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We Are Programmed To Forget - And Its Impact on Our Demos

Indeed we are – and consider the impact this has on traditional software demos!

Imagine you are driving home from work or on an errand... What do you remember about the cars and signs you see, the road-side debris, people, buildings and the roads you pass? How much of that information is retained?

Very little is actually remembered about what you saw along your way. Our brains are continuously evaluating what we see and hear as we move through our day – and continuously discarding anything that is not considered important, threatening, or particularly interesting.

What *don't* we remember? Everything that is typical, expected, or normal.

What *do* we remember? Remarkable events, problems, danger and close calls, humor (things that made us laugh), anger (things that made us mad) and other emotional experiences (things that caused a strong emotional reaction).

What's Forgotten?

How does this impact our demos and what audiences remember? In an hour-long traditional demo, we shouldn't expect our audiences to remember very much:

- They *won't* remember long sequences of features, functions and options...
- They *won't* remember complex workflows, loops and multiple "if" cases...
- They *won't* remember the confusing interdependencies of configuration choices, multiple roles, and intertwined pathways...

What's Remembered?

What will audiences recall from traditional demos? The beginning, the end, and the ugly:

- They *will* remember the first and last few things that are shown...

- They *will* remember the bugs, crashes, ignored or poorly handled questions, the amusing distractions from other audience members, and particularly stunning fumbling for features.
- And they *will* remember an overall impression of the demo – as being boring, confusing, and complicated.

They may also remember the *absence* of capabilities they were looking for – in many cases, even if these capabilities were, in fact, presented!

What can we do to improve our success rates?

Memory Management

Here are three simple (yet very effective!) tactics to help your customers retain the key ideas you want them to remember:

1. [Shall we all say it together? “Do the Last Thing First!”] When presented with a long list of ideas, people remember the first few items very well and the last few items moderately well – and the material in between generally gets lost. This is the “Attention-Retention” principle (also known as the [Serial Positioning Effect](#)).

Take advantage of this and start your demos with the most compelling, most interesting deliverables for each audience. If the audience remembers nothing else, they will remember the most important part of your demo – the payoff, the visual evidence of the solution to their problem.

2. Along similar lines, people absorb and retain information best when it is presented in discrete “chunks”, as opposed to a long linear flow. Organize and present your demos accordingly – in consumable components – and use a roadmap to help manage the delivery of your component chunks.
3. Summarize...! Adults learn by repetition – so when you complete a demo segment, summarize. Repeat, verbally, what you just showed them. If you are face-to-face, you should see your audience nodding their heads – this means they have heard you, they understand, and they have a higher likelihood of remembering.

How can you tell if your audience will remember the key points? You’ll see them making notes – writing things down.

We combat our “programming-to-forget” by making notes of the major ideas, issues and questions we want to remember. For software demos, if you are doing well, you’ll see your audience making notes about key capabilities and writing comments about what they find particularly interesting.

I Really Remember...

What else can we do to help audiences remember our demos? Anything that is perceived as *remarkable* is memorable – for example:

- A unique presentation of a solution to a problem – “Wow! – They showed us the key reports that we need to produce right up front, at the beginning of their demo. And they showed generating those reports in *3 mouse clicks*, as opposed to what is taking us a week to do today...!”
- Engage the audience – “That was so cool – they had John drive a portion of their demo, and John still types in all caps...!”
- Develop concepts or materials *ad hoc* – “It was great when they built a new form for us, first on a whiteboard and then right in their software...!”
- Make it a two-way conversation – “We were really engaged – asking questions and even coming up with new ideas for our process...”
- Finish the demo early – “Wow – they finished early and I had time to get some *real* work done...!”
- Be humorous, but effective – “It was funny when the sales guy said, ‘The bad news is I have a 60 slide corporate overview presentation to show – the good news is that I’m not going to inflict it on you...!’”
- Use props – “Do you remember when their technical guy came into the room with this huge stack of documents and folders spilling all over the place? Looked like our day-to-day lives, to me...!”
- Run their examples – “That was really nice – we rarely take something of value away from a demo...”

Humans are, by nature, programmed to forget. Causatively forgetting the unimportant, the uninteresting and the unremarkable is how our brains are able to handle the enormous volume of information we encounter every day.

Make your demos memorable by Doing the Last Thing First, organizing your delivery in consumable components, and by summarizing – as basics. Make your demos truly unforgettable by doing the unexpected, the noteworthy, and the remarkable.

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