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The Power Of “And Then What Happens?”

Transitioning Into Storytelling

Discovery can be a frustrating process. For example, sometimes you deal with a customer who is the classic, vague “big picture” person and has no apparent direct insight into the facts and figures you need to build a value proposition. Unfortunately, that situation is not conducive to effective Business Value Discovery, which is the art of matching the customer’s hopes and dreams to your technology portfolio.

Yet there is a better way. Sales Engineers harness the power of story to bring our products to life in front of the customer. Humans have been using stories to amplify their messaging since the days of our prehistoric ancestors painting buffalo on the walls of their caves. So why not encourage our customers to use stories to explain their pains and gains?

The Basic Technique (also known as Peeling The Onion”)

When you hear a client use descriptive words such as faster, better, cheaper, or poor/bad, good/improved – that is an opportunity to peel the onion or slowly unwrap the situation step by step until you arrive at the core.

Client	Our testing quality is very poor.
SE	So what happens because the quality is poor?
Client	Well .. our applications suffer outages because of that poor quality
SE	Oh, and what happens because of those outages?
Client	Actually, it happens 3-4 times a month, and our COO mentioned it cost her \$400k an hour in the worst case.
SE	Wow. That’s quite an impact – tell me more
Client	(Launches into a story). Last month our customer portal crashed because of a currency conversion bug, and ...

Observe the outcomes of that conversation. You obtained two great pieces of data (3-4 occurrences a month, at \$400k each, which is conservatively an annualized \$15m problem) and an illustrative story about the real-world impact of one of those outages. Let’s look at a second example.

Client	We need to speed up our development process and get our apps to market faster.
SE	Hmm, faster? So what happens then?
Client	We can build more apps every quarter and launch them earlier.
SE	Oh, and what happens because of that speedup?
Client	We'd get one extra product app out every quarter, and we'd accelerate revenue by about 3 weeks.
SE	Wow. That's quite an impact – tell me more
Client	(Launches into a story). Last month our best-selling new app (which is rather cool as it does ..) generated 10,000 a day in extra revenue. Unfortunately, we missed the end of quarter release by 5 days. If we'd been 3 weeks early, that would be 160k in that quarter, and the CFO would have been ecstatic.

The Add-On Technique (also known as “Hopes and Dreams”)

Using “*and what happens then*” is a great way to drill down on pain and problems and what is currently happening right now. However, about 20% of opportunities are driven by gains –good things that may occur in the future. Sometimes, you need to get the customer’s head out of the present day and walk them months ahead into the future. That is where “*what would that allow you to do?*” is an outstanding follow-up.

Client	We need to remove the processing backlog on the grocery store sales analytics
SE	Let's say we could do that. What would that allow you to do?
Client	We could run a same-day analysis, avoid stockouts, and ship popular products faster.
SE	Wow. That sounds like a significant operational improvement. And then what happens?

And now what happens? Try using various forms of these two questions in your discovery sessions and internal meetings. You'll be amazed at what happens next and what that will allow you to do!

“The engineers of the future will be poets.”
Terence McKenna, Scientist/Ethnobiology

Talking Points is a sporadic 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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