



Fashion in Projects

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Overview

Projects typically start with a flourish. Everyone is excited. Six months down the track, a few people are still motivated but the majority have moved on to the next fashionable project. This white paper examines why interest wanes, and what you can do as a Project Manager to keep people focused and interested in your project.

Attention Span

There are a number of reasons for the evolution of fashion. The first is attention span. The world seems to be moving towards shorter and shorter attention spans. Why? My suggestion would be that the cause is information availability. In a world where there are only a few pieces of information to focus on, we can have the luxury of spending time on one topic.

Take an example. A few hundred years ago someone received a book and probably read it cover to cover without reading much else. Written material was not freely available and that book was likely their only immediate piece of written information to digest. They probably reread it and were intimately familiar with each nuance and piece of information.

Contrast that with today. Many people are reading two, three or even more books at once. They also read the newspaper, magazines, technical information, and even the label on their food products. It is much harder to focus for the full time it takes to read a book. It also means people become used to swapping their attention between different inputs.

Fashion

One of the underlying principles of consumerism is fashion. People must be made to believe that what made them part of the herd, or stand out from the herd, last year is no longer acceptable. They must buy a new variation to support their image. Fashion extends from the design of our houses to clothes, to cars to electronic devices. Many companies would cease to exist unless people threw away perfectly good products to buy new ones that basically do the same job.

Oscar Wilde once said about fashion:

“Fashion is something so horrible that it has to be reinvented each year”.

I am not talking true innovation when I talk fashion. True innovation is where the underlying technology or design is improved to make it more useful. Innovation may be a faster computer chip, or a more fuel efficient car, or use of a new material that is less resistant to fading, or more waterproof. Fashion is about changing the appearance purely to make it appear different to what came before.

Probably the best example is women’s fashion. Each season, “they” – whoever they may be – dictate that the look this season is Now learning from history, we see that many of those ‘looks’ should have been assigned to the garbage heap. Think platform shoes, shoulder pads and the one that amazed me in recent years - brightly coloured wellington boots. At this stage there are probably several women preparing

to send me parcel bombs but I will bravely continue. Many people get up in the morning and wonder what they will wear. 90% because they have few clothes and 10% because they have too many.

Without selling something new to replace something perfectly serviceable, many businesses cannot generate revenue.

In addition, to most people, fashion change is considered good regardless of whether the change is beneficial. There are a million options being pushed at us to explore.

Fashion in Business

Business is no different. Suppliers to that industry are in the fashion business. Take a concept; package it; talk about it until everyone believes it is absolutely essential to the survival of the organisation. After the supplier has sold the product or service to most businesses, look for the next fashion. Selling more fashion is a way to survive.

This is a little cynical as some fashions are true innovation. They might be something completely new or have evolved from previous innovation. The point is more and more is being pushed at business. Look at the constant stream of conferences pushing new ideas, new technology, new concepts and new ways of doing things. Look closely and many are repackaged ideas that have been around for years.

It happens within organisations as well. Ideas come from all parts of the organisation and compete for attention. One becomes fashionable this month, and another next month. Ideas, no matter how potentially valuable, may fall out of fashion. It is easy to talk about a fashionable idea after attending a conference, but lots harder to justify doing it.

The Project Manager as a Fashion Expert

The poor Project Manager is probably first involved at the height of the fashion wave. The idea has become fashionable enough that resources are to be committed to the idea, and money spent to turn it into something tangible. A Project Manager is appointed.

It is likely there will never be the excitement level as high as this in the cycle of the product. Perhaps at the point of delivery there will be as much excitement but people will have moved on to the next big thing long before then. The Project Manager has to turn the idea into something that will keep fashionable for as long as possible. This involves keeping the hype going. Making the fashion something that fits this organisation into the future.

Some Fashion Examples

An example I saw many years ago was with a voice recognition system that took about two years to put into an organisation. The Project Manager kept talking about how this system would make their company stand out from the opposition – i.e. be more fashionable. She created the image of a company that would be admired and seen as highly desirable. People would want to deal with them because of the way they handled telephone enquiries.

The truth was somewhat less than expected as most people who have dealt with voice recognition systems will understand. It probably made them less fashionable. The point was however that she was smart enough to say “My project will make you stand

out from the crowd. You will be a fashion leader. Customers will love you. This is the latest and greatest. *Everyone* says so!”

Another example was a Project Manager who was trying to get a major risk assessment undertaken around the operation of their project area. Whilst perfectly competent to do the work himself, he finally brought in an industry expert who had worked with most of the competitors. The person had a high profile and was “fashionable” from the company point of view. People wanted to participate and be associated with someone considered an industry icon. The Project Manager told me on one occasion it was like putting “Dior” or “YSL” on the risk report.

Summary

Without a focus on the project, support will wane. Even though it delivers a great result on time and budget, the response may be muted. You need to keep up the hype if you are to be recognised as a great Project Manager.

Ask yourself “How will I make my next major milestone something that is fashionable to the organisation?” Depending on the culture it might be that it makes you stand out from the crowd, or it may be that it makes you fit in with the crowd. You need to understand that culture before you can sell your project.

You are unlikely to change the way people operate or their basic values. What you have to do is leverage these beliefs and ways of working to make your project not only be successful, but appear successful. This is even more important in a consulting role.

The Author

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About Project Perfect

Project Perfect is a project management software consulting and training organisation based in Sydney Australia. Their focus is to provide organisations with the project infrastructure they need to successfully manage projects.

Project Perfect sell “Project Administrator” software, which is a tool to assist organisations better manage project risks, issues, budgets, scope, documentation planning and scheduling. They also created a technique for gathering requirements called “Method H”™, and sell software to support the technique. For more information on Project tools or Project Management visit www.projectperfect.com.au