

# About that Elephant in the Room

“I knew a man  
who grabbed  
a cat by the  
tail and  
learned forty  
percent more  
about cats  
than the man  
who didn’t.”

*Mark Twain*

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**The Elephant.** There is almost always an elephant in the conference room. In almost any of our client conversations about managing customer relationships more effectively and profitably, someone innocently mentions it by its acronym.

“Ah, yes, our ybtx was supposed to fix that.” Dead silence, all parties intently intrigued by their shoes. Then someone else volunteers, “Well, the ybtx can twirl, yodel, and dice.”

More silence. Then someone else, red-faced and steaming, “Well, it is not being used, and I am telling you it is worthless.”

Then the designated harmonizer tiptoes in. “Certainly, it is not perfect, but it has great potential.” (Coach Bear Bryant comes to mind: “Nothin’ll get you fired faster than potential.”).

On that blinding flash of insight about ybtx potential, we resume our discussion, turning our backs on the ybtx elephant in the room. Topic non grata.

Until later, during a break or subsequent meeting, someone helpfully whispers to me that the ybtx is a piece of very expensive technology or large consulting engagement or major enterprisewide “initiative” that was to be the major force for successful customer relationship management. It cost a bundle. The board was told it was the second coming of profitable revenue growth. Then it petered out. Now there are all kinds of undercurrents around who bought the elephant, or who should clean up after it, or maybe even shoot it. So there sits the elephant, in every meeting about customer relationships – big, white and unmentionable.

**The Pony.** In the muck and mire of so many disappointing customer relationship initiatives, it probably doesn’t look like it, but what if the elephant is really a pony? What if there really is a pony in there?

If we can decide it is a pony, a curious thing happens. We stop focusing on the cost of the investment and begin to look at the potential return on the learning. The single most important asset an organization has is what it has learned. Education is not cheap, and we should not expect it to be. When we move our focus from return on investment to return on learning, we find that we have learned a lot. The remaining question is, how do we translate the learning into enhanced return?

Most organizations are still grappling with how to use the new information and technology to create a more competent and valuable way to manage customer relationships. They lack a model for capturing the learnings and a scaleable way to deploy them in the form of change across all of the touch points.

The promise of point-of-customer-touch technology was that we could eliminate the middleman – the people in branches, sales offices and service centers. The reality is that customers have voted with – our revenue growth or lack of its. Customers may transact much more often using technology, but when they interact, they want to deal with competent, committed, empowered sales and service people. They want to deal with personnel who have learned the new ways of doing business that the information and technology have enabled.