

Mastering Technical Sales
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The Curse Of Knowledge

Why The Fiftieth Demo Is Worse Than The Fifteenth

In 1990, Elizabeth Newton, a Stanford University psychology graduate student studied a simple game in which she assigned people to one of two roles: “tapper” or “listener.” She asked each tapper to pick a well-known song, such as “Happy Birthday,” and tap out the rhythm on a table. The listener’s job was to guess the song. How well did they do?

Amazingly poorly! Out of 120 “tapped-out” songs only three were guessed correctly – a **2.5% success rate**. Yet the “tappers” estimated the success rate would be 50%. Why the big difference? Because the tappers were cursed with the knowledge of the song title and found it impossible to imagine what it was like for the listeners to hear and interpret the isolated taps. That is the **Curse Of Knowledge**ⁱ!

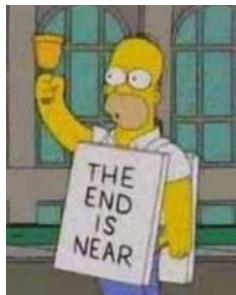
What Does This Have To Do With The Job Of Being A Sales Engineer?

We understand and know our solution. In fact we know it really well because in many cases our job depends on it. However – we find it extremely difficult to place ourselves in the situation of the customer who is seeing our demonstration for the very first time. The more familiar we become with our topic, the more implicit assumptions we make about what our customer should know as opposed to what they actually do know. The result is a knowledge gap, which your customer fills in by assuming either that your product is complicated (because they don’t understand something) or that you are a poor presenter (because they don’t understand what you are doing).

In a large proportion of the demos I have reviewed since starting Mastering Technical Sales, the Curse Of Knowledge has been apparent. I put on my “*Dumb CIO*” or “*Typical Businessperson*” hat and list all the assumptions that the sales team has made in the demo.

That list usually stretches into double digits.

How To Overcome The Curse Of Knowledge?

1. **Be The Customer.** Watch another SE from your company give a demo (live or recorded) and question everything. **And** I mean everything by asking “**So What, Says Who and Who Cares?**” for every click, statement and screen shown. Look for assumptions about the User Interface, Basic Functionality, Use of Features and Business Benefits.
2. **Examine Your Terminology.** It’s stunningly easy to lapse into industry or corporate slang. Here is a simple example – I was explaining a dice game called Yahtzee to someone and I started using terms like Full House and Straight – they had no idea what I was talking about and fortunately asked “What’s a Full House mean?”, instead of just nodding their head as if they understood.
3. **Let Simplicity Be Your Guide.** US President John F. Kennedy avoided the curse by saying “*we'll put a man on the moon within a decade*”. A modern politician/CEO would say, “*Our mission is to become the international leader in the space industry, using our capacity for technological innovation to build a bridge towards humanity's future*”.ⁱⁱ A very wise sales manager once told me that “Sales engineers don’t get paid by the word.”
4. **Draw A Map.** Your demonstration shouldn’t be a magical mystery tour. Just like you should have an agenda for a meeting, the road map serves as a GPS for the customer during your demo. Draw a map with boxes and arrows to tell the customer where you are going and how you are going to get there. Put the map on the wall for a live demo or email it in a PPT before a virtual demo. ([More on that topic on the MTS Demo Resources Page](#))
5. **First = Last.** Also tell the customer where your final destination is going to be. If one of your friends bangs on your front door one morning and says, “*Come on – we’re going for a trip*” your first question is likely to be “*where are we going?*” My alternative analogy is that when you watch a cooking show that teaches you how to bake a cake – the very first thing they show you is what the finished product looks like. Only after you’re hooked on baking the cake do they share the ingredients. Do the same for your demo. Peter Cohan’s [Great Demo](#) book explains this in way more detail.

The customer is the hero.
Not you.



6. ⁱⁱⁱ**Make Your Customer the Hero.** The best demos usually involve some theme or story. The old “day in the life” variant is a bit overdone, but the idea of a story wrapped into the demo places the customer as the hero in the middle of using your solution, as opposed to your solution being the hero. It’s a subtle difference, but helps avoid the Curse. I usually start with a generic Acme Rocketskates example as the company using the solution, and then customize it from there based on the prospect.

"It is the province of knowledge to speak. And it is the privilege of wisdom to listen"

Oliver Wendell Holmes

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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ⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curse_of_knowledge Wikipedia entry

ⁱⁱ Thanks to Signal Vs. Noise Blog, 37 Signals, for this fine example.

ⁱⁱⁱ Image from <http://remarkablogger.com/2009/08/22/make-your-customer-the-hero/>