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## Using Analogies and Metaphors (and More) in Demos

Well-crafted analogies and metaphors<sup>1</sup> help our audiences remember the key ideas we present in our demos. Some examples are very effective, others could be improved... Let's explore!

### Beyond Facts

If you simply present your capability (a "fact"), typical audiences don't retain it (unless it addresses something really key). Facts by themselves are flat and lack luster, they don't stand out. They are unremarkable and are correspondingly difficult to remember.

Analogies and metaphors often build visual representations of ideas that are "sticky" – they form memories that last longer and are easier to recall than facts.

Here are some examples I've heard – fact first, then the analogy or metaphor. First specimen:

"We have a broad range of reports."

Nothing particularly remarkable here, is there? A different vendor offered:

"You can choose from a broad range of reports. It's like having a supermarket of reports, ranging from fresh meats and fish, arrays of vegetables, rice and pasta, eggs and dairy, exotic canned goods, chips and cookies – if you need it, your desired report is likely here... Bring your shopping list!"

"...a supermarket of reports..." Much more memorable!

Another example:

"You can set search filters to find exactly what you need."

Meh. This next variation I heard is quite a bit more, um, pointed...:

“People talk about how hard it is to find ‘a needle in a haystack’. Well, this search capability is like a powerful magnet precisely extracting that iron needle in a fraction of a second...! Haystack? No problem!”

“...a powerful magnet...” I *want* one of those...!

Another example, for software that automates various workflows:

“We automate your manual processes...”

ZZzzzzzz.... Here’s an alternative I heard – a nicely “crafted” description!

“It’s like the difference between a team of workers laboring with hand tools slowly building cabinets and fixtures – vs. equipping your team with state-of-the-art computer design driving integrated power tools – not only producing beautiful works in a fraction of the time but also improving the craftsmanship and quality!”

“...state-of-the-art computer design driving integrated power tools...” Wow.

Finally, an example from my distant past, with respect to applying combinatorial chemistry and high-throughput screening to pharma and materials science research – we used to say (while holding up a 384-well micro-titer plate),

“It’s like doing a year’s research in the palm of your hand...!”

[For those who are familiar with this industry, no explanation is necessary; for those who are unfamiliar, no explanation will suffice!]

Facts are boring and unappetizing. Spice up your demos with a generous seasoning of analogies and metaphors. Make it a memorable meal...!

### **Regional vs. International Issues – Be Aware!**

A while ago I was delivering a Great Demo! Workshop in Europe to an international audience and during our first break, a woman came up to me and asked me to:

1. Slow down a bit and
2. Be a bit more careful with my choice of words.

This was a great reminder – and humbling, personally. I work hard to slow down my delivery and try to choose more “internationally”-understood English words and phrases (and to avoid U.S.-specific colloquialisms), when presenting to non-native English speakers – and I believe I generally do a good job. However, it was clear I could do better...!

It is difficult for non-native-English audiences to spend a day or two working in English – it can be confusing, at minimum, and very tiring overall...! Accordingly, U.S. folks presenting to international audiences need to be aware of their word and phrase choices.

Here are some examples that I have heard (along with possible non-U.S. interpretations):

- “Hit it out of the park” – [What are you hitting, and why?]
- “Out of left field” – [Which field?]
- “That’s the minor leagues” – [Is this a music reference or perhaps a follow-on movie to The Justice League?]
- “The cat’s out of the bag” – [Why was the cat in the bag? What did she do?]
- “That dog don’t hunt” – [Whose dog doesn’t do what? And why?]
- “It was wicked” – [Wicked – is that evil or good, or a reference to the musical?]
- “Piece of cake” – [Ahh, it must be time for dessert or our next coffee break, yes?]
- “That’s just putting lipstick on a pig” – [Um, why and what did the pig do to you?]
- “Break a leg” – [Sounds painful...]
- “Monday morning quarterback” – [Do they play American football on Monday mornings?]
- “The whole nine yards” – [What happened to the 10th yard? And how many meters is that? (8.23)]
- “Go Dutch” – [Is that like, “Go AFC!”?]
- “It fell through the cracks” – [Are there cracks in our software?]
- “We threw him under the bus” – [Now *that’s* going to leave a mark...!]
- “Off kilter” – [I’m totally lost on this one]
- “Out of whack” – [Too bad, no more whacks in your bag, huh – perhaps the cat has more whacks in her bag...]

How does this apply to demos? Directly!

Contemplate the challenges faced by *your* customers when they are listening to demos presented using phrases and language that are U.S.-specific – and delivered at rapid-fire pace.

One of our top priorities in presenting demos is clarity of communication – so we should take the guidance from my Workshop participant and

1. Slow down
2. Choose words and word phrases that are as international-English as possible...!

Interestingly, it cuts both ways. Just as U.S.-based phrases can be confusing to non-U.S. audiences, other international regionalisms can be equally puzzling. Here are some UK-based examples followed by a rough U.S. translation):

- “Let’s table that” (The U.S. translates this as the *opposite* of what other English-speaking countries mean!)
- “Cover off”? (Completed)
- “Football” (Soccer, the beautiful game)
- “Thongs” (Flip flops, zories, clam diggers...)
- “Entrée” (Appetizer)
- “Chips and crisps” (French fries and chips)
- “Rubber” (Eraser)
- “Storey” (Floor)
- “First floor” (Second floor)

Winston Churchill (or George Bernard Shaw or Oscar Wilde) famously remarked about the U.S. and the UK that “England and America are two countries separated by a common language.”

