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The Sales Engineer And The Piranha

A Different Way To Measure Presentation Effectiveness



I'm proposing a new way of measuring the effectiveness of Sales Engineering customer interactions – other than the obvious end result of revenue generation. It's called the piranha. Before you roll your eyes – read on – there is a point to this. Much of our curriculum here at MTS revolves around effective and professional communications skills. That includes asking questions, listening, written communications, virtual and physical presentations, demonstrations, whiteboards and a host of other skills.

Once you have the basics covered, it's the little things and small details that can make a difference, yet I've long struggled to explain just how important this is to our clients. Finally – in the middle of a Story Telling class – I got the idea of the piranha. Here's how it works.

The Analogy

Imagine you are standing next to a river in the deepest reaches of the Amazon. You put your foot in the river and you get bitten by a single piranha. What happens? You jerk your leg out of the water, say “ow” and take care of a small bite. No real harm done.

Now for some inexplicable reason you put your foot back in the river and you're attacked by 6-7 piranha. What happens? You scream, leaping back from the water, mutter a few curses and look at a somewhat bloodied and ripped, but still intact, foot. It hurts, and will do for days, but you'll live to fight another day.



Tempting fate, you try to cross the river one more time, and are attached by a school (or pack) of piranha. What happens? You're piranha dinner. Too bad.

The Measurement

My proposal is that we assign every negative action in a customer meeting a piranha score – based on its severity. So things like a spelling error on a slide might be 1 piranha. Illegible screen shots and heavily bulleted slides might be 2 piranhas. An invisible, or a zippy, mouse during a demo might be 3 piranhas. Starting a sales pitch with the corporate overview or finishing with “Any Questions” is 5 piranhas and a total demo crash might be the entire pack descending upon you.

To be fair, we can also institute positive piranha scores to reward good behavior. So you subtract one piranha every time you link a technical feature back to a desired business benefit, subtract another piranha for dropping a competitive mine and yet another piranha for using customer stories or analogies in your presentation. You just can’t get below zero as minus two piranha makes no sense!

In Practice And in Summary

Two weeks ago I watched a senior SE give a demo/presentation. He had one obvious typo on an intro slide, another slide with so much text in tiny font no-one could read it, a demo example that returned zero data, repeatedly used product names and acronyms and constantly said “you guys”. Let’s say that is a six piranha score. Not one of those bites was significant enough to lose the deal or impact the presentation – yet put them all together – and customer attention was degraded enough that two attendees started checking their email. That’s equivalent to a bite out of your leg that needs attention.

Be creative. The small details matter. What’s your piranha score??

“Geeks are people who love something so much that all the details matter.”

- *Marissa Mayer*

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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