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Shepard News

Business Advice from Van Halen

Full article written by Dan Heath and Chip Heath for the March 2010 issue of Fast Company. The full article can be viewed on the SandBox by clicking [here](#) or on FastCompany.com by clicking [here](#).

Your source of data doesn't need to be high tech. In fact, it doesn't even need to be numerical. Consider Van Halen. (We have been waiting years for a chance to write that sentence.) In its 1980s heyday, the band became notorious for a clause in its touring contract that demanded a bowl of M&Ms backstage, but with all the brown ones removed. The story is true -- confirmed by former lead singer David Lee Roth himself -- and it became the perfect, appalling symbol of rock-star-diva behavior.

Get ready to reverse your perception. Van Halen did dozens of shows every year, and at each venue, the band would show up with nine 18-wheelers full of gear. Because of the technical complexity, the band's standard contract with venues was thick and convoluted -- Roth, in his inimitable way, said in his autobiography that it read "like a version of the Chinese Yellow Pages." A typical "article" in the contract might say, "There will be 15 amperage voltage sockets at 20-foot spaces, evenly, providing 19 amperes."

Van Halen buried a special clause in the middle of the contract. It was called Article 126. It read, "There will be no brown M&Ms in the backstage area, upon pain of forfeiture of the show, with full compensation." So when Roth would arrive at a new venue, he'd walk backstage and glance at the M&M bowl. If he saw a brown M&M, he'd demand a line check of the entire production. "Guaranteed you're going to arrive at a technical error," he wrote. "They didn't read the contract.... Sometimes it would threaten to just destroy the whole show."

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In other words, Roth was no diva. He was an operations expert. He couldn't spend hours every night checking the amperage of each socket. He needed a way to assess quickly whether the stagehands at each venue were paying attention -- whether they had read every word of the contract and taken it seriously. In Roth's world, a brown M&M was the canary in the coal mine.

Like Roth, none of us has the time and energy to dig into every aspect of our businesses. But, if we're smart, we won't need to. What if we could rig up a system where problems would announce themselves before they arrived? That may sound like wishful thinking, but notice that it's exactly what Roth achieved. Surely, you won't be outwitted by the guy who sang "Hot for Teacher."

Where's the brown M&M in your business?

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