GEEK SPEAK AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

By Claudia Winkler

Sorry! I heard what you said, but I did not understand what you meant!

You and your management team have been sitting in a two-hour meeting with a system vendor and its sales engineers reviewing the latest and greatest products to improve your business processes. At the end of the meeting the sales executive asks, "Does anyone have any questions?" No hands go up. Everyone seems satisfied. Heads nod in agreement. Everyone politely thanks the vendor and quietly leaves the meeting.

Fortunately, at the beginning of the meeting the sales executive handed out business cards to you and all the other participants. Within 24 hours of the meeting, the sales executive's cell starts ringing, and e-mails and text messages arrive with a common theme: "I did not want to look stupid in the meeting, but I really did not understand most of the information that you presented. Can you please put it in English?"

As someone who has been a "girl geek" (and proud of it!) since the beginning of the technology revolution, I am just as guilty of answering clients and colleagues questions with the technical definitions and all the associated acronyms, only to be called out with an, "I'm sorry, I did not understand a word you just said." After apologizing for the "geek speak," I attempt to provide a plain English translation.

The reality is that technology is getting more complicated, and our brains are tasked with processing gigabytes of information over limited bandwidth. We can only absorb and retain so much information, and we need to receive that information in "chewable bytes."
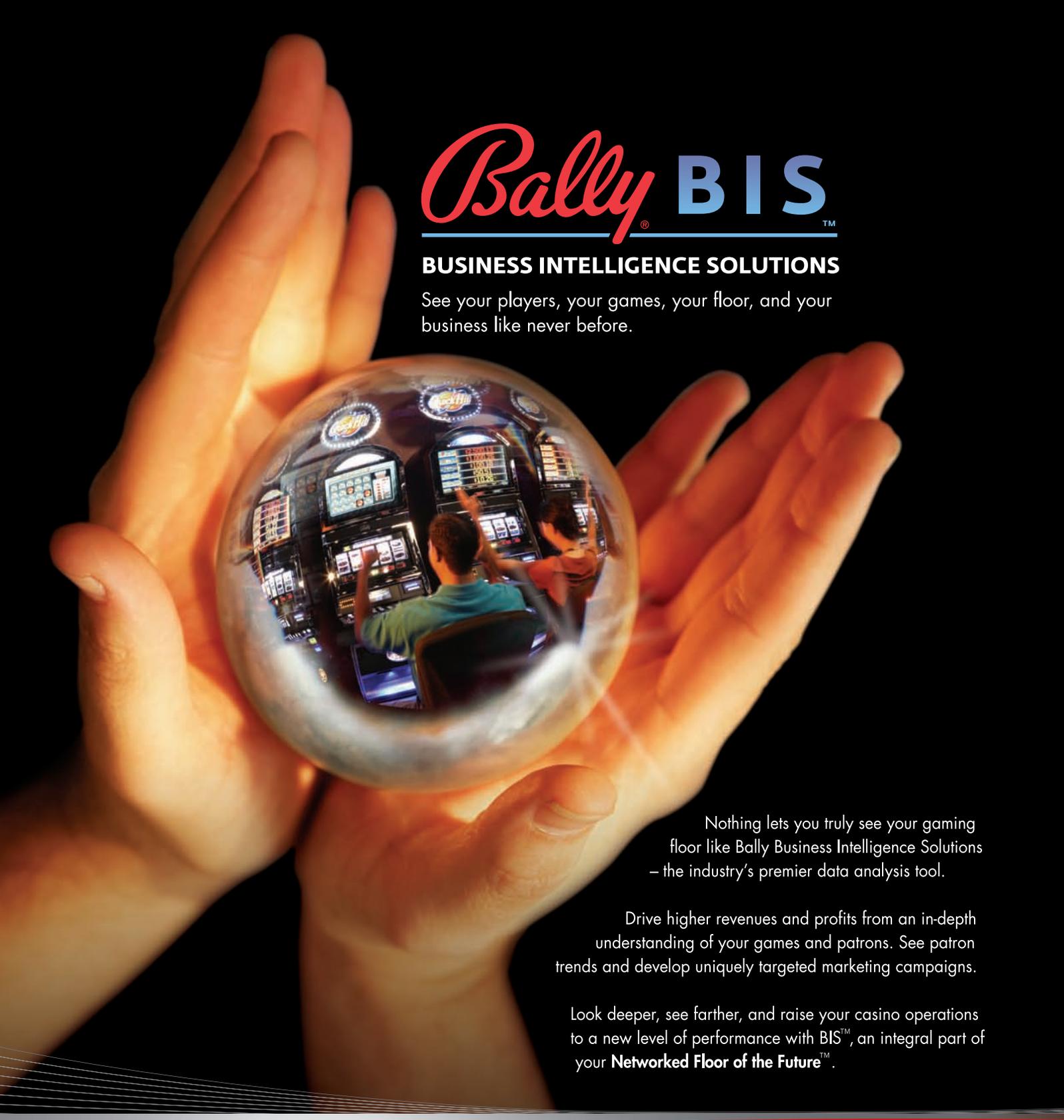
A major consideration and concern in today's business environment is that not all business users are "technology savvy." Yes, you know how to use your workstation, your PDA, your iPhone and your iPod, but the majority of business users that I come in contact with do not understand the network topology and interface/integration requirements of the systems that they use to run their business. They depend on the vendor or the IT department to do the work for them. This is problematic for three major reasons:

