

Yet Another Rejection

Jerry Barkley was broke. And frustrated. Teaching people who were arrogant, ignorant, and proud of it was like pounding a pencil through solid concrete. It made him want to grab the non-existent hair on his bald head and tear it out. Sometimes, it made him question his sanity. But Jerry kept trying because he needed people like Sally Brock, Maverick Marketing General Manager, as paying customers.

Maverick was a PR firm representing powerful people and Fortune 500 companies, and when Sally mentioned she was looking for improved IT service at the Burnsville, Minnesota spring Chamber of Commerce recruiting gala, Jerry jumped at the chance to land a high-profile customer. Which led to today's meeting in Sally's office.

"Here's where you're vulnerable. You can see it in this port scan report, right here," said Jerry, pointing to the information on Sally's computer monitor.

"Port what?" asked Sally. She looked out across the office, as if she wanted to escape. Short and slender, with greying hair pinned up in a 1950s-style bun, she reminded Jerry of a stereotypical librarian.

"A port is..." Jerry saw the far-off look in Sally's eye. "A port scan report means..." She looked at her watch. "Um, well it shows how vulnerable you are to probes and attacks over the Internet," concluded Jerry, rushing.

A normal job might have been easier. Especially on days like today. But after the idiots in charge destroyed the computer company from Jerry's last so-called 'normal' job, nobody and nothing would persuade Jerry to trust another bunch of corporate geniuses again. After suffering through endless rounds of layoffs, this time if he wanted to gripe at the idiot in charge, he could hold up a mirror. And that's why Barkley IT Services was born. And why he put up with being chronically broke and frustrated. And why his friends and family thought he was nuts.

He was not going down without a fight. Maybe this could get her attention. "And your Internet perimeter is set up in about the worst possible way. You have three choices when somebody knocks on your door. You can open it, you can ignore it, or you can tell them to go away. But when you tell them to go away, you just told your adversary you're home. You gave away information they'll use against you. And that's what you're doing right here," he said,

jabbing at Sally's computer monitor. Jerry wanted to grab her head and point her eyes at the words.

"You're probably getting probes from around the world. You should ignore them. But you're not. You answer every single one. And you don't even know who's probing you because you don't log anything."

"Jerry, I'm not a computer technician and I have no idea what you just told me," said Sally.

Jerry bit his lip. How could she not get it?

"We don't keep national security secrets here," Sally continued. "I just want you to tell me about your service and what it costs. And I have a meeting in a few minutes, so I don't have a lot of time."

Jerry leaned back in his hard chair in front of Sally's desk, but kept his feet under Sally's desk to take her attention off his white socks and tennis shoes. How could he get through to her?

"I need to look at a few other things first," said Jerry, taking a deep breath. "Tell me about your backups."

"I change a tape on the server every Friday," said Sally. "We never had a problem until last month when we had to recover our customer database and it didn't work. We lost the whole database and it's taken us the past month to put it back together by hand. That's why you're here. I want to make sure we have good backups from now on."

"What triggered losing your customer database?" asked Jerry.

"Some kind of glitch."

Jerry leaned forward and cocked his head. "Did anyone look into that glitch?"

"I don't know. As I said, I'm not a computer technician. I just want it to work."

Wasn't she at least curious? "So, if nobody analyzed what happened, that glitch is still in your system someplace and it'll bite you again."

"I guess. How much more time do you need?"

"I don't know—it depends on what I find. Are your backups any good right now?"

"I hope so."

Jerry looked at her for a few seconds, trying to think of something appropriately firm to say. But he came up empty. How could she not know? Even after living through a disaster?

"Why don't you show me your server?"

Sally led Jerry down a hallway and opened a door. A heat wave blasted Jerry in the face as he looked inside a tiny janitor's closet. Jerry cringed as he took in the scene. The company server was a dusty minitower with an ancient CRT monitor, sitting on a table against the left wall and plugged into a yellowed power strip on the concrete floor, about three feet away from an upside-down mop bucket over a floor drain. Jerry noticed copper plumbing pipes overhead and followed them with his eyes to a water faucet on the right wall, partially hidden behind boxes of cleaning supplies. How many times had water splashes disrupted power to that server, shutting down the whole company? Jerry's stomach tightened.

