

## **We Can Play in the AI Arena**

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While our area has fallen behind on efforts toward economic transformation, the signals tell us we're in a great position now to be a real player. Our Economic Transformation Signals team has been following:

- Changes in strategic diversity
- The evolution of higher education
- The increasing impact of women
- Increasing relevant skills
- Increasing entrepreneurship/innovation
- Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the role of evolving technologies

That final area - artificial intelligence - has been my focus.

The first effort to take advantage of technology, though, isn't technological. It's KNOWING YOUR CUSTOMER'S OPPORTUNITIES for greater effectiveness in *your area of expertise!* Or, put another way, to know your customer's customer.

So, what arrow do you have in your quiver that would make your customer more effective? What option isn't being used? Frequently, it's mining additional data from your selling initiatives that could help them - applying machine learning algorithms. Or it might be using augmented reality for training your customers. Another possible option, like Microsoft's HoloLens, might be to see problems with the customer's machinery so you can provide a fix. Perhaps what you can offer is remote product demonstrations.

To think most creatively, though, you need to know what technologies exist that might add that missing arrow to your quiver. Your goal is to ask intelligently: "What if \_\_\_?" The great news is that experts who can provide you that technology and help you apply it exist in spades here in Northeast Wisconsin. Consider these disruptive efforts already developed by your local peers:

**Bemis Manufacturing in Sheboygan Falls**, whose expertise is molding plastic products, thought about "shopping carts" - not even their product line. A major dilemma for retailers is theft of carts. So, Bemis provides carts with RFID embedded in them so they can be found wherever they're discarded. They're selling like hotcakes! And imagine what Bemis might soon offer: Tracking what aisles the carts move up and down most frequently, which tells where customers' major interests lie.

**BayTek Entertainment in Pulaski** makes myriad fun entertainment center games like Skee-Ball and sells them globally. Kids are way ahead in knowing what's possible, and the next frontier is applying Virtual Reality games: The kids put on the headset and see the game played out from inside that virtual environment. Wow! As the Pandemic lockdowns

hit back in March and people no longer went to entertainment centers, BayTek developers focused on how to create smaller, less expensive versions of their games for home use. Within months they had two models available, one now selling well, the other struggling - but that's the nature of innovation.

**U.S. AutoForce, a division of US Venture, in Little Chute**, is a national distributor of tires, undercar parts and lubricants. With 70,000 different tires available in America, how does a dealer or a repair shop find what they need for a specific customer? Answer: A cloud-based database of the 70,000 possibilities, and then custom software that allows dealers to enter their parameters and find the possibilities that meet their needs.

**Skyline Technologies of Green Bay** helped U.S. AutoForce with that effort (above), and they also helped Basil's Pub in Appleton make ordering specialty beer both entertaining and profitable. A computer record for each customer lists the specialty beer ordered - simultaneously making customers aware of the many cult beers they *haven't* tried yet! Not real sophisticated, but very effective.

Now, the above examples show how to use disruptive technology EXTERNALLY, to help your customers. This is a great opportunity because your competitors aren't doing it yet. However, we're in danger of losing out to national competitors who are more advanced than we are. In our area we are, by and large, more advanced in how to use many of the techniques INTERNALLY: robotics, 3D Printing and the like.

So how do you get started? Not much sophistication involved. Brainstorm with your technical and customer-facing executives. Send your customer-facing executives to visit customers and have focused discussions on the topic: What are your main pains? Your frustrations in serving YOUR customers? What are you afraid your COMPETITORS might do before you do it? Engage in disparate thinking: What would it look like if you applied a technology in a completely illogical way: Apply robotics to eating out, 3d Printing to parts outages, for example?

If you'd like to learn more, consider these great resources:

- Oliver Buechse, formerly chief strategist for Associated Bancorp., now an AI advocate who consults through My Strategy Source ([www.mystrategysource.com](http://www.mystrategysource.com)).
- Joe Bashta, CEO, Axicor, who provides AI capabilities via deep data analysis to companies. ([www.asicor.com](http://www.asicor.com))
- Troy Parr, CEO, TDP Solutions, who can help you figure out how to use Augmented Reality techniques. ([www.tdpsolutions.tech](http://www.tdpsolutions.tech))
- Larger multi-divisional accounting firms are also providing AI consulting now as well.