The Second Derivative
1532 Scenic Drive
Trinidad, CA 95570
Phone: +1 650 631 3694
PCohan@SecondDerivative.com
www.SecondDerivative.com

Peter E. Cohan, Principal

Storytelling in Demos

Stories can be one of the most effective mechanisms in demos to help your customers remember – and recommunicate – the use cases and value of your offerings.

Stories engage, illustrate and are remembered in ways that facts and features cannot. We are *wired* for stories – most people can *retell* stories that resonate with them days, weeks or even months after initially hearing the story.

Immortality for the Boring?

Contemplate the following punchline: "Slow and steady wins the race."

What is the name of this story and who first told it – and when did the author live?

"The Tortoise and the Hare[1]", one of Aesop's Fables, was first captured by Aesop in 2600 BC. Let me say that again: that story is now 2600 years old.

And what is the take-away message from the story? "If you simply persevere, my son/daughter, you will do well…"

Frankly, this message is *boring*. By itself, that message would not last (do the experiment: tell a teenager that "if you simply work hard and persevere, you will do well in life" – and watch the reaction, "Yeah, right, whatever…"). The message would disappear and be forgotten in moments.

However, when you wrap this boring message inside a story that includes several key storytelling elements, that message gets told and retold – and in the case of Aesop, for 2600 years (so far!).

> "*Tell me the facts and I'll learn*. *Tell me the truth and I'll believe*. *But tell me* a *story and it will live in my heart forever*." – Native American Proverb

Storytelling in Demos

It is fascinating to watch an audience's reaction when you offer to tell a story. When you ask, "Are you interested in the true story of how this happened?" people lean forward in their seats and their attention level rises markedly.

So how do you use stories in software demonstrations?

[1] The title of the story, and the animals, may change from culture to culture, but the key elements and the take-away message remain the same.

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Use stories to underscore and illustrate key ideas and important concepts.

During a demo, you present a capability – you describe what it does and outline the business value for the customer. You may also use a metaphor or analogy to develop the ideas further – that helps.

But to make it truly memorable, wrap a story *around* that capability– and make it live for millennia…!

What Makes a Good Story?

Good stories get retold; others don't. If stories you relate in demos aren't retold by your audiences then they weren't successful. Similarly, if your audience is not actively engaged while you are relating your story, it is not getting the job done.

We know good stories when we hear them – they often cause us, as audience members, to respond with a "Wow…!" or "Hmmmm…!" reaction. A good story often triggers us to tell one of our own stories in response.

Here are five key elements of a good story as a starting point for analysis:

Simple Message:	The concept or message needs to be clear and easy to understand
Real Experience:	It has to be believable and perceived as being true
Element of Surprise:	An unexpected twist, event or outcome generates interest and tension
Evokes Emotion:	The best stories are those that generate an emotional response
Relevant:	Good stories relate directly to the subject or key point

[Note: Read *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* by Chip and Dan Heath – this terrific book outlines the elements above and develops other important principles of storytelling.]

Simple Message

In Great Demo! Workshops, we use stories to illustrate the concept of the *Specific Capabilities* needed by a customer to solve a business problem. There are typically tons of features and functions available in most software offerings, but it is just the few *Specific Capabilities* the customer actually needs to complete the desired tasks. The idea of *Specific Capabilities* is a simple one.

Unfortunately, if we simply said, "Remember, it is only the *Specific Capabilities* that the customer needs…" our Workshop participants would likely *not* remember this idea very well. However, by wrapping it inside one or more stories[2] we give the idea of *Specific Capabilities* greater longevity.

Real Experience

Why do customers go to users' group meetings? (In addition to the free drinks, of course…!) They go to hear how *other* customers have addressed challenges or solved problems using the software.

[2] For you who have survived a Great Demo! Workshop, you may remember the following stories:
"…You are riding a bicycle rather fast…"
"…A negative conversion of $245,000…"

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The stories shared by other customers are perceived as real, based on actual experiences, and are therefore highly valuable and believable.

