or pine? If the wood is solid and holds your chair up from the grass, you have what you need.

You need to approach technology sales the same way. You're looking to discover a customer's pain, or help them plan for the future. You're not selling hammers and nails. You're selling decks.

Server Virtualization

While you're welcome to try, I wouldn't walk into a customer site and try to sell a project purely to virtualize their server for the sake of virtualizing. You want to talk about the solution you're presenting. Why is this useful? What does it do for me?

Let's go over three approaches that I think make perfect sense as ways to sell a virtualized server project.

A new server installation

If you're in the process of talking to a customer about an upgrade to a server, be it a replacement due to hardware age or a migration to a new operating system (such as Windows Server 2008 or Small Business Server 2008), you're afforded a perfect opportunity to add virtualization in.

My discussion with the customer would go something like this:

> *"New technologies mean that with this new server, I can make this the last time you have to upgrade your hardware and your software at the same time. We can make it so that you have the ability to do them at different times. This means you can control your IT spending with more precision. We want to make sure you're upgrading your hardware every three years, but you may not want to upgrade your server operating system on the same schedule, due to cost or the needs of your business.*

> *"To make this even better, I'm going to be able to setup some really great solutions for disaster recovery, so if you want to develop a robust solution to protect you in the event your server is lost due to fire, flooding, or some other disaster, that will be very easy."*

A backup solution or solution to high availability

If your customer is sensitive to backups and disaster recovery, you have the ability to frame the project in those terms. Customers who want higher levels of availability without spending the money on a cluster solution might consider this as well.

> *"I know you want to ensure you have a way to get back up and running quickly. It's expensive to keep identical hardware available in the event of issue, and that has traditionally been one of the best ways to ensure that recoveries are as fast as possible. That's no longer true.*

> *"We can deploy your server in a new way, allowing me to take 'photocopies' of your server anytime we need them. These copies are identical, and like paper copies, are just as useful. I can put the copy up on any hardware, ensuring that you have your server in any situation. This is really useful for solving physical hardware failures or solving disasters."*

Customers looking to hold onto old operating systems

Some customers aren't willing to make an upgrade to a new operating system, or are potentially unable to. As a trusted technology advisor, you will find situations where a server is aging and needs to be replaced, but the pain of rebuilding the operating system and applications make it impractical.

You're balancing two levels of risk--the risk of continuing to run on that old hardware, or the risk to the business of moving the application onto a new operating system or the risk of rebuilding the server.

Virtualization would solve this--a virtualized copy of the existing server could be placed on new hardware, allowing the existing, working application and operating system to continue to function, yet running on new, advanced hardware.

The conversation would go something like this:

> *"Mr. Customer, we have your existing system, which we acknowledge needs to run in it's current configuration. It's a vital system and we can't take the risk of upgrading the operating system. However, we also have a need to move you to new hardware, as the existing hardware is out of maintenance and becoming more costly to maintain.*
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> *"Traditionally, this would be an awkward solution, requiring us to move everything to the new hardware and recertify the application on the new hardware. However, now we have the ability to copy the entire server as it is into a portable file, and move that from new hardware to new hardware. You'll never have to go through a costly migration again, as anytime you need new hardware, we can easily move to it.*
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> *"Investing now in this solution means we reduce the complexity in the future. Since we need to move this hardware, how about if we eliminate this problem once and for all?"*

Isn't this a better discussion than trying to sell the product? Notice we didn't talk about "virtualization" at all. The entire discussion revolved around business value, both in the short term and in the long term. This is a business conversation rather

than a technical one, and thus needs to be justified by business goals, direction and intention.