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Why Structure a Demo Like a News Article?

Remember newspapers – the analog version of web-delivered news?

News organizations have been presenting information for several hundreds of years, in print and more lately via the web, and they have learned some highly effective practices that we can employ in demonstrating software.

Structure your demonstrations like a news article. Here's why...

Think about the news articles you read and consider two things:

1. How you select which articles to read
2. How the articles are written

Chunks and Consumable Components

Imagine you've just picked up today's newspaper or opened a web news site. Which section do you turn to or choose first? In many cases, people immediately select a specific section – finance, entertainment, local, sports, etc. Readers explore that section and its articles in as much depth as desired, and then move to the next section of interest.

Newspapers (and news websites) organize information in a *hierarchy of consumable components* – chunks – that can be accessed rapidly, explored as deeply as desired, and then exited at any point to move to the next chunk or component. The top level of the news hierarchy is the section – sports, finance, international, entertainment, technology, health, comics... And within each section you know you'll find articles on that topical area – and on that area only.

Next, how do you choose which article you want to read? Typically, you scan for headlines or photos that catch your interest. For many articles, you may only read the headline and move on rapidly – you're not interested. Other articles engage your attention sufficiently to review the first paragraph or two, after which you stop and move on. Some articles you read most of or all the way through because they address a topic of real interest to you.

Each individual article is cleverly organized to enable readers to make rapid decisions about their depth of interest. The headline presents the topic – providing a binary opportunity for readers to pursue it or move on. In a well-written news article the first

one or two paragraphs summarize the story concisely. Many readers are completely satisfied with this level of information and read no further, returning to scan for other headlines.

The subsequent paragraphs in an article drill deeper and explore the story in more detail. Readers who are truly interested in the topic are the typical consumers of this level of information.

Inverted Pyramid

This article structure and presentation of information is sometimes referred to as the “inverted pyramid” style of writing. It presents the most important information right at the beginning, starting with the headline and followed by the overall summary of the article in the first few paragraphs. Material in subsequent paragraphs is more and more detailed and of less importance. Reading on towards the end of an article we often find the finest levels of granularity and smallest details.

In the bad old days of paper and ink, newspaper editors were able to cut articles to fit the space available (or to sell more advertising) – by cutting from the *bottom* of the article upwards. That way they knew they’d be removing the *least* important information.

News organizations have evolved this “inverted pyramid” method of presenting information over literally hundreds of years. Why not take advantage of this learning?

I’ll Go Really Fast...

Have you ever run out of time in a demo – and you were unable to get to the “best stuff” because (a) the meeting was cut short or (b) the corporate overview/product overview consumed too much time?

Traditionally, when we are faced with 25 minutes remaining in the demo meeting in which to show a 45 minute demo we try to compress the material: “We are going to move really fast” (while also telling our audience that “we want this to be as interactive as possible, so please feel free to ask questions...”). Are we surprised when we (a) don’t get through the material and (b) our customer doesn’t ask any questions?

Consider organizing your demonstrations like a news article. Present a “headline or photo” succinctly and rapidly. In Great Demo! methodology we call this an Illustration.

If your audience is interested in going further, present the key capabilities using a minimum of mouse clicks – like reading the first one or two paragraphs in a news article. The audience just wants a summary at this point – not all of the details! This corresponds to the Great Demo! “Do It” pathway.

Finally, for audiences that are really interested, you can dig deeper and explore the breadth and depth of the relevant capabilities – similar to those who wish to read more of the article. In Great Demo! we call this “Peeling Back the Layers”.

Interestingly, also note that there are *very* few readers of the news who read *everything* in a newspaper or news website – similarly, you are *not* obligated to present everything that your software can do...!

News organizations present information in a hierarchy of consumable components, using the “inverted pyramid” organizational structure – why not apply the same ideas to your demos?

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