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Snappy Comebacks to Stupid Questions

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If you're of a certain vintage or above, you probably remember one of MAD Magazine's regular columns entitled "Snappy Comebacks to Stupid Questions" – their version of "I wish I'd said that." I've found that as purveyors of a mysterious and arcane craft (software development), we're often asked questions that are a few bricks short of a full load. This isn't unique to our profession, of course – most any technical area garners more than its fair share of "I can't believe they asked that" questions.

I first encountered this when in a training program fresh out of school. I was assigned to follow a repairman around for a month as he made service visits for the machinery that my new employer manufactured. One day, we were in a factory working on a machine, and a dweeb in a white lab coat wandered over. He watched us for a few minutes, and then asked, "It seems these things break down a lot. Has that been your experience?" The field service guy, a fifteen year veteran of the repair department, replied in a completely serious tone, "Well, I dunno about the whole company, but just about every machine I've ever seen has been broken."

As software developers, one of our job functions is often to examine the business processes of our customer. This isn't always a pleasant experience, since the questioning of "Why do you do it this way?" can be perceived as threatening. As a result, when I think that the customer is getting their dander up, I've often told the following story to help them realize that sometimes processes become outdated.

It seems that there was a battleship being outfitted with a new 27" gun on the foredeck. This new gun was going to be the pride of the fleet, and the Admiral himself was going to visit the ship for the first firing of the gun.

That day came, and the battleship was shipshape; the crew having spent weeks cleaning every nook and cranny. After a brief ceremony, the captain of the ship and the Admiral made their way to the foredeck for the firing of the gun. The gun crew had practiced this since the day that the announcement had been received, and was in top form. They broke their old record in preparing the gun and firing; several miles away, the target was obliterated.

The Admiral offered his congratulations to the captain and the gun crew, and as he was about to step off the deck, he noticed one of the gun crew still standing smartly at attention. He realized that the sailor in question hadn't moved during the entire exercise, and pulled the captain aside, asking just what that member of the crew was supposed to do. The captain realized he didn't know either, but promised he'd look into it and report back.

A few days later the Admiral received a call from the captain. "Well, sir, it appears that the job of the crewman you saw standing at attention is, well, his job is to hold the reins of the horses while the gun is being fired."

I told this story to a customer a few months ago for the usual reason, and we went on with our design and business process analysis. Somewhat later, the lead developer for the customer was watching me write out a bit of code for something, and asked me why I used function "X" instead of function "Y", which had been added to newest release of the product.

I mumbled something, and quickly changed the subject, but it bothered me that I didn't have a snappy comeback. And this, I'm sure, isn't an isolated incident. I'll bet you're still using commands and functions that have been superseded by newer (and better) features, simply due to inertia, and I'm sure I'm guilty of doing so on other occasions as well.

Since then, though, I've thought more about what to say when caught. And then the I heard the perfect line, and I'd like to share it with you. At a recent conference I was attending, I met a fellow named Ed Tittel, who you may recognize as co-author of a number of hot computer titles, including the astounding

Exam Cram series. What you may not know is that Ed was an archeologist before he joined the computer field.

And thus, next time you get caught, simply place your hands in your lap, bow your head, and solemnly pronounce, "It is the custom among my people..."