



## Kimball Design Tip #18: Taking The Publishing Metaphor Seriously

By Ralph Kimball

In this design tip I want to share a perspective that I take very seriously, and in some ways is the foundation for all my work in data warehousing. It is the publishing metaphor. Consider the following scenario.

Imagine that you have been asked to take over responsibility for a high quality magazine. You have been named editor-in-chief and you have been given broad latitude to manage the content, style, and delivery of this magazine.

If you approach this responsibility thoughtfully, in my opinion you should do the following 12 things:

- \* identify your readers demographically
- \* find out what the readers want in this kind of magazine
- \* identify the "best" readers who will renew their subscriptions and buy products from the magazine's advertisers
- \* find potential new readers, and make them aware of the magazine
- \* choose the magazine content most appealing to the target readers
- \* make layout and rendering decisions that maximize the pleasure of the readers
- \* uphold high quality writing and editing standards, and adopt a consistent presentation style
- \* continuously monitor the accuracy of the articles and the advertiser's claims
- \* keep the reader's trust
- \* develop a good network of writers and contributors
- \* draw in advertising and run the magazine profitably
- \* keep the business owners happy

If you do a good job with all these responsibilities, I think you will be a great editor-in-chief! Conversely, go down through the list and imagine what happens if you omit any single item. Ultimately your magazine would have problems.

While these responsibilities may seem obvious, let's list some dubious items that should be non-goals:

- \* build the magazine around the technology of a particular printing press
- \* put most of your management energy into the printing press operational efficiencies
- \* use a highly technical and complex writing style that many readers may not understand
- \* use an intricate and crowded layout style that is difficult to read and navigate

The lesson for magazine publishing is that serving the readers effectively is the whole ball game. By building the whole business on the foundation of serving the readers, your magazine is likely to be successful.

The point of this metaphor, of course, is to draw the parallel between being a conventional publisher and being a data warehouse project manager.

I am convinced that the correct job description for a data warehouse project manager is "publish the

right data". Your main responsibility is to serve your readers who are your end users. While you will certainly use technology to deliver your data warehouse, the technology is at best a means to an end. The technology and the techniques you use to build your data warehouses should not show up directly in your top 12 responsibilities, but the appropriate technologies and techniques will become much more obvious if your over-riding goal is to effectively publish the right data.

Let's recast the 12 magazine publishing responsibilities as data warehouse responsibilities:

- \* understand your end users by business area, job responsibilities, and computer tolerance
- \* find out the decisions the end users want to make with the help of the data warehouse
- \* identify the "best" end users who make effective decisions using the data warehouse
- \* find potential new end users, and make them aware of the data warehouse
- \* choose the most effective, actionable subset of the data to present in the data warehouse, drawn from the vast universe of possible data in your organization
- \* make the end user screens and applications MUCH simpler and more template driven, explicitly matching the screens to the cognitive processing profiles of your end users
- \* make sure your data is accurate and can be trusted, labeling it consistently across the enterprise
- \* continuously monitor the accuracy of the data and the content of the delivered reports
- \* keep the end user's trust
- \* continuously search for new data sources, and continuously adapt the data warehouse to changing data profiles and reporting requirements
- \* take a portion of the credit for end user decisions made using the data warehouse, and use these successes to justify your staffing, software, and hardware expenditures
- \* keep the end users, end user executives, and your boss happy

If you do a good job with all these responsibilities, I think you will be a great data warehouse project leader! Conversely, go down through the list and imagine what happens if you omit any single item. Ultimately your data warehouse would have serious problems.

I urge you to contrast this view of a data warehouse project manager's job with your own job description. Chances are the above list is much more oriented toward end user and business issues, and may not even sound like a job in IT. But in my opinion, that is what makes this job interesting. Write to me with your reactions.