

## Keep it simple, stupid



You may be familiar with the expression **“Keep it simple, stupid.”** People say that the phrase was created in about 1960 by Kelly Johnson, who was an engineer with the Lockheed aircraft company. His idea was that the design of an aircraft should not be so complicated that an ordinary mechanic with ordinary tools couldn't repair it.

Kelly Johnson's version of the KISS principle didn't include the word “stupid”, but someone added it later. It suggests that the KISS principle is so obvious and sensible that any intelligent person would happily follow it.

The principle applies to the design of machines, but it's equally used in business practice. The simplest ideas, structures and products are the ones which are the most likely to succeed.

Of course, some things have to be complex. Hi-tech solutions have to be complex: if they weren't, they wouldn't be hi-tech. But nothing should be more complex than it needs to be. Even Albert Einstein believed that.

### ***Elegant and self-evident***

Personally, I've always found the KISS principle both elegant and self-evident. I've also assumed that the business world, with its love for efficiency, held closely to the KISS principle.

But recently I've discovered that that's not necessarily true. Let me tell you what I mean:

In April, when we moved house, I needed to find a new way of accessing the internet. I asked other people for ideas, and someone suggested getting a “portable hotspot” also known as “mobile internet access”. The idea is simple. You get a small piece of equipment which is basically a mobile phone with no screen and no buttons. This device connects to the internet over the mobile phone network and rebroadcasts it around your home so that your computer can connect to it via Wi-Fi.

There's nothing to install, no cables, no antennae, no special software. You can take it with you when you go away on holiday. It'll even run on batteries so you don't always need access to mains electricity.

The package (the equipment and the internet access) comes to you for a flat-rate monthly fee of 35 Swiss francs, so there are no complex bills at the end of the month.

The whole thing seemed to be a model of the KISS principle, and so I decided to get one. One day in early April I went along to a shop of the company who provides this service. I won't tell you the name of the company, but for the purposes of this article, let's call them “Pepper”.



When I walked into the Pepper shop I discovered that in reality things weren't that simple. Their agent was talking to some customers about plans and Gigabytes and discounts. He answered all their questions, and more. Much, much more. When I had browsed through all the stock in the shop several times, I began to get bored and told the salesman that I had some other shopping to do and that I would come back later.

I did come back later, but by then the salesman was talking to a new group of customers about plans and Gigabytes and discounts. There was nothing for it but to wait my turn. I sat down and tried not to fall asleep—it was very hot in the shop—until eventually the customers signed a whole sheaf of contracts, handed over some money and walked out of the shop with a box containing some kind of equipment in their hands. It was my turn now.



I started by telling the salesman how simple my requirements were, and that it shouldn't take any time at all for him to sell me what I needed. But he had other ideas. He produced a pad of paper and started sketching out various ways I could combine the mobile internet package with other Pepper services, most of which I resisted.

I mentioned a few moments ago that the mobile internet package costs a flat-rate of 35 francs per month; I made it clear that that was the maximum I was prepared to pay. After a long time the salesman suggested that I took out a second Pepper SIM card.

If I did that, he said, it would mean that I was a Pepper customer, and as a Pepper customer he was allowed to offer me both services for just 24.45 francs per month.

By this time I was so desperate to get away from the sales-talk and the hot airless shop, that I agreed, signed a lot of contracts and finally left the shop.

When I got home I tried to explain to my family the deal Pepper had offered me, but it turned out to be impossible. I had no idea how much I had signed up to pay per month, or why.

So where does the KISS principle come into this? What possible advantage can Pepper have in setting up a system which is so complex that a customer of average intelligence can't understand it?

Well, after a month or two I discovered two things. Firstly that Pepper had indeed granted me a discount for signing up for two Pepper products instead of one. I have been paying 24.45 francs per month instead of 35.– francs.

The second thing I discovered was that Pepper's commercial strategy is probably **"Keep it complex, stupid" (KICS)**. Through all the confusion of signing contracts I somehow forgot to pay the initial payment of 24.45 francs. That is, I thought I had paid it, but I hadn't. And because I failed to pay the bill, Pepper charged me an administration fee of 30.00 francs.

Quite a clever strategy this KICS! Maybe I'll try it out for myself.