

Q&A with Randall Garner, President/Senior Engineer of Garner IT Consulting, Inc.



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President/Senior Engineer

Garner IT Consulting, Inc.
www.garner-it.com

Contact:
Randall Garner
850-250-3210
randall@garner-it.com

Interview conducted by:
Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor
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CEOCFO: Mr. Garner, what is the overall mission and vision at Garner IT Consulting Inc?

Mr. Garner: Our mission is to help small or medium businesses utilize technology strategically to help them achieve their business goals.

“IT stands for Information Technology and I would argue that most of these guys are just “Technology” guys! They do not understand the “Information” part. They do not understand the value of data or the cost of downtime in the business, and that is ultimately what we are trying to help each business with; protecting access to data and preserving productivity.”- Randall Garner

CEOCFO: Would you explain the strategic part and what you understand on a very basic level about helping businesses that perhaps others do not?

Mr. Garner: During the very first computer purchase a business made; that business owner, that decision maker, decided that it was worth spending money to buy this tool that was going to help their business in some way. However, I think that when most business owners made that initial decision they did not have all of the information in front of them to really understand what they were getting in to. By that, I mean a computer system is a living, breathing system of multiple layers and complexity, if you will. It is pretty similar to our human bodies and if we are going to get the best results out of our human bodies we better put good fuel in it. We better exercise. We better maintain our bodies. We need to treat our computer systems similar. Back to my point, what we see is that a lot of business owners bought a computer with the goal of, “This is going to make X function in my business run faster,” let us say bookkeeping or accounting, maybe processing orders, maybe tracking my customers. However, they only understood the cost of this decision was the initial purchase, and not what the on-going costs were going to be. Therefore, before they know it, six months into buying this computer, and it is slow, it is giving them errors, it is slowing down the staff, it is causing frustration, and money is just flying out the door! What happens in that common scenario is that the computer actually slowed their company down or did not give them the efficiency that they wanted. Therefore, when we say we want to be strategic, we want to help our client’s businesses, to really understand what a true cost is relevant to their unique business and put that out in front of them. An example conversation with our client would be, “Mr. Client, we know we are going to need to do a server refresh based off of our established criteria in the next six to twelve months, and we know that that is going to cost thirty thousand dollars. Now we can set that goal out in front of us so we can plan and we can budget.” This allows us to make that investment strategically verses reactively, which what we see many of our competitors do. They wait till the server crashes. Now your business is down. Now stress is high and now you are down for some amount of days while you are waiting on getting

that repaired. Also, that is an unexpected cost to get that fixed. Therefore, that is really not an ideal situation in anyone's work day or even your personal day. That is an example of what we mean by being strategic.

CEOCFO: *How do your customers grow to understand that you really are looking out for them as opposed to just wanting to make a sale?*

Mr. Garner: That is a great question! We see that a lot! I think that A, much of the skepticism is to your point, very true; "everybody is trying to sell me something." B, back to my original point, they really did not have a good understanding of the correct spend for the business, but C, let us face it, all the other IT guys that they have worked with in town are not professional or strategic. Simple things as far as professional communication that our clients expect! "Hi Lynn, I understand you have a problem and I am going to get back with you in a couple of hours." They have an IT guy that has really treated them badly and that only responded to reactionary incidences and never sit down with the client and communicate with them. "You know you need to be thinking about this investment in the next year. You are going to open a new location; that means we are probably going to need to expand the network and buy this new equipment. You are turning over employees and every time you hire someone it costs X amount of dollars from the IT standpoint to get them set up and running or vice versa; you are terminating employees and that costs some money to get those things done as well." How do we accomplish that with our clients? We really strive hard to have a relationship. In any successful relationship, you must always work towards a win/win situation and you must communicate. For example, at least quarterly we meet with our clients. They are C level CEOs and CFOs; they are high level management decision makers. We do not discuss the megabytes and gigahertz, or anything like that. We talk about how the business is running, what are they planning on doing, what are they seeing in the next short term/long term, what things are we seeing from our perspective and the things that the users are struggling with to make sure that they are aware of those challenges and so that we can continue to talk about where we are going. Again, we do that through frequent communications for example, including every day communications on tasks we are working on for our clients. Lynn, I am shocked at how many computer guys out there we hear that if you have an issue and you send a phone call or an email off to your computer guy, you do not even hear back from them for two or three days! We have a lot of people out there running around saying that they are IT guys. IT stands for Information Technology and I would argue that most of these guys are just "Technology" guys! They do not understand the "Information" part. They do not understand the value of data or the cost of downtime in the business, and that is ultimately what we are trying to help each business with; protecting access to data and preserving productivity. Also in my mind, information includes communication as a subset. Therefore, we strive to communicate, to build relationships, to build a win/win and to educate. Again, every CEO that I am sure that you have talked to, they are busy and they have got a lot of things going on. They have a strategy. They have a vision for their business. They cannot and do not really want to get bogged down in the details. Therefore, they need to find the right people that they can trust to handle the details.

