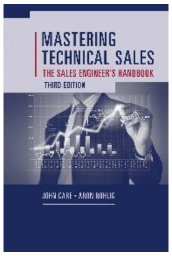

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The Sales Engineer And The Crashed Demo

Recovering From The Demo Bomb

Sales Engineers pursue the perfect demo – and it is certainly wonderful when it (occasionally) occurs. But what happens when things go the other way – and the demo crashes? How should you react, what should you do next, and how can you recover? It's an unfortunate fact of life (ref: Bill Gates – Comdex – Windows 98) so it is how you handle the crash that matters most.

The vast majority of crashes fall into five broad categories. We'll look at each and suggest some strategies and key learning points. When it does happen, don't panic, take a breath before you start clicking away and if it's a small error, don't point it out as there are good odds no one else has noticed it. Above all, no matter what happens, don't take it personally, step away for a few minutes and learn from your own (or others) mistakes.

1. **The Technology Crashes.** Think of this as the technology surrounding your demo – which can include WebEx/Skype, the projector, internet connectivity, cloud access or even your laptop. Let's get one thing straight – it doesn't matter that its 3rd party technology – you still own the problem unless it's clearly 100% a customer issue.

    a. Once it's obvious there is a problem, name it and claim it. "*Looks like we have a technical challenge or glitch here.*"
    b. If you're presenting to a bunch of techies, you can usually gain some empathy from them as this has happened to everyone. If appropriate ask for assistance.
    c. Ask your sales partner to step in and take the stage for a few minutes. Pause your screen display so the audience cannot see you hacking around.
    d. If you honestly believe you can fix it in a few clicks or a simple reset go for it. Otherwise you'll do more damage by randomly clicking around.
    e. Proceed to Plan B. Plan B might be a video or PPT screen capture of the demo, a whiteboard pitch or even a conversation.

2. **The Sales Engineer Crashes.** This is you! Maybe you've launched into a long and boring demo, you are killing your audience with PowerPoint, you don't know the material, or are outgunned by the customer.

    a. If you know you are losing the audience, it's time to stop and try something different. Sales Engineers don't get paid by the word, so there is no value in simply continuing. For PPT, go to the whiteboard, or start a conversation (but don't say "any questions?"). In a demo, stop and recap what you shown so far, maybe sketch it out and explain what's coming next – check for interest levels. Easier to accomplish when face to face than virtual, but you'd be surprised.

b. If it's a knowledge issue, then someone (you or the customer expert) is in the wrong room. Your customer shouldn't know your product better than you, but may well understand the underlying technology (virtualization, ransomware, automation) better. It's not a competition and <u>acknowledge the knowledge</u>.

c. It's just a bad day. Sometimes you're "off your game". You accidentally hit the wrong key, misunderstand the customer, commit some social error etc. Apologize, own the issue and ask the customer how to proceed.

3. **The Demo Crashes.** This is your own "stuff". A screen fails to populate, the system just hangs, or a fatal error message appears.

    a. For a relatively minor error – just carry on. Customers will see what they expect to see (I had a typo on a slide I used in almost every class for 3 years before someone pointed it out. My audiences are detail oriented SE's – go figure!).
    b. Follow the steps for The Technology Crash.
    c. Add – an explanation of your support process and how your hotline works. *("Everyone has errors in their software. We try really really hard to eliminate them, however when this happens in a real life situation. Here's what you do..")* This can be explained by you, the rep, or a manager if on the call. Remember you only get to do this ***<u>once</u>*** per client!
    d. Don't – keep trying to fix it in front of the customer. You have a few minutes of grace and then you are done.
    e. Do – if you do fix it – accept the fault and take it upon yourself (even in cultures where you might lose a little face). That humility can save you and help build some great relationships.

4. **The Salesrep Crashes.** The rep is totally unprepared for the call, has given you incorrect discovery guidance, or decides to take you way off the standard demo path. "*John, why don't you show them..*"

    a. At some point it is obvious that you have incorrect information. If you haven't verified a **WWHFY – What We Heard From You** – at the start of the call, stop and do it now. If it's a Zero Discovery Demo, stop, ask lots of questions, then pose common problem scenarios.
    b. For the unplanned demo diversion, you should actually be prepared. Every SE should have a set of apparent 'ad-hoc" let-me-show-you's built into every demo and agreed with the rep. If it's truly unplanned and you are 100% comfortable and it makes sense, comply with the request. Otherwise defer the request; "*Andy – that's a good thought and I'll get to it in a few minutes.*"
    c. Debrief afterwards. Customers want and expect to see an account team in lockstep with each other – almost to the point when you can finish each other's sentences. <u>These are issues that should only happen once.</u>

5. **The Customer Crashes.** You have the wrong people in the wrong room at the wrong time. Maybe your product is a bad fit, the customer really isn't interested, they're just looking at you to justify buying the competition, or they are "tire kickers" (also known as architecture committees).

    a. If you are obviously in front of the wrong people then stop, and ask the customer for advice/guidance on what to do next. (Customers do love being asked for advice – even grumpy VPs)
    b. For a *column fodder* call (they want to buy the competition but have to look at you first) I'd look to the salesrep to take action. It's not a good or realistic investment of your next 60 minutes to turn the situation around.
    c. A "just looking" prospect needs some guidance. Perhaps that's a checklist of functionality in a Feature-Advantage-Benefit format that would make you look good. Perhaps they have a checklist. Ask for it.

Summary

You'll notice a few common themes. First is stop when you feel or know something is wrong. Simply continuing because it will be alright in the end never works. Never. Second is "name it and claim it" – state the nature of the issue and (most times- ask for advice or guidance. Third is develop the rapport with your sales partner so you seamlessly hand meeting control back to them to give you time to fix things. Lastly – don't blame anyone else, you are both responsible and accountable for the demo in front of the customer. Once you're in the parking lot with the salesrep – that's a different matter.

Don't Panic!

"When you are deep in a hole, the #1 rule is to stop digging"

Anonymous

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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