Even within the confines of the U.S. meanings change. For example:

- “Wicked” as noted above...
- “Sugar”, as in “Give me some sugar...!”
- “Pasty” – pale or delicious?
- “Dressing” vs. “stuffing”
- “Fix” – repair vs. about to...
- “Dope” – don’t *even* get me started on this...!
- “Pop” vs. “soda”
- “Shopping card” vs. “carriage” vs “buggy” (vs. “trolley” in the UK)
- “Puppy chow” (U.S. Midwest)
- “Ugly” – unpleasant looking vs. rude or unkind
- “Awesome” – can mean absolutely anything, it appears...!

The moral? Think about your words before you use them. Be as clear as possible and practice using “International” English when appropriate.

### **Beware the Morass of Mixed Metaphors**

Metaphors and analogies are terrific – but can be risky if applied haphazardly. Mixed metaphors can be more amusing than useful – particularly if your audience focuses on trying to “decode” the metaphor as opposed to getting the point directly.

Here are a few sad examples of mixed metaphors for your inspection – vote for the worst or best, depending on how you view this...! Note that these are all real, captured from various demo recordings, blogs and articles:

“All too often we relegate the demo to the ‘been there, done that’ corner, content to put into practice all of the tired, tried and possibly true techniques that will get us in the

door but see us coming up short when it comes down to closing with confidence and power. Today we'll examine some of the practices that can be tossed out with tomorrow's trash, and look at ways to pump up our demo game."

This mixed metaphorical *mélange* starts in a corner, moves to the door, then gets tossed and finally pumped. A busy afternoon!

Next?

"While it may seem like good sense to cover all your bases, throwing too much at your prospect actually weakens your message. Even a short diversion from focus can confuse the issue and cause your prospect to tune out during an otherwise stellar case. You make your prospect do all the work of picking out and remembering the most relevant pieces."

Love it: "Cover bases, throw too much..." (OK, so far so good...), but then the baseball analogy gets rained out with "...focus, tune out, stellar case, picking out pieces."

How about:

"With these ideas in your back pocket, you can break through to the toughest of clients and keep your organization firing on all cylinders no matter how much of a time crunch you are in."

Short but packed! "Back pocket, break through, fire on all cylinders, time crunch." I think this is the winner so far. And I really *want* to see someone breaking through, leading with their back pocket while firing on all cylinders...!

And:

"And like the U.N. Security Council Members, it only takes one veto to kill an entire deal. Because of the proliferation of stakeholders needed to approve a deal to get it off the ground, a sure thing can become dead in the water long after the sales cycle seems over."

Better have the Security Council equipped with both wings and fins...

More:

"Our reps use our ... platform which provides the toolset they need to spread your compelling sales message and get those who buy in the wiggle room they need for others to sign off on their decision."

This one mixes a bad case of rampaging pronouns with toolsets and wiggle rooms!

But wait there's more:

"Modern decision-makers have a million things to take care of, so even a small objection or a momentary scheduling snag can threaten to eject them out of your funnel as their plate fills up with other priorities."

Wow – breathtaking...!

The moral? Once again, choose your words carefully and build your metaphors thoughtfully...!

### **Manufacturing Metaphors and Accumulating Analogies**

Some people can generate effective analogies and metaphors as needed – “on the fly”. Other folks may want to have a handful of prebuilt (and tested) examples to draw from.

Here are a few suggestions for those of us in the second group:

Collecting:

- Any time you hear a terrific metaphor or analogy, write it down – and include the context, if necessary.
- Similarly, collect good candidates from your reading and listening. Books, articles, podcasts, webinars – any time you come across something you like, capture it.
- Raise the question at your next team meeting, “Is anyone using any particularly effective analogies or metaphors?” In a team of presales folks it is likely that one or more have some really great ones...!

Using:

- Like so many things in the Wonderful World of Demos, practice is useful and likely important – so *do* so...! Rehearse your new analogies and metaphors in your demo dry runs. Get feedback from your peers on how they resonate – and get comfortable with your delivery.
- Test with real audiences – and assess the impact. Are people nodding their heads as the ideas sink in (or shaking their heads sadly...)?
- Next, take a lesson from stand-up comedians: They test new material and, if it works, continue to refine and include it in their act going forward. And of course, new content that fails is scrapped. You can apply the same methods in your demos similarly.

- And, of course, when you have material that really resonates, share it with your colleagues – make it a virtuous feedback loop.

## What About Stories?

Ah, stories – the most effective communications leverage the power of stories. Archimedes noted:

“Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world.”

One might observe that where facts are the world, and analogies and metaphors are the fulcrum, stories are indeed the lever...!

If your demo is like a 60-floor high-rise building, facts occupy the lower floors, with respect to retention. Analogies and metaphors find comfortable lodging in mid-upper levels, enjoying improved visibility. For the best views, impact and retention, effective stories enjoy residing in the penthouse suites...!

Chip and Dan Heath identified and characterized the key principles of stories and storytelling in, *“Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die”* – this terrific book should be required reading for anyone in presales or sales.

And for a delightful description of how to apply stories in your demos, see our [article](#) on the topic, *“Storytelling in Demos”*.

Think of memories like a spider web. A fact is like a single strand attaching an idea to a support. Analogies and metaphors build a memorable vision, adding many more strands and connections. Stories imbed your idea in a complete web, securing the memory against the wind and weather of time...!

<sup>1</sup> I never remember which is which... I was once told an analogous story about a metaphor – or perhaps it was a metaphorical tale of an analogy? Or a simile-like metaphor? In any case, as Steven Wright once quipped, “It’s a small world, but I wouldn’t want to paint it...!”

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