1. The IT department is not responsible for using the systems to run the business. It is IT's responsibility to install the required hardware and software, making sure that everything is properly configured, that the data and systems are protected with the required backup and disaster recovery policies and procedures, and that the systems are available 24/7. To put this in English: It is the IT department's job to make sure the car is ready to drive and to provide regularly scheduled maintenance. It is the business user's responsibility to drive the car to the desired destination.

2. There should always be vendor oversight. Vendors are in the business of selling products and services. You need to know what you are buying and why you are buying it—how the product or service is going to improve business processes, increase profitability and provide the ROI to justify the purchase.

3. The executive team should ask this fundamental question: Does the new technology support the strategic business plan and enterprise objectives? If it does not, then perhaps it is not worthy of the limited capital dollars available for IT investment.

So in order to keep up with technology that is changing at warp speed, you need to learn to speak "geek."

I surveyed my fellow geeks to gather a list of geek-speak terms that every business professional should already be, or should become, familiar with. These terms are part of the fabric of our industry, and as we move toward more integrated systems and gaming floors, you will need to understand what these terms mean and how they will impact your organization.

THE GEEK SPEAK BEGINNER'S DICTIONARY

ASP

An application software provider, abbreviated ASP, is a third-party entity that manages and distributes software-based services and solutions to customers across a wide area network from a central data center. They provide SaaS (see entry below). ASPs are a way for companies to outsource some or almost all aspects of their information technology needs. But be warned—ASP also stands for active server page, a specific type of Web technology. Don't get them confused!

BI – Business Intelligence

Most companies collect a large amount of data from their business operations. To keep track of that information, businesses historically have used a wide range of software programs, such as Microsoft Excel and Access, and different database applications for various departments throughout their organization. Using multiple software programs makes it difficult to retrieve information in a timely manner and to perform analysis of the data.

Business intelligence (BI) represents the tools and systems that play a key role in the strategic planning process of the corporation. These systems allow a company to gather, store, access and analyze corporate data to aid in decision making. Generally these systems will illustrate business intelligence in the areas of customer profiling, customer support, market research, market segmentation, product profitability, statistical analysis, and inventory and distribution analysis.

Ethernet

Ethernet is the most widely installed local area network technology, communicating in 10-megabit, 100-megabit or 1000-megabit speed, depending upon the speed settings of the network switches (see entry below) to which the cabling is connected. While Ethernet is most specifically a communications protocol—like talking on the telephone—it is also generally used to refer to the cabling and other physical infrastructure components themselves.

EDW – Enterprise Data Warehouse

Abbreviated EDW, an enterprise data warehouse is a collection of data designed to support management decision making. Data warehouses contain a wide variety of data that present a coherent picture of business conditions at a single point in time. Development of a data warehouse includes the development of systems to extract data from operating systems plus the installation of a warehouse database system that provides managers flexible access to the data.

The term data warehousing generally refers to the combination of many different databases across an entire enterprise.

Fat Client

In a traditional client/server architecture, a client (your workstation) performs the bulk of the data processing operations. The data itself is stored on the server. This makes your client "fat," as it is doing a substantial amount of work. (See also Thin Client.)

Fiber

A more sophisticated and more expensive option to extend standard network copper cabling beyond copper limits, fiber is also used to extend networks where copper cabling is environmentally inappropriate. Fiber delivers higher speed and greater reliability than copper. Unfortunately, unlike copper, fiber is fragile and is not as widely usable and easily maintainable. It also generally requires a specialist to rollout.

Graphical User Interface (GUI)

Windows XP or Windows Vista is an example of a graphical user interface (GUI) that enables "behind-the-scenes" data processing. Compare this to older text-based or "green screen" interfaces that are not quite so easy to work with.

High Availability

High availability, or HA, means that you have hardware and software to minimize system downtime due to hardware failures. HA requires that you have redundant systems (mirror images) so that if one system fails, the other system picks up. Business processes are not interrupted and no data is lost. The goal with HA is the so-called "five 9s" of reliability—99.999 percent uptime.

