

Don't Persuade. Explain.

Lessons from AWS Re:Invent on explaining super complicated ideas, avoiding the curse of knowledge, and why explanation is empathy while persuasion is manipulation.

"If you're not having fun, you're not learning. There's a pleasure in finding things out." — Richard Feynman

When someone tries to explain a concept, the explainer usually makes at least two cognitive errors that prevent them from communicating well: (1) They don't understand what the listener knows, and (2) They try to persuade instead of explain.

The first error is simple enough. If you don't understand what your audience knows, you're more likely to use terms and concepts they can't follow. Simply put yourself in their shoes and tailor the content of your explanation accordingly.

The second error is less intuitive. Explainers often forego the empathy of explaining in lieu of the salesmanship of persuasion. They attempt to convince rather than inform. What they don't realize is that the very act of persuasion is, itself, insulting. They've forgotten their Ogilvy: 'The consumer isn't a moron; she is your wife.'

Persuasion is manipulation. Explanation is empathy. It's the latter that pays fatter dividends.

A Simple Heuristic for Explaining Complicated Topics

1. What does the audience know?

To explain something well, you need to understand who you're talking to and what level of knowledge they're working with. People tend to get this wrong thanks to the 'curse of knowledge' — you tend to discount things you already understand as much easier to grasp than they actually are.

2. How do they feel?

Now that you understand what the audience knows, you need to learn about what they feel. As the old adage goes: Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care.

3. How do they want to feel?

To help a listener understand a topic is more than communicating a fact. What you're really doing is helping them feel like they understand. Your explanation empowers them.

4. Explain how the product helps them achieve those feelings

With your understanding of the audience's knowledge and feelings at hand, simply explain the benefits. Benefits are statements that answer that age old question: 'What's in it for me?'

5. Explain what the product does

Finally, explain the features. Make the product the hero. Go into detail. Remember your Ogilvy: 'She wants all the information you can give her.'

The Real Problem

People don't buy cloud document storage because they care about cloud document storage; people buy it because managing remote workers is a hassle, or because maintaining servers is expensive. People want work to be easier. People don't buy mattresses because they care about mattresses; people buy them because their back hurts, or because they're uncomfortable. People want to feel refreshed.

The audience does have a problem. However, that problem isn't a material problem they can't solve. Rather, it's a feeling they want to feel, but can't. A good explanation is what gets them there.