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Stunningly Awful Demos – Lost in the Weeds

(The Elegant Art of Managing Questions and Time)

You are in the midst of delivering a demo and things are going well… Somebody asks a question and you answer it, then start to return to your planned demo – but he asks a follow-up question. You answer that in more detail, since it required a deeper response. Again you think he is satisfied, but he asks a further follow-up question, which you proceed to answer in breathtaking depth, showing detailed examples in your software and covering extensive whiteboard space with drawings and text…

After several minutes you realize you are waaaay off track and "in the weeds". Except for the (low-ranking) person who asked the questions, everyone else looks bored or confused.

Worse, you notice that the high-ranking members of the audience somehow left the room while you were in your explanation. To add insult to injury, you are now short on time as well!

How do we simultaneously encourage questions, yet make sure they don't take us off track?

Chaos Controlled

The Swiss are very organized (understatement). In Basel, they celebrate Carnival (called "Fasnacht"), in a typically Swiss way: "Now we will have chaos, and this is the way we will organize it…" The chaos is carefully scheduled to start and end at precise times. You can march anywhere you want, as long as it is within the carefully defined limits of the old town. And you can wear any costume you want, as long as it is one of the 13 specifically prescribed characters.

We can learn a thing or two from the Swiss, with regards to demos. Yes, we want to encourage questions and make things as interactive as possible – but we need to manage the process as well.

There are three types of questions we might expect to receive in a demo:

- Great Questions – which we should answer right away.
- Good Questions – which should be "parked" for later.
- Stupid Questions – which should also be "parked" for later, but with a nuance…

Let's take them in order…

Great Questions

Great Questions make our hearts sing with joy (they do!). They are questions that lead directly to the next point you want to make; they underscore the value; they are the questions you *want* your customer to ask.

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In Great Demo! Workshops, we teach the idea of having answers to typical questions ready to go, but placed (in a virtual sense) behind your back. You *want* your customer to ask these questions – and when they do so, and do so at the right time, they are truly terrific – they are Great Questions.

You'll know your demo is going *perfectly* when your customer asks the question you *want* them to ask at that moment.

You answer Great Questions crisply – one or two sentences – that's it!

Good Questions

Most of the questions we receive in an otherwise well-prepared demo are Good Questions. They are earnest, honest and indicate interest from your audience – and they are the very questions that can take your demo into the weeds.

How do we handle Good Questions? Park them.

For example, early in the demo, someone asks, "What infrastructure is required to install your software?" and you know the answer will likely require some discussion and detail – and your audience includes high-ranking executives, middle managers, end users and administrators.

You respond, "Thank you for that question. That deserves more development than I'd like to invest right now… Let me capture it here, on the whiteboard." You right it down and then ask, "Have I captured it correctly?"

Your customer indicates agreement.

You say, "Thanks, let's plan to address this later in our session or in the Q&A segment – is that acceptable to you?"

Your customer says, "Yes" – releasing you to continue your demo as planned. Very elegant, very professional.

This process works extremely well. Why? Because your customer *sees* you capture his/her question, removing the concern that you are simply dismissing the question (which can happen if you only acknowledge it verbally or appear to write it down on a paper pad to yourself).

You've essentially made an agreement with your audience that you will address that question. Note that the timing is now up to you. You could address it later in the demo, during Q&A – or in a separate session over the phone or web.

Just Say "Yes"

Things are going well and someone asks, "Can it do xxx?" ("Can it print?" is the example I often use in Great Demo! Workshops). Instead of simply answering, "Yes" – we dive into our software to show how it is done, along with several options and alternatives. *We've* taken what was possibly a Great Question and turned it into a Good one…

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Listen carefully to how people ask questions. When they ask, "Can it…?" you may only need to respond "Yes" or "No". You can test to see if they *want* further explanation by asking, "Is that sufficient or would you like to see it?" Most often, your audience responds, "Nope – I'm good."

When your audience asks, "How do I…?" it is more likely that they need to see how it is done in your software.

Stupid Questions

Stupid Questions come from two sources: truly stupid people and hostiles. Hostiles are the people who don't like you, they don't like your company, they don't like your product; they feel it is their obligated duty to torture the vendor…

How do we handle hostiles? Two approaches:

1. Sustained, small-arms, automatic weapons fire. OK, kidding. (And that approach is likely only legal in Texas and Alaska).
2. Treat their Stupid Questions in a similar fashion to Good Questions.

A hostile asks, "How come your software sucks so bad and costs so much…?" (Note: clearly *not* a Great Question…).

You respond, "This requires more development than I'd like to invest right now. I'm going to capture it here on the whiteboard [along with all of the other questions]. We'll plan to address it later on or during the Q&A session."

Important note: do *not* give the hostile the option to respond. You want to close him/her down.

Interestingly, we often see other members of the audience help you manage the hostile – they may, in fact, ask the hostile to stop tormenting you, when they see you are using a reasonable and rational process to manage the session.

So the strategy is to treat Stupid Questions similarly to Good Questions – queue them up on the Parking Lot for later.

Some Subtleties

All questions from high-ranking people are Great Questions (even if they are Stupid).

You can turn a Great Question into a Good Question by going too deep with your answer. You are allowed (encouraged, even) to park yourself in these cases…!

Teaser answers: you can mitigate the potentially awkward feeling of parking a Good Question by offering a brief, "teaser" answer – just a sentence or two before you complete parking the question.

When parking hostile questions, consider one of two strategies:

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1. Write it done verbatim for public display. The advantage is that it shows how stupid the question really was. The disadvantage is that the audience will be looking at "Sucks so bad and costs so much" for the duration of the session.
2. Paraphrase it by finding its central issue. For example, translate "Sucks so bad and costs so much" to "Quality and Value". Looks much better on a whiteboard…!

When should you address any Stupid Questions that you have parked? That's up to you. Interestingly, many hostiles *leave* the meeting before you get to the parked questions…

Body language: there are likely hundreds of books written on how to answer questions, many of which focus a good portion of their guidance on body language. Here are a few suggestions harvested from these tomes:

1. When listening to a question, initially move towards the asker – and don't move backwards, away from him/her. That appears to the audience as if you are running away!
2. When listening to a question, assume a neutral body position (no folded arms, don't jingle keys or change in your pocket, don't fidget with a "clicker", pointer or your mouse).
3. When listening to a question, don't look at your watch (you can lose major elections this way).

More Chaos Control

Who else can help you manage the chaos? Your sales counterpart (if present) has a number of specific roles to play: He or she should be prepared to "rescue" you by stepping in to help parse and park questions. Sales people:

- Can help to identify Great vs. Good/Stupid questions.
- Should manage the Parking Lot, capturing questions for you.
- Should help clarify questions (often by asking questions in return).
- Should repeat questions when you are operating over the web. (Why? To make sure you heard the question correctly and to give you a few extra seconds to prepare an answer!)

Managing Questions and Time

There are three types of questions we can manage in a demo:

- Great Questions – which we answer right away.
- Good Questions – which we park for later.
- Stupid Questions – which we also park for later, but without giving any choices…!

Managing questions in your demos with this process will help make your demonstrations crisp, compelling and *surprisingly* effective.

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