Hub

Use a switch instead (see entry below)—switches are more effective and efficient. And if you buy a bunch of hubs, someone has just sold you substantially older technology.

Integration

Integration is an activity by companies that specialize in bringing different manufacturers' products together into a smoothly working system. While new specifications from the Gaming Standards Association (GSA) and others are designed to simplify this process—and have made it far more standardized over the last couple of years—there is still no good way to have your labor/scheduling system talk to your gaming system, and vice versa, without integration.

IP Address

An IP (Internet Protocol) address is an identifier for a computer or device on a TCP/IP network. Networks using the TCP/IP protocol route messages based on the IP address of the destination. The format of an IP address is a 32-bit numeric address written as four numbers separated by periods. Each number can be zero to 255. For example, 1.160.10.240 could be an IP address.

Within an isolated network (inside your company's firewall), you can assign IP addresses at random as long as each one is unique. However, connecting a private network to the Internet requires using registered IP addresses (called Internet addresses) to avoid duplicates.

Load Balancing

Load balancing means distributing processing and communications activity evenly across a computer network so that no single device is overwhelmed. Load balancing is especially

important for networks where it is difficult to predict the number of requests that will be issued to a server. Busy websites typically employ two or more Web servers in a load-balancing scheme. If one server gets swamped, requests are forwarded to another server with more capacity. Load balancing can also refer to the communications channels themselves.

MAC Address

Short for media access control, the MAC address is a unique hardware number that identifies each node on a network—the printer, the workstation, the server, the switch, the router, etc. When you're connected to the Internet from your computer (or host, as the Internet protocol thinks of it), a correspondence table relates your IP address to your computer's physical (MAC) address on the network. MAC addresses are also often used by network administrators—particularly with wireless networks—to provide an additional level of security. MAC addresses are unique to every device/computer and retain that uniqueness for their lifetime.

Managed Switch

Managed switches provide greater control over network communications. These are different from a standard automated switch in that network administrators and others can use tools like load balancing, throughput management, and so on, to drive heavy traffic more effectively and to ensure the highest performance. (See also Switch.)

.NET (pronounced "dot net")

.NET is a Microsoft application development system platform that incorporates applications, a suite of tools and services, and a change in the infrastructure of the company's Web strategy.

There are four main principles of .NET from the user's perspective:

1. It erases the boundaries between applications and the Internet. Instead of interacting with an application or a single website, .NET will connect the user to an array of computers and services that will exchange and combine objects and data.

2. Software will be rented as a hosted service over the Internet instead of purchased on a store shelf. Essentially, the Internet will be housing all your applications and data.

3. Users will have access to their information on the Internet from any device, anytime, anywhere.

4. There will be new ways to interact with application data, such as speech and handwriting recognition.

Microsoft views this new technology as revolutionary, enabling Internet users to do things that were never before possible, such as integrating fax, e-mail and phone services, centralizing data storage, and synchronizing all of a user's computing devices to be automatically updated.

Network Interface

A point of interconnection between one software application and another.

Packets

Communications (like TCP/IP) wrap information into this manageable-block format before sending them over the Internet—think of it like little FedEx packages. The Ethernet protocol defines a specific size and shape for those blocks, and the TCP/IP protocol stack interprets them (opens them up) in a specific sequence so everyone is talking to each other in the same language (rather than me speaking English and you speaking Cantonese and neither of us knowing what the other is talking about).

Platform

The platform is the underlying hardware or software for a system. For example, the platform might be an Intel processor running Windows XP. The platform could also be UNIX machines on an Ethernet network.

The platform defines a standard around which a system can be developed. Once the platform has been defined, software developers can produce appropriate software and managers can purchase appropriate hardware and applications. The term is often

used as a synonym of operating system (like Windows XP, Vista, UNIX, AIX or Linux).

Portal

(1) A Web portal or public portal refers to a website or service that offers a broad array of resources and services, such as e-mail, forums, search engines and online shopping malls. The first Web portals were online services, such as AOL and Netscape, that provided access to the Web, but by now most of the traditional search engines have transformed themselves into Web portals to attract and keep a larger audience—MSN, Google, AOL, etc.

(2) An enterprise portal is a Web-based interface for users of enterprise applications. Enterprise portals also provide access to enterprise information such as corporate databases, applications (including Web applications), and systems.

In general, a portal is a standardized methodology for exposing SaaS, thin client applications, and other related solutions. (See entries below.)

PSTN

PSTN is short for public switched telephone network, which refers to the international telephone system that is based on copper wires carrying analog voice data. This is in contrast to newer telephone networks based on digital technologies (most particularly fiberoptics).

Telephone service carried by the PSTN is often called plain old telephone service (POTS).