Along the same lines, stories presented by vendors need to be perceived as real to have solid impact in a demo meeting. Often, the best stories are (therefore) those about how *other* customers solved problems that are the same or similar to what the current customer is facing.

Accordingly, some of the *best* stories to use when presenting software demonstrations are customer success stories. These are often shared anecdotally in typical use, "Oh, I remember working with *another* customer who had the same problem…"

The skill here is to capture and *plan* to reuse that success story when delivering demos for other, similar customers.

Element of Surprise

Memorable movies have numerous plot twists and turns – stories that offer one or more non-obvious surprises tend to engage and are more effectively remembered. Stories that are too predictable may be less interesting.

In Aesop's *The Tortoise and the Hare*, we all expect the rabbit to win the race (with ease). But because he takes a nap and oversleeps, the turtle is able to beat that bunny. (Note: in the Warner Bros. Bugs Bunny version of the story, the careful observer will note that the turtle is cheating at the start of the race – with his feet beyond the starting line. This is an additional element of surprise – we didn't expect that terrapin to cheat…!).

Elements of surprise can come from a range of possibilities:

- Turning a well-known phrase upside down: "Snatching *defeat* from the jaws of *victory*."
- Presenting an unanticipated result: "Resulted in the *loss* of $245K annually."
- Offering an unexpected process or approach: "Turn traditional demos *upside-down.*"

When using stories in demos, find stories that have a similar twist or unexpected turn. For example, "He was about to spend 6 weeks and tens of thousands of dollars to build a tool on his own – but in a conversation with another customer at a users' group meeting he learned about an unsung and unknown product that was the perfect fit. As a result, he was able to beat the schedule and came in under budget with his project…!"

Evokes Emotion

To connect strongly to a story, the audience needs to feel an emotional impact – it should resonate with them as a shared experience or situation.

A child comes home from school and reports to his parents, "Everyone did really poorly on today's math test…" Most parents immediately respond, "Well, how did *you* do?" The parents don't care about the balance of the class – there is no emotional connection – but how *their* child performed is critical.

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To introduce the idea that "We Are Programmed to Forget" we offer an example situation in the form of a short story: "Have you ever arrived at the end of a drive that you take frequently – to the store, to school, to the office – and you suddenly realize that you have *no* recollection of the drive itself? We think, 'I must have been on autopilot'…"

For many people, this evokes emotional responses of recognition, wonder, self-aware surprise, and a certain degree of discomfort. At the same time, the realization that this also appears to happen to everyone else is reassuring.

An emotional connection makes the story that much more meaningful and personal.

In a software demo, we want to use stories that have a similar emotional "hook". One way to accomplish this is to begin with, "Have you ever had the following experience…?" followed by a story that has a high-probability of having happened to this customer as well.

In Great Demo! Workshops, we ask questions like, "Have you ever had a demo go poorly…?" The answers are nearly always, "Yes…" followed by a stream of descriptions of what happened: no Internet, wrong audience, not enough time, etc. – all of which evoke head nods of agreement from the balance of the participants who have suffered through similar situations.

Relevant

Stories need to be perceived as relevant or their impact drops precipitously – stories need to resonate with your audience.

A customer in the manufacturing industry won't consider a demo that uses data from a commercial banking scenario as credible – he perceives it as too distant from his situation. Similarly, stories need to be aligned with how customers view themselves and their situations.

When discussing Remote Demos, we often offer a story in which a rather embarrassing email preview message appeared during a webinar to a large audience. The message described plans for a date that evening – in rather graphic and embarrassing terms!

While the specifics may be different, many people have seen or suffered from similar situations – and the story resonates and has strong relevance.

Leveraging Well-Known Stories

Relating ideas in your demo to well-known, existing stories can be simple and very effective. Using stories taken from popular media such movies, TV and famous YouTube videos offer good examples:

- "These are not the droids you seek…" [The movie? Star Wars. This line is often offered immediately after a bug appears in a demo…!]

- "One miiiiiillion dollars" [The movie? Austin Powers. Usage? Ah – so many possibilities!]

