

Too Much Knowledge Can Kill Your Product Launch

I recently had the opportunity to participate in a sales call for a company that sells energy efficiency solutions. The technology is ground breaking and delivers significant energy savings. World class companies are already customers. So what does the company lead with in its presentations and literature? Their Kowalski Coil*, obviously. An * indicates that the name of the technology has been changed to protect the guilty.

Maybe I travel in the wrong circles but I don't know many CFOs, CEOs and other high level decision makers who worry about Kowalski Coils*. Proven energy savings, yes. Kowalski Coils*, no.

We see this all the time. A chemical company introduces a breakthrough product and highlights the molecular structure of the chemical. An enterprise software company develops a game changing application and leads with the system architecture. A start-up invents a unique way to reduce pollution and can't stop talking about its Silicon Crystal Hydro-Balance*.

Why such a large disconnect between the customer's interests and what the company talks about on sales calls and marketing materials? Why do these companies put their customers to sleep by using jargon only a few understand?

These are smart people often with PhDs who lead innovative companies and yet they fall into the jargon abyss. Shouldn't they know better?

What is going on?

I recently read a fascinating book *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* by Chip Heath and Dan Heath. Chip is a professor at Stanford and Dan used to work at Harvard Business School. Smart guys. While the focus of their book is on how people in all professions can better communicate complex ideas and concepts, their book has special relevance to those companies who seek to commercialize breakthrough innovations.

Based on years of research, *Made to Stick* introduces the concept of The Curse of Knowledge. The very expertise that enable companies to develop breakthrough products and services, serves to undermine their ability to sell and market these products and services. The problem is these companies have knowledge based on years of studying a problem that makes it impossible to

imagine what it is like to lack that knowledge. As a result, vendors and customers suffer from massive knowledge imbalances.

The inventors know from years of working with these products, the importance of the Kowalski Coil or the benefits of using a Silicon Crystal Hydro-Balance*. Customers, prospects, reporters or potential investors often nod knowingly since they don't want to appear ignorant in the face of such overwhelming expertise.

Even if a listener has a scientific background does not guarantee that they understand what you are talking about. True confession, I have a graduate degree in Chemical Engineering and I don't know what a Silicon Crystal Hydro-Balance* does.

Ralph Vetsch, a sales executive with an outstanding twenty year track record of selling innovative products and services, states "The Curse of Knowledge is a very common phenomenon particularly with innovative products and companies. The benefit to the customer is considered intuitively obvious and it is assumed that the customer will know why the innovation will help them."

So how can innovative companies keep The Curse of Knowledge from derailing their product launch? One approach is to rethink the composition of their launch team (assuming that they have one!) and the skills they seek in launch/product managers.

The usual job description or posting for a product manager or marketing manager starts with the requirement that the ideal candidate has more than X years in the company's industry. Or the launch manager is frequently an engineer who gets promoted. I've seen customers get hired by vendors and put in charge of the commercialization effort. In other words, product knowledge is the most important job requirement. However, having an experienced product expert lead the commercialization effort almost ensures that you will be cursed by the Curse of Knowledge.

Instead companies should strive to find people to lead their commercialization effort who have successful product launch experience or a proven track record communicating complex ideas. Even if they can't tell a Kowalski Coil from a turkey sandwich.

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