



The Second Derivative

1538 Winding Way
Belmont, CA 94002
Phone: +1 650 631 3694
PCohan@SecondDerivative.com
www.SecondDerivative.com
<http://greatdemo.blogspot.com/>
Peter E. Cohan, Principal

Stunningly Awful Demos – Two Words to Avoid

Name two words that strike fear and terror into the hearts of customers watching a software demonstration – two words that lengthen demos and turn short, crisp pathways into journeys worthy of Norse sagas. These are, of course:

“If” and “Or”

Recently, I was watching a demo where a major component of the software was a wizard. It was a rather wonderful wizard. Rich with features. Ripe with options. The depth and breadth of the capabilities it offered were legion. How do I know this?

The person delivering the demo started the wizard to show how to execute a specific task – and finally finished the process *55 minutes* later. Truly breathtaking (and not in a positive way...)!

I said, “Could you please start again and run the wizard the way that someone would use it to complete that same task on a day-to-day basis?”

He said, “Sure” and launched into the process a second time. How long do you think it took this time? Three and a half minutes.

That’s right – using the wizard as designed for this typical task took 3.5 minutes – vs. the 55 minutes consumed in his demo.

What was the difference? “If” and “Or”.

Each time someone presenting a demo uses either of these words, it opens a branch – an additional pathway – and each additional pathway extends the demo, inflicting increased complexity and confusion on the audience.

A Parable

Imagine you need to drive to the store to pick up a few things for dinner – a trip that normally takes 10 minutes each way. You get into your car, leave the driveway and proceed down the street. Your car is equipped with a surprisingly intelligent voice-controlled GPS – so intelligent, in fact, that it decides there are other options you should see on the way.

The GPS takes control and turns off the direct route to show you an interesting restaurant it thinks you might want to try sometime in the future. You thank the GPS and ask it to return to the original course. It does so.

A few blocks later, it again changes direction and drives 5 minutes to show you a nice park. "Terrific, but I'm not in the mood for a picnic," you say. "Please return to the original course." The GPS sighs quietly, but obediently returns to the original route once again.

Moments later, the GPS makes a left turn and drives 8 minutes to a new home-products store. It announces proudly that the store just opened recently and is a great option for everything from paint to plumbing. "Thanks" you comment, getting irritated, "but I don't need any hardware – please return to the original route."

Two minutes later the GPS takes control again – and this time it shows you five options for travelling one segment of the route: An expressway, a toll-road, and three separate local "short-cuts" (none of which are particularly short) – and the GPS travels down each of these.

Now very annoyed, you tell the GPS "Please return to course!" It does so, after grumbling that you really should see all of the cool options it knows about...

Angrily you disable the GPS and proceed directly to the store – and because of the many detours, dinner will be seriously late!

What if demos were delivered this way?

The Dreaded "If"

It starts innocuously enough, with a single "if", such as, "Now, *if* you want to submit this, then you choose 'OK'..." But "if" appears to need company and will clone itself...repeatedly! Here's an example:

"Now, *if* you want to submit this, then you choose 'OK'... But *if* you want to change the color, then you go to our color palette which I'll show you now..., and *if* you need a different size, then you click here where we have our sizing sub-wizard which operates like this..., and *if* you want to share it with other colleagues then let me show you our collaboration tool and..." "Ifs" breed like proverbial rabbits.

And that's one way to change a 3.5 minute pathway into a 55 minute torture tour. When you find you are about to say "If" in a demo, consider asking whether the *audience* is interested in seeing the capabilities you have in mind before proceeding!

"Or" Horror

Let me describe the sins of "Or" via a simple example or by using a medium-length process, or with a longer task example, or via a nice story, or by providing a couple of references, or by using live software to show seven different ways to accomplish the same task...

Have I made my point – (or) do I need further "Or's" to illustrate?

Consider: Is there any task you do that you'd like it to take any longer than necessary?
[Clarification: any task you do at *work*?]

When there are several possible ways to accomplish a task, which should you show in a demo? Pick the fastest, most direct route – the “Do It” pathway. No extra information, no discussion of options. The straight line – the *fewest* number of steps – from a logical starting point to completing that task.

Cohan's Razor: Given the choice of multiple paths in a demo, choose the shortest. [Apologies to William of Occam.]

Later on, you can *ask* if the audience might be interested in other possibilities – particularly if the other capabilities are competitively important or otherwise differentiate your offering.

And, of course, the worst phrase of all is “Or if”... Example: “Or, if you want save this in other formats let me show you all of the file formats we support...”

Death By Dead-End

What is a “Dead-end”? It is the natural outcome of launching down an “If” or “Or” pathway, getting close to the end, but not completing the function – leaving the audience unfulfilled and unsatisfied.

Example: Have you ever seen someone in a demo navigate to the “Reports” tab, comment that there are 600 pre-built reports available in the system”, then move to another menu option, begin to build a custom report and – after a pile of clicks, scrolls and drags – produce a completed report template, but *not run an actual report*? Aaagh!

Even worse, in many cases the demonstrator needs to *backtrack* through another pile of clicks just to return to the main story. Hmmm – sounds a lot like our car GPS story above...!

To be fair, there may be situations where some of these alternative approaches may be useful or important. An excellent way to test for interest is to *ask*. For example, “We have a number of output options – are there any that you would like to see in particular?” [See my article *Competitive Demo Situations – Biasing Towards Your Strengths* for more on how to do this.]

Otherwise, avoid alternative approaches and dead-ends...!

In Case “If” and “Or” Aren't Enough

There are a handful of phrases that put fear and loathing into customers' hearts when on the receiving end of demos – here are a few of my personal favorites:

“...Let me start by orienting you to our screen layout and navigation ...”

Oh my god. I don't what to *learn* how to use your software yet; I don't yet know if it does anything that will help me in my business. The *last* thing I want at this point is product *training*!

Solution? Do the Last Thing First.

“...Now I'll show you our context-relevant help system...”

Double oh my god. This suggests that I'll *need* the help system, because your software is likely complex, complicated, and downright user-hostile.

Solution? Don't.

“...and another really cool thing about our software is...”

This phrase is used, often frequently, in what are known as “run-on demos”. These are demos without a break, without a pause, and typically no introduction or summary for any particular segment. These demos are one-way, painful fire-hose deliveries of features and functions flung in a steady stream from presenter to audience.

Solution? Break your demo into consumable components – chunks – that can be introduced, presented crisply, and summarized before moving on.

“...now this next part is really important...”

You can say this once, and I'll believe it. Twice, I'm still with you. Three times, I *might* be able to remember all three.

But what happens beyond the third use of “really important”? Confusion, then boredom. Tedium. Numbness. Idle doodling and furtive glances at smart phones. When too many items are labeled “important” they all become – unimportant!

Solution? Don't.

When possible, record and listen to your demos carefully and critically – and if you hear yourself using any of the phrases above, take appropriate action to change! Overall, consciously avoid “If” and “Or”. Your audience will be grateful and your reward will be higher success rates with your demos and more closed business.

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