



## The Second Derivative

1538 Winding Way  
Belmont, CA 94002  
Phone: +1 650 631 3694  
[PCohan@SecondDerivative.com](mailto:PCohan@SecondDerivative.com)  
[www.SecondDerivative.com](http://www.SecondDerivative.com)  
<http://greatdemo.blogspot.com/>  
Peter E. Cohan, Principal

### Are You a Demo Expert? – Why Experts *Should* Feel Uncomfortable

That’s right. If you are a Demo Expert, you should be *consciously uncomfortable*. You should always be alert to find ways to improve your practice.

Some seasoned veterans – those with 5 or more years of experience – are often the *least* likely to change their ways. Many perceive themselves at the top of their game; many believe they are experts. They are the skeptics in many training workshops, the ones who arrive thinking, “I’ve been doing this for 10 years – what could they possibly teach *me*?”

Given the (shockingly) large number of demos that don’t achieve the desired objectives, is it possible that some seasoned veterans – the putative experts – are part of the problem?

### Sobering Numbers...

Certain data suggest that many demos are not particularly strong, whether or not the delivery is done by someone who is believed to be an expert or claims to be an expert. Interestingly, data from the people who fill out the Demo Assessment on our web site ([www.secondderivative.com/assess.html](http://www.secondderivative.com/assess.html)) show the following results, overall:

Average Self-Assessment Score (out of 100):	76%
Average Percent of Demos that Achieve the Objectives:	57%

Hmmm...! People may rate their demo skills highly but the results suggest something different. It is rather frightening that fewer than 60% of demos failed to achieve the desired objectives – 43 demos out of 100 apparently don’t get the job done.

Other external data also suggest that not as many people may be Demo Experts as believed:

- Multiple, repeated demos for the same audiences
- High number of demos required to complete a sale
- Failure to achieve sales quotas
- Losses to competitors
- Losses to “no decision”

(You can do your own analysis of your situation. Review the “Demo Skills Assessment – Do It Now” article available here:

[http://www.secondderivative.com/Demo\\_Skills\\_Assessment\\_Do\\_It\\_Now.html](http://www.secondderivative.com/Demo_Skills_Assessment_Do_It_Now.html))

What does it mean to be an “expert”, anyway?

## Are You a Demo Expert? How Can You Tell?

What does it take to become an “expert”? Is it the result of 10,000 hours creating, watching and delivering demonstrations? In many disciplines, such as music, becoming an expert requires (roughly) an investment of 10,000 hours in practice and execution. Does this take a year? 2 years? 5 years? Longer?

Frighteningly, with respect to software demos, this may translate to a dozen years or more! For example, if a person spends 2 days per week involved in demo prep, delivery, or closely related activities, it would take around 12.5 years to achieve an expert level using this definition.

For presales people demonstrating enterprise software, one could expect that the time actually involved with demos might range from 8-20 hours a week – but most likely not more, given the amount of time consumed in meetings, travel, administrative functions, etc.

Here’s a time-based view at achieving demo expertise:

Demo-Associated Hours per Week	Weeks per Year	Hours per Year	Years Needed to Achieve “Expert” Level
4	50	200	50
8	50	400	25
12	50	600	16.7
16	50	800	12.5
20	50	1000	10
24	50	1200	8.3

If time is a key factor, the moral here is to make sure to retain your seasoned veterans as happy and productive employees! (And if you are a seasoned veteran, you may want to ask for a raise...)

But – is length of time *the* key factor? The ability to learn a process and execute it through a range of conditions *might* connote expertise. It also might simply mean that a person has learned to repeat a *poor or mediocre* procedure extremely well.

Another view suggests that there are two processes going on: The first is the demo pathway itself; the second is the ability to bring it to life – showmanship. One person could be an expert at the demo pathway, but poor at showmanship; another might be a terrifically engaging personality, yet still present an otherwise boring or misaligned demo pathway.

Those who have been delivering demos for years may suffer another challenge: Cognitive dissonance impacts our impressions of ourselves, with respect to our abilities. For example, many sales, presales and marketing people believe that *since* they have been preparing and presenting demos for many years they *must* be experts!