CEOCFO: *How do you help a client embrace change when it is needed? How do you work with them to insure any change or implementation is smooth?*

Mr. Garner: As technology experts, we know that we are in an industry that is every changing and fast paced. Therefore, we have to be comfortable with that, but we also have to recognize, to your point, that our clients are not in that industry. They may not be comfortable with those rapid changes. Therefore again, I would say number one; communication. We are always encouraging our team to find sources of information, whether it is straight from the large vendors like Microsoft, or maybe it is a technology specific news agency, and spend some time during the week just reading on what is going on in the IT world. That helps us to be on top of things, like when these changes are going to happen and who and what the changes will affect, which allows us to communicate the changes ahead of time with the clients. In addition, we also confirm with the client that after these changes are made we are here for you! We are here, our support team is knowledgeable, you can call us or start a chat, and if you have got a question or an issue we are there within a few minutes and we are helping you resolve that question or issue, so you can get back to your day. Again, stressing communication, intentionally encouraging our team to take a few hours out of the week, and read up on what is going on and stay on top of the trends, so that we can be best positioned to help our clients. For example, Microsoft, particularly in the last year or two, has really taken control away from our ability to manage some changes, like updates, on our client's timeline. We cannot make Microsoft move like we want to, so we just have to really hunker down with our clients to ensure them that we are on their team. We cannot change Microsoft's timeline, but we can do other things to make you aware of it ahead of time and then be there on your side after the changes take effect, for better or worse.

CEOCFO: *How are you reaching out for potential new clients? How would someone find you if they are looking? How do you jump off the page is someone using search because they need a new provider?*

Mr. Garner: We try to attend industry specific events that give us an opportunity to speak and try to present educational information to potential clients. We do not really try to sell our service. We are just trying to show ourselves as an expert

that they might not have known about, that is in their local area, that they feel comfortable with reaching out to with their questions, and can help them solve their business challenges. We also participate in events like lunch-and-learns, webinars, and partnerships with other vendors in town. We've had a few opportunities to partner with our clients on events that was close to their heart. Another vector that we use get prospects is by hunting – do the research with various different lists to try to determine companies in our area, a certain size, a certain number of computer users, a certain amount of revenues and certain specific industries. We've learned some of the characteristics of ideal clients we can help because their time is more dependent on the technologies that they have or maybe a smaller Mom and Pop shop. Then we will go after those guys. Again, the whole concept of how we are going to court them is through education. To the last part of your question of how we separate ourselves, is through that education process. The pain points that we hear and see these prospects having, we work hard on them internally to make sure that we do not duplicate the mistakes of our competition. Therefore, we are not just touting ourselves with how well we do. For example, with customer satisfaction, I do not think that there is anyone in our area that can really go out to a prospect and say, "Our customers tell us they are ninety nine percent satisfied, and we receive over forty percent response rate." We know this because we send out surveys to our end users pretty regularly on various support tickets. Actually, we know that over the last four months straight, we've received a one hundred percent satisfaction rating with over a forty percent response rate! That is just unheard of in almost any industry. We can use that data from our end users and share those as testimonials and examples of how we help our clients. However, I will tell you Lynn, the biggest thing that I have found in the last couple of months, once in front of a qualified prospect, was talking to them about the things we are doing in our business, that they know that they need to be doing in their business, but can't get to them for whatever reason. They know the tasks are important, but they are busy juggling to keep their business moving every day. Therefore, when they hear they are treating our company like a professional business and we are doing those things that they know they should, we get some credibility that this little technology company, these computer geeks, are doing quarterly career counseling sessions with their employees to make sure that they are staying on a training plan and constantly improving. This little "geek squad" is having weekly team meetings where the whole company sits down and talks about what challenges that they are having and how they can help each other improve. We talk about those things once we get in front of a solid prospect and they understand! They know they should try those things in their business, and they know how difficult they are. I've found these conversations give us credibility with prospects, because we are in the same boat as them. We are not the same as all the other "IT" guys who are really just trying to grab a few dollars and pay some bills, who do not have any intention on improving themselves or their company.

