

# You Recommended *What?*

*John Riedl*

Some years ago Net Perceptions was installing its recommender software in a major catalog retailer. Our top lead consultant had been working with them for months to integrate the software into their back-end databases and front-end call center software (no mean feat: these were Windows PCs simulating IBM “green screens”), and tuning the recommender to produce high quality recommendations that were successful against historical sales data. The recommendations were designed to be delivered in real time to the call center agents during live inbound calls. For instance, if the customer ordered the pink housecoat, the recommender might suggest the fuzzy pink slippers to go with it, based on prior sales experience.

The company was ready for a big test: our lead consultant was standing behind one of the call center agents, watching her receive calls. Then the moment came: the IT folk at the company pushed the metaphoric big red button and switched her over to the automated recommender system. The first call came in: a woman ordered the complete two-week diet package: a self-contained package with all the powdered food you needed to eat and drink to lose 10 pounds in just two weeks. Our consultant watched nervously as the agent entered the order. In seconds, the recommendations came back. The top of the list was a 5-pound tinned ham! The agent’s eyes were wide as she looked at the screen. She looked back at our consultant with eyebrows raised: should I? He smiled nervously, and gave her his best “I have no idea” shrug.

After a couple of seconds of silence, her training kicked in: “Would you like a tinned ham with that?” Without missing a beat, the woman on the other end replied, “Sure, that would be great!”

We eventually won the contract, probably in spite of recommending hams to customers who wanted to go on a diet.

**John Riedl** is a professor in the Department of Computer Science at the University of Minnesota.