



Mastering Technical Sales

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Practicing Your Pitch

Practice Makes Perfect; But Rehearsal Is Reality!

*In the Malcolm Gladwell book, **Outliers**, he claims that what makes the best of the best is practice, liberally sprinkled with talent and determination. He cites the 10,000-hour rule – which is amount of practice you need to become a true master of your craft.*

The same applies to becoming the best Sales Engineer –it usually comes down to how well you can present/demo/speak. The difference between winning and losing a deal is less than 4%. Getting better involves practice – so do you have best practices for your practice sessions?

Why Should You Practice?

Firstly, let us differentiate between Practice and Rehearsal. Both are good. Practice is running through future actions. That may be writing down a script, working through a tough demonstration with a beta product or just speaking your pitch aloud. Rehearsal is a simulation of real-life conditions. An example: I can stand on a golf driving range and hit most of my shots straight. Put me on a tee with a water hazard in front of me and place a \$10 wager on my shot – my golf ball will get wet. The driving range is useful practice, the tee-shot is true rehearsal (and expensive).

So why should you practice your presentation? Well, running through it just once can reveal:

Timing: Do you have too little or too much material?

Pauses: Are there awkward pauses while you are waiting for system response?

Phrasing: Does your tongue trip over a difficult phrase or combination?

Flow: Can you easily transition from one segment to another?

How Should You Practice or Rehearse?

1. **Use A Real Setting.** If you are going to present standing up – then stand up, do not practice sitting in a chair. If you are going to be behind a laptop, then that is how you should practice. Duplicate the setting if you can. Maybe you can gain access to the room beforehand and really rehearse and “case the joint” so you are familiar with it. Every edge you can gain will help.
2. **Use Your Props.** Use visual aids to break up your pitch and make sure you know what you are doing. This could be as simple as physically getting out of your chair to point to something very important on a screen. If you have handouts or need to use a whiteboard then work with those materials too. Don’t just skip over that part of the practice.
3. **Chunk The Pitch** Break your pitch into chunks or chapters of less than 15 minutes. Stop after each chapter and take notes about what worked and what did not before you move onto the next chapter. Then rewind 60 seconds and start from there so that you practice the transitions.
4. **Start In The Middle.** If this is going to be a “stock” pitch that you will deliver multiple times in the next few months, try starting in the middle. Then 1/3 way through, and 2/3 of the way through. Imagine you have been interrupted or that a senior executive has walked into the room and asked for a 5-minute catch-up summary of what he/she missed. (This is an Improvisational exercise too)
5. **Watch The Time.** Allow some leeway in the timing. Although you may think you’ll speak faster because you are nervous or in front of an audience – it will be balanced by additional information you’ll just feel the need to articulate. For a speech or presentation, estimate about 160 words per minute. Your rate may vary for non-English languages but 160 wpm is a good starting point. Demos will require more accurate timing as the speech is not always continuous.
6. **Experiment.** Try out some new techniques and experiment with some changes. Throw in some gestures, start on a different screen, and use a different grabber. For a demo, practice a couple of “ad-lib” diversions away from the standard demo path. That really helps with credibility.

How Should I Use Audio-Visual Feedback?

A video of your rehearsal is a great way to get more feedback than you could ever imagine. The downside is that knowing a camera is recording your every move makes many SE's self-conscious. Try hiding the camera so it is not in plain view – eventually you will forget about it. The video is all about you, but you can struggle with too many small things to correct. Look at the video with no sound, sound only, then both together. Here is what I suggest you focus on:

- I. Motion – move with a purpose. No fidgeting.
- II. Gestures – do your hands and body amplify or detract from the message?
- III. Body Language – are you open, making eye contact and sitting up straight?
- IV. Smiles – smile. It relaxes everyone including you.

Audio of your pitch can focus on the actual delivery and content. Pay attention to:

- I. Volume – can we hear you? Does your voice vary?
- II. Fillers – watch the *ums* and *ers* and *likes*.
- III. Pauses – listen for a disturbance in the flow of the pitch. If it sounds weird to you it probably will to the audience as well.
- IV. Silence – Is not bad, if planned. Use silence to reinforce a point.
- V. Content – are you too technical? Using acronyms? Do you cover business value?

I'll cover manager or peer feedback in a future article. However, practicing with an audience is halfway to rehearsal anyway as you get the personal view without your own filters on your performance. Because you sell to people, not to a mirror or a video camera.

CALL TO ACTION: Practice may make perfect, but rehearsal is reality. Plan your practice and rehearse your rehearsal. You will get a better performance, fewer nerves, and become known as the SE who is always cool, calm and fully prepared. That is a great personal brand statement.

Talking Points is a monthly column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.

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