

Don't Let Your Expertise Kill Your Products

Technology companies struggle to explain what they do in a way that non-experts can understand. A major reason is that we use different parts of our brains than our customers and prospects when thinking about our products. Here are three ideas to deal with this challenge.

My son Ben turned 16 in July, and a few days later passed his driving learner's permit test. To me, the summer of 2011 will always be remembered as the summer I taught Ben how to drive. We started off in the parking lot of his former elementary school. (The irony of teaching him at the place where just 11 years ago we dropped him off at kindergarten was not lost on me.)

Ben was soon bored with the parking lot. We advanced to little traveled local roads. Moving from a parking lot to a road with multiple distractions was a big jump.

As I tried to explain to him how to make right and left turns, I realized just how automatic driving had become for me. My instructions (slow down going into a turn, turn the wheel and then accelerate) made perfect sense to me as an experienced driver. However, to a new driver the instructions were useless. His mind was flooded with questions.

- How much do you slow down?
- When do you start the turn?
- How much do you turn the wheel?
- How fast do you turn?
- When do you accelerate?

Answering them required me to become aware of things I haven't thought about in years. I needed to think like a beginning driver. Later that evening, I went out driving on my own and broke the entire process of making a right turn into simple steps that were easy to explain to a beginning driver.

Research has determined "when people are first learning a skill such as driving a car, they engage the higher conscious areas of the brain such as the cerebral cortex. But with practice [as well as knowledge and experience], the skill becomes automated and moves to more

primitive areas like the cerebellum. Thus experienced drivers can maneuver a car with far less active attention.”¹

This is a good thing for humans since it enables us to do routine things easily while freeing up the higher levels of our brains to take on new and challenging tasks.

The implications of this research for those of us who sell, market, and develop technology products and services are enormous. The phenomenon of being so good at something that you can't explain it, isn't restricted to driving.

I regularly witness technology companies struggle to explain what they do in a way that non-experts can understand. A major reason is that we use different parts of our brains than our customers and prospects when thinking about our products.

Like my driving ability, a vendor's knowledge of their technology is engrained into their subconscious. As a result, it is difficult to understand what it is like to be a non-expert (first time driver) and communicate effectively with them. Yet these non-experts are often the key decision makers who are vital to our commercial success.

Here are three steps to deal with these challenges.

- Recognize that it is human nature and the way our brains are wired rather than a character flaw that leads us to do a “deep dive” on product features and assume that everyone else is an expert. This realization will help organizations recognize that the “product feature” trap is a natural occurrence and focus on ways to avoid it.
- Recognize that the walls between sales, marketing and development exist because our brains (as a result of years of experience) are wired differently. Individuals in each group see the world differently.

As Marty Petraitis, VP of Software Business, PDF Solutions, the leading provider of yield analysis solutions, puts it: “This shouldn't be a situation that one group is superior to the other. It is actually a good thing that there are different points of view. To break down organizational walls, we need to move from figuring out who is right to recognizing that the groups are different and have something to contribute to the conversation.”

- When you develop your value proposition and messaging, it is essential to include someone who is not invested in the technology in the discussions. These individuals could be from other internal organizations, an external consultant or a customer.

It behooves us all when dealing with either new drivers or prospective customers to remember that our in-depth knowledge is a mystery to the driver or prospect. By remembering the three points above you'll be able to more efficiently turn your knowledge into messaging that resonates with your audience.

1. Sports Illustrated, August 8, 2011.

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