## A Simple Analysis

Here's one simple starting point – working from three brief definitions:

- Novice – Just learning
- Practitioner – Able to perform consistently with confidence
- Expert – Causatively makes changes to and improves practice

Novices – newly minted presales people, for example – are just learning the products, the services, the customers, the markets – the entire suite of information that needs to be assimilated to be perceived as credible to customers (and to their sales counterparts). Through practice and repetition (“mental muscle memory”) Novices improve, generally passing through four stages on the way to becoming Practitioners.

Four Stages from Novice to Practitioner:

1. Unconsciously Incompetent: Doesn't realize that there are problems with his/her demos and delivery.
2. Consciously Incompetent: Realizes that there are problems, but doesn't know how to solve them.
3. Consciously Competent: Understands how to address the problems, but needs to consciously think about them in order to implement during customer-facing demos.
4. Unconsciously Competent: No longer needs to think about how to address demo challenges and acts automatically.

The process from Novice to Practitioner often takes as long as 1-2 years for many presales people, largely depending on the nature of the offering and the target markets.

Practitioners are those who can consistently prepare and present demos – and manage a range of real-life challenges comfortably. They develop methods to handle hostile audience members, are experienced with Remote Demos delivered over the web, and can walk through nearly every feature in their offerings with confidence.

As a few more years go by, they solidify their practices and view themselves as tenured, seasoned veterans. Terrific – we've got a team of seasoned veterans who do a great job, right?

Perhaps not! We may, instead, have a team that executes the same things over and over with boring certainty. Their demos don't excite their customers; the demos are mechanical, predictable and banal. (Their demos don't excite themselves, how could they possibly excite customers?!). No wonder only 57% of demos achieve their objectives.

With the exception of adding demos of new functionality or new products, there is no evolution or development of the demo practice itself.

Most of these seasoned veterans would consider themselves Demo Experts – largely based on their depth experience. Are they?

Nope. They are simply Practitioners...

### **Why Experts Are Uncomfortable**

A true expert constantly seeks to improve his or her *practice*; a true expert wants to evolve. A true expert embraces incremental changes and is open to exploring broad new concepts and ideas. A Demo Expert constantly evaluates his or her performance, looking for opportunities to improve.

Have you ever found yourself thinking, during a demo, that there are portions that just don't "feel quite right"? Something in the current demo or delivery just seems like it could be better? That's the first step to becoming an expert!

Three Stages from Practitioner to Expert:

1. Unconsciously Uncomfortable: Realizes that some portion of the practice could be done better, but can't articulate exactly what.
2. Consciously Uncomfortable: Knows that the presentation of a specific feature or section of the demo could be improved, but doesn't yet know how.
3. Consciously Adaptive: Develops and *tries out* new ideas in dry-runs and customer-facing situations. Tunes, iterates and seeks to continuously improve.

If you are *not* uncomfortable, perhaps you should be!

### **Coach Yourself**

[Warning: self-help section alert!] If you are an individual contributor, you can coach yourself to continuously improve – and truly be a Demo Expert:

1. Debrief yourself: what did I do well; what could I do better? Were there areas that felt *uncomfortable*, that could or should be changed? Note these as action items for yourself (write 'em down!).
  - a. Changes to my verbiage
  - b. Changes to slides
  - c. Improvement in the mechanics

- d. Tools/infrastructure
  - e. Props
  - f. Stories
  - g. Analogies
2. Block out time to address these items – and work on them. Make changes to your materials, your mental “script”, your demo infrastructure.
  3. Try these out on your next opportunity – test them. Debrief again and iterate.

Your demos will evolve wonderfully as a result. You should be able to look back on demos you did a year ago and see marked differences and improvements!

### **Coach Your Team**

If you manage a team, you can apply the same process as above for the group. In addition, you can also facilitate change and improvement *across* the entire team:

1. Weekly team calls: encourage team members to share success stories, demo practices and tips that have worked for them.
2. “Demo Days”: Schedule opportunities for team members to present demos that they are particularly happy about – that were successful for them. While this is terrific to do in face-to-face meetings (at quarterly events, kickoffs, etc.) it can also be done remotely using tools like WebEx and GoToMeeting.

Team members otherwise rarely have the opportunity to see how *other* people are doing demos – this is a wonderful way to share ideas and best practices.

### **Consciously Uncomfortable**

The next time you note you are uncomfortable with a portion of a demo, take delight in that thought! Use it to consciously improve your practice. You’ll make many important incremental improvements – and you might just have an epiphany that enables a sweeping change to your entire demo process!

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