Redundancy

Redundancy, or redundant, is used to describe a component of a computer or network system that is used to guard the primary system from failure by acting as a backup system. Redundant components can include both hardware elements of a system (disk drives, peripherals, servers, switches and routers) and software elements (operating systems, applications and databases). For most casinos, both high availability and redundancy are extremely important for revenue protection.

Router

Simply stated, a router is typically the device that provides connectivity to a Local Area Network switch and a data circuit provided by a local carrier who is charged with bringing Internet services, at various levels, to a location.

A router is like an automated air traffic controller in that it determines which "planes" can fly into and out of your local network and how to manage them most efficiently.

SaaS

Short for Software as a Service, SaaS is a software delivery method that provides access to software and its functions remotely as a Web-based service. SaaS allows organizations to access business functionality at a cost typically less than paying for licensed applications since SaaS pricing is based on a monthly fee. Also, because the software is hosted remotely, users don't need to invest in additional hardware. SaaS removes the need for organizations to handle the installation, set-up and (often) daily upkeep and maintenance. Software as a Service may also be referred to simply as hosted applications. SaaS has compelling arguments, but unfortunately for many gaming companies, their business data is their single most valuable asset, and so putting

that onto a backbone they don't directly control can be uncomfortable or unrewarding.

SAN – Storage Area Network

A storage area network (SAN) is a high-speed sub-network of shared storage devices. A storage device is a machine that contains nothing but a disk, or disks, for storing data.

A SAN's architecture works in a way that makes all storage devices available to all servers on a LAN or WAN. As more storage devices are added to a SAN, they too will be accessible from any server in the larger network. In this case, the server merely acts as a pathway between the end user and the stored data.

Because stored data does not reside directly on any of a network's servers, server power is utilized for business applications, and network capacity is released to the end user.

There are two main types of SAN structures available today: the traditional, fibre-channel SAN, which is fast, reliable and somewhat expensive; and the new iSCSI SAN technology, which is not as fast in most situations but just as reliable and somewhat less expensive.

SOA – Service Oriented Architecture

This is a methodology for systems development and integration where functionality is grouped around business processes and packaged as interoperable services. SOA also describes IT infrastructure that allows different applications to exchange data with one another as they participate in business processes. SOA makes it easier for different software applications and databases to "talk" to each other. The intent of the SOA model was to simplify the integration of diverse applications.

Switch

A switch moves data through a network, intelligently and efficiently increasing the communications speed throughout the network. Switches compare to older hub technology in that each communication is handled individually, so that you don't end up with "traffic jams" like you can when too much data is trying to transit on a singular "wire."

Thin Client

In more modern client/server applications, a client (your workstation) is designed to be especially small so that the bulk of the data processing occurs on the server (a process which, ironically, looks surprisingly similar to the way older computer technologies work as well).

Although thin client usually refers to software, it is increasingly used for computers, such as network computers and Net PCs, that are designed to serve as the clients for client/server architectures. A thin client is a network computer without a hard disk drive, whereas a fat client includes a disk drive. (See entry above.)

Virtualization

Virtualization essentially lets one computer do the job of multiple computers, by sharing the resources of a single computer across multiple environments. Conceptually, virtualization works like a gym membership: If everyone goes to the gym at once, it's too crowded and nobody gets anything done, but because most people go to the gym only once or twice a week, there is a lot of excess capacity that can be used if it is load-balanced effectively.

VoIP

Short for Voice over Internet Protocol, VoIP is a category of hardware and software that enables people to use the Internet as the transmission medium for telephone calls by sending voice data in packets using IP rather than by traditional circuit transmissions of the PSTN (see entries above). One advantage of VoIP is that telephone calls over the Internet do not incur a surcharge beyond what the user is paying for Internet access, much in the same way that the user doesn't pay for sending individual e-mails over the Internet. It also tends to be easier to deliver multimedia content down the VOIP pipe, since that is a part of its design, than it may be over a traditional analog line.

Web 2.0

Web 2.0 is the term to describe a second generation of the World Wide Web that is focused on the ability for people to collaborate and share information online. Web 2.0 refers to the transition from static HTML Web pages to a more dynamic Web that is more organized and is based on serving Web applications to users. Other improved functionality of Web 2.0 includes open communication with an emphasis on Web-based communities of users, and more open sharing of information. Blogs, wikis, and Web services (see entry below) are all seen as components of Web 2.0.

Web Service

Web services allow different applications from different sources to communicate with each other without time-consuming custom coding. And because all communication is in a formatted XML document, Web services are not tied to any one operating system or programming language. For example, Java can talk with Perl and Windows applications can talk with UNIX applications. This communication process happens through a standard called SOAP and is widely-used for tying together applications on the same platform as well as cross-platform.

Hopefully these geek-speak definitions have expanded your BI, providing you with an understanding of some of the basic and most commonly used geek speak terms to help you be a better-informed and more tech savvy business user.

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