

The following is a review of Hal Bryan's talk titled "It's a Beta... What do you expect?" presented at [QA SIG](#) on July 8, 2003.
by **Jonathan Bach**, senior test lead at [Quardev Laboratories](#):

I don't know a single test professional who hasn't been disappointed by the quality of bugs from a beta program. Hal Bryan (a test lead and beta coordinator for Microsoft Flight Simulator 2004) has had similar disappointment in his test career, but in a talk for QASIG's most recent gathering on July 8, he offered an astoundingly simple cure: Change your expectations.

That may be a hard pill for testers to swallow, or a simplistic solution that's easier said than done, but after hearing him talk about beta bug metrics, it made sense to me.

"Bug reports are the least important value of beta programs," Hal said, citing an average Valid Bug percentage of only 5%. Not surprising, then, that we're often disappointed. But if bugs aren't the most important aspect of a beta, what is?

According to Hal, it's consumer relations and corporate image—a profound idea to consider, given his success with hosting the most successful beta in Microsoft Flight Simulator franchise history. FS 2004 is due in stores next month, so the beta program is over for this version, but its success was largely due to its users who were granted newsgroup access to several program managers and developers on the project. Its success was marked by the managers' regular and reliable replies to customers in the newsgroup, a venue that helped manage expectations on both sides of the firewall and generate unparalleled enthusiasm and excitement for the upcoming release.

But Hal cautions that beta programs commonly fail because they are hosted only by marketing teams, not the team responsible for developing and testing the software. As he succinctly stated: "The term beta testing has the word 'testing' in it, and should be managed by testers. Just as testers provide a service to developers, the customer also provides a service to testers. While valuable to other project teams like Marketing and Sales, the beta is often more suited for Test, helping testers generate ideas and trap crashes on various configurations that can't be tested in a small lab."

But since testers are trained to be critical, Hal had words of caution. Bugs may be poorly written (or not a bug at all), but that should not devalue the beta tester's test ideas. "Their ideas can inspire testers to follow different paths or can alert testers about paths they never saw before," he said, and added an interesting anthem for testers: "Don't judge the value of the test by the quality of the testing."

Since testers are trained to think like end-users and often use black-box test techniques, the information leading to a bug report is often more valuable than the bug. Hal gave a simple reminder: "Beta testers are not professional testers," Hal said, "but they ARE customers." Hal offered a few other innovative ways to make sure your beta is more successful, and all stem from his title—managing expectations. The title and the theme of Hal's talk is right on the money. If you take time to answer the question: "What do you expect from your beta program?", you'll likely be able to help your customer know what to expect when the software is released.