- The slow-motion cliff-hanger scene in Deadpool [Usage? Explaining *In Medias Res.*]

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- "A Conference Call in Real Life (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNz82r5nyUw) [Usage? Illustrating the frustrations of using conferencing technology…]

- The "Rockwell Retro Encabulator" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXJKdh1KZ0w) [Usage? A beautifully produced, stunningly awful demo, with an emphasis on (avoiding) the use of technobabble.]

Each of these (hopefully) references and draws upon our previously stored memories of stories already in place. This can be a great strategy, particularly when trying to draw analogies or find examples.

Note: in the case of the YouTube examples, they can be played at the time of use – presenting the story for you that underscores the problems and behaviors.

The Hero

An additional story-telling concept is the use of a hero – someone (or something) that the audience can identify with. Traditional stories (e.g., sagas) typically have a hero that encounters and overcomes trials and adversity before achieving success. (Check out the Wikipedia entry for "The Hero's Journey - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hero%27s_journey).

In demos, heroes can take a number of forms:

- Customer (an individual): The customer can be portrayed as the hero (very effective!), with the payoff being the timely and on-budget completion of a project, accolades from colleagues or a promotion. In my own experiences, it was gratifying to see customers I'd worked with over a period of years move from staff members to middle managers to senior and C-level management, partly as a result of using our software.
- Team (a customer team or group): The logical corollary to an individual, a team can be presented as the hero in a story.
- Customer's customer: In this case, the hero is the ultimate beneficiary.
- Product: Your software can be the hero, similarly, enabling a customer to achieve their objectives in spite of (apparently) overwhelming challenges.
- The Cloud: Interestingly, the "Cloud" can be positioned and perceived as a hero – "when our own servers went down, we were still able to complete the project thanks to the ability to access the software and our data from the cloud…" I've heard a number of examples where the Cloud is the hero, in addition to the one above: access to key information via collaboration tools or capabilities, group scheduling scenarios, and disaster recovery experiences ("and we were able to get back up and running just in time for the opening…").

"Wrap a Story Around Your Demo…"

Many managers ask their teams to "wrap a story" around their demos – and teams struggle to find and use stories that meet this requirement.

One *unsuccessful* tactic is to use a "day-in-the-life" to bind together a range of tasks, functions and multiple job titles. The end result is *not* really a story, but is simply an organizational framework –

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and as such it fails to engage interest. How could it? How exciting is it to hear about executing one's day-to-day job?

It is unlikely that a good story *can* be wrapped around most demos. Stories are most effective when used as punctuation, as reinforcement, and as alternative mechanisms for making key ideas stick.

When to Use Stories

Use stories when presenting your most important points, critical concepts and key competitive capabilities. Stories help make these ideas memorable – and enable the ideas to be retold with high fidelity within the customer's organization.

As an example, consider a scenario where you decide to present a key competitive capability in your demo. You should:

1. Present the capability, describing what it does, how it works (if desired by the customer), and the business value it delivers. "Our SmartAutoRollback feature keeps you protected from disasters…" Those are the facts – important, but uninspiring.

2. Draw an analogy or relate the capability to a metaphor: "This capability is like having air-bags in your car: you hope you never need to use them, but if you actually *have* an accident you'll be glad they were present…!"

3. Wrap the capability inside of a story (in this case, a customer success story): "Let me share what happened with another customer, in a very similar situation to you. She was struggling to complete the project when there was a terrific rainstorm, the roof caved in and the server room flooded. She though all was lost, but because she had just implemented our SmartAutoRollback capability, she discovered that all of the files were *already* on the machines at the backup facility – and she was able to complete her project ahead of time and underbudget…!

Never Tell a Good Story Only Once

Good stories serve to punctuate key points and help make your demos remarkable and memorable. Collect them. Try them out. Refine them. Repeat. Practice and improve telling the stories that work. Experiment – try out various stories for a range of situations.

Test and refine – and then share what works with your peers. After all, they'll want to hear a good story as well!

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