On the back wall was a rats-nest of telephone and network cable, punch-down blocks, and a patch panel, all mounted on a piece of plywood. Dozens of network cables ran from the patch panel to a device with small amber and green blinking LEDs, stacked on top of a red colored device, also with a few blinking lights. The stack sat on a wire shelf mounted on the wall next to the server table. That red device had to be the firewall. The device on top with all the LEDs had to be a network switch. Dusty manuals and papers sat on top of it.

Jerry tried to keep a diplomatic face. "At least your server is on a table. But that power strip on the floor will give you problems if this room ever gets wet. May I?"

Sally gestured to Jerry and Jerry walked inside. The heat was stifling. Jerry lifted the papers and manuals from the top of the network switch and blew the dust off. That was a mistake. Jerry sneezed and his eyes watered. He put his hand on top of the network switch and pulled it away. "Ouch!"

"Put your hand on top of that switch for a second."

Sally looked at Jerry suspiciously. "The dust will wash off. Just touch this."

Sally extended her hand and put it on top of the switch. She quickly pulled it away, leaving a handprint and dusty dirt on her hand. "Ouch! It's hot!"

"Yup," said Jerry. "And that's a problem."

Turning to the server, he asked, "What are you running on your server?"

"We do word processing and lots of proposals," said Sally. "Do we have to stay in here?"

"Only for another minute," said Jerry. "I meant, what operating system is on your server?"

"I don't know, Windows I guess."

Jerry shook his head. "Is it okay if I login and look at some things?"

“I guess so—go right ahead.”

Jerry leaned over the table and pressed the Ctrl, Alt, and Delete keys. The monitor displayed a familiar but obsolete Windows 2003 Server login screen. “How old is this server?”

“We bought it a couple years ago.”

“You know this version of Windows isn’t supported anymore, right?”

“Okay.”

“What’s the administrator password?”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve probably seen enough anyway.”

They walked back down the hallway to Sally’s office, where the port scan report was still displayed on her computer monitor.

“Sally,” said Jerry, “you have serious issues. That heat and dust in your server room is torture for all your equipment. You’re feeding flakey power to your server, and it’s a wonder that server runs at all. It must be more than ten years old and Microsoft no longer issues security patches for the version of Windows on it. That glitch that took out your customer database—it was probably a server hardware problem. Water and servers don’t mix. Your next server needs to be out of that room and somewhere with plenty of air flow and no janitor’s sink. And put a UPS on it to feed it clean power. You have a security threat at your Internet boundary, and we haven’t even looked at your antivirus yet. This whole operation is a disaster waiting to happen. I’m a reseller partner for Saphas Antivirus and I can get you antivirus protection right now if you want it. Do you want to fix this?”

“We just want all this to run smoothly,” said Sally. “We’re a marketing company, not a tech company.”

“To make this all run smoothly, you need to make some changes.”

“What will that cost?”

“I don’t know yet. Let me put some choices together.”

Jerry left the meeting with that familiar feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Over the next several days, he put together a proposal with equipment costs and choices. He delivered it a week later.

“I have about fifteen minutes and then I have to run to a meeting,” said Sally. “We’ll have to do the abbreviated version.” She took a copy of Jerry’s proposal and scanned down to the

“total cost” line. Jerry rushed through his plan of attack – relocate the server, Internet router, network switch, and other equipment out of the janitor’s closet, upgrade the server with new hardware and a virtualized environment, bring in a BarkleyIT firewall, and put it all behind a UPS to feed it clean power. With hardware, software, and projected labor, the cost was well into five figures.

“What questions can I answer?” asked Jerry after quickly running through the proposal.

“You’ve done a thorough job, Jerry. Thanks for coming in,” said Sally. “And I really do have to go. You know the way out?”

And that was it. Hours of analysis and presales work, sunk into that familiar black hole. Jerry left unanswered voicemails and emails for almost a month. It was familiar territory. Frustrated, he decided to show up and wait in the reception lobby. After cooling his heels for over one hour, Sally finally came out, rushing to another meeting.

“Jerry, you gave us a great proposal, but we’ve decided to go a different direction. We’re bringing in a cloud provider and planning to put all our documents in the cloud.”

“What happens if your Internet connection hiccups?” asked Jerry. “Wasn’t reliability one of your biggest concerns?”

“Yes, it was,” said Sally. “But the vendor we chose has a system to address all those issues.”

“Did they tell you how...?”

Jerry never finished the question as Sally turned her back and walked away, leaving Jerry standing in the lobby. Maybe it was the tennis shoes. But Jerry knew the tennis shoes were not the real problem. “When will I learn, some people don’t care about how to change a lightbulb.”