

Tips from a consultant to recognize vaporware during a buying process

By Mike Cohen, President, MRC Consulting Group, St. Charles IL

Mike Cohen has been consulting with healthcare providers for over 30 years. He has helped dozens of clients evaluate, select and implement new products. During that time he has been exposed to the sales tactics and vaporware of hundreds of vendors.

Here are a few tips from him on how to recognize and deal with vaporware:

- **Beware the Powerpoint presentation.** It is used instead of a “real” system for a very good reason!
- **Watch for evasive language:** The best sales representatives never lie. However, they are great at using half truths and being evasive!
- **Probe:** Don’t let anybody off the hook with stock or evasive answers to your questions. Instead probe and take them to the next level. For example, a string of questions may begin with “How many customers do you have on this product?” Follow up with: “Really? And do they all use the same product you just demonstrated to me? Who is your best client? For how long? How many users (Drs, clinics, depts etc) at the client use it? Etc
- **Control the demo.** If at your facility, prepare vendor to focus on what **you** want to see. Consider using demonstration scripts. If the vendor refuses to, or can not deviate from their standard demo, beware. While this is harder to do at a trade show booth, come prepared with specific items you want demonstrated.
- **Hands on** during demo: Ask to personally enter data and navigate the system. Create specific scenarios on the spot for you or the vendor to follow. In short, check if there is software behind the user interface!
- **Ask the competition:** Vendors know their competition. They will share their information. Of course, you need to validate what they say too.
- **Ask for and check client references.** Confirm they are on same product, with same technology, same version/release if it is a major upgrade etc
- **Conduct at least one site visit.** See how it works in a real environment, how it impacts care, work flow and process
- **Get contractual protection:** You may elect to buy a product even though you have determined it is fully developed and operational yet. That’s fine, someone has to be

first. But remember the old saying, “Pioneers are easy to recognize; they’re the ones with arrows in their backs!”. Be sure you have an excellent reason, your management understands and is willing to accept the risk; the vendor shares some of the risk with you, and your contract clearly specifies what you will get. Negotiate remedies in the event the vendor fails to deliver