

A GLITCH IN THE PILOT LINE

You are a development engineer for a company making graphical display systems. A small computer manufacturer is interested in purchasing a state-of-the-art display system for use as part of a line it hopes to announce shortly. The computer company is also known to be considering a more conventional display, one that has been available for some time from one of your competitors.

You have supplied a very advanced prototype to the computer company, and its engineers are delighted with its performance. A small delegation of engineering and purchasing executives is scheduled to see the pilot production line, including your test procedures, and to talk price and delivery.

Your pilot line has been producing only three or four units per day of this new system. Nevertheless, you feel comfortable at having invited the customer delegation to view it and observe the units being tested.

Unfortunately, a glitch has developed, and not all units are coming through with flying colors. Not a major problem, but something that could prove embarrassing if one of the units should be tested in the presence of the potential customer.

What to do? Engineering, sales, and management meet. It is decided to isolate four or five perfect units and have them ready for running through the test station when the delegation comes. But the problem has become worse, and only three good units can be found. A dozen or so tested units are packed and awaiting shipment to other customers. Surely two or three of these can be commandeered to make up the "perfect" test group.

But when the first one of them is retested it fails for the same characteristic: it looks as if some sort of sleeping sickness is involved here. Best not ship any of those to the waiting customers until the correction can be found. At least a couple of good units are found upon the retesting, so the demonstration test group is complete.

Comes the day of the customer visit, everything goes well. A technical presentation in the conference room is followed by a tour of the production line. Assemblers are busy on some 20 or so units in various stages of completion. Five units are lined up awaiting test. The delegation watches as one after another, they are put through their paces. No surprise. They prove to be perfect. Assembly of a sixth unit is just being completed, and it is pushed toward the test station. But before it can be tested, a bell rings and it is time for the assembly and test people to go for coffee break. One of your co-hosts invites the customer delegation to the executive dining room for coffee and pastries.

Before the visit is over, your marketing people have signed up the customer.

From *IEEE Spectrum*, February, 1989, p. 25.