CEOCFO: *Was that your approach from day one? Did you understand the need to look at it from a business sense, the need to maintain that relationship, curiosity and focus with your employees or did you recognize over time?*

Mr. Garner: I would have to say the latter. In my previous job I was an engineer. It was a reactive firm, so we only talked to clients when they had problems. At that point, by the time they were calling us it was a huge problem. Therefore, we never could really get into a win/win relationship. That was because the client was down, they were losing, but we were winning because we were able to bill' or if we did a really great job doing an initial install and nothing ever broke, then the clients were winning but were losing because we are not making money. When a colleague and I saw this "managed IT" business model that we've implemented at Garner IT and I went to my boss at that time and he just was not interested. He had a retirement plan and it was within ten years of his sight and he did not want to do anything to rock the boat. That is understandable. That was his business he built that was meeting his goals. But I had a decision to make for my family and career, so I left that job and started this company, kind of a "put your money where your mouth is" type of scenario. At that point, all I knew was I was an engineer, people seem to like me, and I can do some great things with technology. However, what I did not know was how to wear the other hats I would have to wear to run a successful business. So, I knew what I did not know. At that point is where I started going to sales and marketing training where I learned not to go in and talk about technology, like how much hard drive space and how much RAM they have. Business leaders do not care about the tech. They want to know about their business. Therefore, I caught on to their concepts. However quite honestly, it took some time to figure out how to have that conversation. You have to have experience and knowledge under your belt to be able to intelligently have that conversation. I gave you a little bit of the back story there, to help you draw the picture that I did not have the skill set, I saw there were things that I did not know that I needed to know and I went and tried to find those answers. That concept of "speak business, not tech" makes sense. However, I still had to kind of grow into it and have the conversations with other business owners to understand what their business meant before I got to any level of being good at doing it.

CEOCFO: *What is ahead for Garner IT Consulting?*

Mr. Garner: We have a couple of exciting this that we are looking at. The state of the cyber-attacks and the breaches in the news in the last two years has finally gotten some attention from some potential prospects. Therefore, we are looking

ahead to finally be able to add some clients to really grow the business with clients wanting to fight off these cyber bad guys. We think that another five years or so of continuing to focus on supporting the businesses through our expertise and technology, that we will be able to take our understanding of how our various industries work, the different clients that we have taken care of and spin that into a business consulting service at some point. We definitely think that the cloud and the hosted technology has become mature enough to where our smaller customers do not have to go out and make a huge technology investment or expenditure to get going. We can set them up on cloud based technologies and help them grow the technology solution as the business grows, all for a predictable monthly fee. We have put in a lot of hard years to grow a really solid foundation that should support whatever growth gets thrown our way. We have been in the trenches. We have been fighting for that name recognition. We have been fighting for that expertise and credibility in our area and we think that the news is starting to turn to where hopefully, we can get after some of these growth goals a little bit more seriously than what we have been able to achieve in our first seven years of business.

