



The Second Derivative
1538 Winding Way
Belmont, CA 94002
Phone: +1 650 631 3694
PCohan@SecondDerivative.com
www.SecondDerivative.com
www.DemoGurus.com
Peter E. Cohan, Principal

Storytelling and Demos

Stories can be one of the most effective mechanisms to help your customers understand the use and value of your offerings.

Stories engage, illustrate and underscore in ways that facts and features cannot. We have a particular propensity to remember stories – most people can reasonably accurately *retell* stories that connect with them – days, weeks or even months after initially hearing the story.

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. We are somehow programmed to be interested in hearing stories and audience body-language reflects this.

“Wrap a Story Around Your Demo...”

Is there a “Grand Unified Story Theory...?” 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 – 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 may be unlikely that a real story *can* be wrapped around most demos (there may be no “Grand Unified Story Theory...”). Stories are often most effective when used as punctuation, as reinforcement, and as alternative mechanisms for making key ideas stick.

What Is A Good Story?

“I’ll know pornography when I see it...” This is a great example of how subjective “good” vs. “bad” can be. With stories and demos, however, you are working to communicate key messages. A “bad” story is anything that doesn’t get the job done.

Here is a simple test: 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 “Hmmm...!” reaction. A good story may trigger us to tell one of our own stories in response.

It is tough to dissect the key elements of a good story, but these five attributes can serve as a starting point:

- 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, which then demands release
- Evokes Emotion: The best stories are those that generate an emotional from the audience
- Relevant: Good stories relate directly to the subject or key point

Simple Message

In Great Demo! Workshops, I often 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 uses to complete typical tasks. *Specific Capabilities* is (hopefully) a very simple idea.

A second example is embodied in the recent merger of United and Continental Airlines. Jeff Smisek, President and CEO, is presented in a brief video describing the status and advantages of the merger, immediately before the obligatory “Safety Video”. If you have flown on either airline in the past several months you’ve likely seen the video (perhaps many, many times!).

Towards the end of the video, he says, “We want to provide clean, safe, reliable travel, great customer service, and a broad range of flights and destinations.” His message is not simple; it is broad and unfocused, and is hardly memorable.

Conversely, when you think of Southwest Airlines, what do you think of?

[Hint: “*The* low-cost airline”]. Simple.

Real Experience

Why do customers go to users’ group meetings? (In addition to the free drinks from vendor sales people, of course...!) They go to hear how other customers have addressed challenges or solved problems using the software. The stories they share are perceived as real, based on actual experience, and are therefore highly valuable.

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.

Conversely, the weakest stories may be about the vendor sales team's personal experiences.

Element of Surprise

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

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 excepted process or approach: “Turn traditional demos *upside-down*.”

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.

To introduce the idea that “We Are Programmed to Forget” I offer an example situation: “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? You essentially were on ‘autopilot’...”

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

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

Relevant

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

A customer in the commercial banking industry won't consider a demo that uses data from a manufacturing 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, I often offer a story in which a rather embarrassing email preview message appeared during a webinar. The message described plans for a date that evening – in rather graphic 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. For example, can you identify the movie from these 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...!]
- “He chose...poorly...” [Movie? Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade. Usage? Ah – so many possibilities!]
- “I...can't...help...it...” Bxzzzzzt! [A Bug's Life. Usage? Explaining how and why the “B” key in PowerPoint works.]

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.

Example Story – Ease of Use

My old boss, the head of sales of a software company, was (surprisingly) such a novice with computers that he always typed messages with CAPS LOCK on because using the SHIFT key slowed him down and caused many (embarrassing) errors.

We used him for a demo of a new tool we were working to purchase, asking him to “drive”, as there was concern by some team members about ease-of-use. We walked him through the few steps it took to generate his forecast for the quarter. He then said, “Wow, if *I* can do this then I'm *sure* everyone else can as well...!”

What better way to prove ease-of-use?

[For the “analytical” types reading this article, I’m sure you just did a quick check of this story to see if it includes the attributes described above: Simple Message, Real Experience, Element of Surprise, Evokes Emotion, Relevant. How’d we do?]

Example – Painfully Boring

The following was related to me by someone who was present...

About 40 minutes into a particularly boring demo a customer (senior manager level) got up from the conference table, walked over to the wall and started to slowly bang his head on the wall – and continued to do so for *several* minutes until, at last, the person delivering the demo looked up and asked if anything was wrong...!

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.

For 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.
- 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 end or ultimate beneficiary.
- Product: Your software can be the hero, similarly, enabling a customer to achieve their objectives in spite of (apparently) overwhelming challenges.
- SaaS: 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 vendor’s software 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, disaster recovery (“and we were able to get back up and running just in time for the opening...”).

When to Use Stories

Audiences need to be “refreshed” frequently. Use stories to re-engage people when they begin to fade (e.g., after lunch or when someone gets up from the conference table and starts to move towards the wall...!).

Apply specific stories to reinforce or illustrate key advantages of your offerings. A quote I often hear is, “Facts tell, stories sell!”

Use stories as a transition tool to introduce a new segment or wrap-up a segment. Stories add another “thread” to an important point or idea to help embed it in customers’ minds.

Storytelling and Demos

Good stories serve to punctuate key points and help make your demos memorable and remarkable. Causatively collect them. 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!

Copyright © 2011 The Second Derivative – All Rights Reserved.

For more on demo effectiveness skills and methods, visit our website at www.SecondDerivative.com. For demo tips, best practices, tools and techniques, join the DemoGurus® Community Website at www.DemoGurus.com or explore our blog at <http://greatdemo.blogspot.com/>.