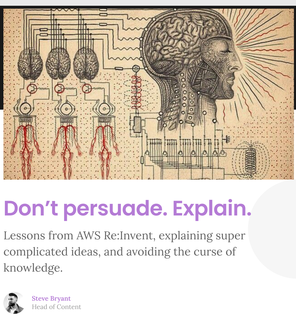


Don't persuade. Explain.

Lessons from AWS Re:Invent, explaining super complicated ideas, and avoiding the curse of knowledge.

Steve Bryant
Head of Content

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

— Richard Feynman

Here's a thing you've probably noticed yourself. When someone tries to explain a concept, the explainer usually makes at least two cognitive [tooltip text="errors"]Obviously, the superset of cognitive oopsies, logical fallacies, and rhetorical noggin-smackers could fill a Santa-sized sack. In this article, we're dealing with a subset of cognitive biases (like, say, the self-serving bias) and informal rhetorical fallacies (e.g., the mind projection fallacy), and grant that the broader range of human decision-making errors is *spreads arms wide* THIS big![/tooltip] that prevent them from communicating well:

1. They don't understand what the listener knows.
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. This is an easy error to identify, and it's an easy error to correct. Simply put yourself in their size 9s and tailor the content of your explanation to that shoe.

The second error: 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."

Or, put another way: Persuasion is manipulation. Explanation is empathy. It's the latter that pays fatter dividends.

And, happily, this holds true whether you're on a dinner date with your (very intelligent) wife, or explaining PS5th GPU instances and data lakes to 50,000 people at once.

Lessons from AWS Re:Invent

Speaking of 50,000 people at once, consider AWS Re:Invent.[tooltip]This transition is an example of introducing an argument *by* the head and shoulders." Another example: "Did you hear that gunshot just now? No? Well now that we're talking about a gun ..." I can't for the life of me remember where I learned this term of art, but I encourage you not to google the phrase unless you wish to be accosted by shampoo-conspiracy theories.[/tooltip]

Re:Invent is a conference hosted by Amazon Web Services — the subsidiary inside Amazon that develops, manages, and sells cloud computing. Full disclosure: they've been a client since Re:Invent 2012.

Re:Invent is ... how to put this, *not a small operation*. AWS has been holding the conference in Las Vegas since 2012, when about 10,000 people attended. That year, AWS revenue was $1.5 billion. This year, there were roughly 50,000 attendees. AWS revenue: $17.5 billion.

All those billions flow from the proceeds of the cloud. Broadly speaking, AWS sells on-demand computing power. Subscribers can access a virtual cluster of computers at any time over the internet. Some subscribers need storage, some need processing power, and some need access to various data and AI algorithms. AWS, for example, stores the Netflix movies you stream. They also make it stupid easy for computers to recognize cats.

But the larger point is this: AWS provides computing services so subscribers don't expend resources developing those services themselves. Not everybody can afford to build a server farm, but everybody needs computing power. Which makes the business a good example of that old frontier maxim of opportunism: *When everybody else is digging for gold, young man, sell shovels.*

Explaining complicated topics with a simple heuristic

At Re:Invent, we help AWS executives explain what those shovels are and how they work. When CEO Andy Jassy and CTO Werner Vogels are on stage, our work is behind them.

What Jassy and Vogels are explaining are not uncomplicated topics. AWS is creating the bleeding edge of virtual services. They are, quite literally, franchising out human ingenuity and decision-making power. It's our job to help AWS communicate those services so their audience understands them. Over the years, we've employed a simple heuristic to help guide the work:

1. What does the audience know?
2. How do they feel?
3. How do they want to feel?
4. How will the product help them feel that?
5. How does the product work?

1. Who's the audience and what do they know?

To explain something well, you need to understand who you're talking to and what level of knowledge they're working with.

Sounds simple enough. But people tend to get this wrong thanks to what's called the "curse of knowledge" — i.e., you tend to discount things you already understand as much easier to grok than they actually are. When that happens, you begin to automatically assume short inferential distances between you and your audience. You expect them to understand your terminology and concepts, when really their eyes have glazed over and they're only nodding to be polite.

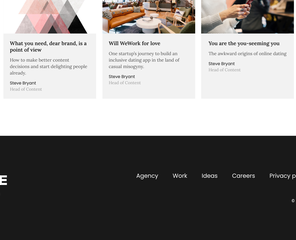
In other words, your words are more ambiguous than you think. If you take the time to understand who the audience is and what they already know (or don't), you'll be better at helping them understand you.

2. How do they feel?

Now that you understand what the audience knows, you need to learn about what they feel. To illustrate, we turn to an old adage which is often (and erroneously) attributed to Teddy Roosevelt: *Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care.*

In other words, you can spout facts all day long, but if the audience doesn't know you have their best interests at heart, they'll tune out.

So to understand audiences, we often use an excellent tool called an Empathy Map.



3. How do they want to feel?

This is the step that's trickiest to understand. 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.

Often times, a person making an argument — or a brand selling a product — assumes that the argument itself (or product itself) is the point. A brand, for example, wants people to desire its product. But people don't desire products. People desire feelings that products give them:

People don't buy cloud document storage because they care about cloud document storage; people buy cloud document storage because managing remote workers is a hassle, or because elaborate file permissions are onerous, or because maintaining servers is expensive. ***People want work to be easier.***

People don't buy mattresses because they care about mattresses; people buy mattresses because their back hurts, or because their spouse keeps them awake, or because they're uncomfortable.

People want to feel refreshed. *People don't use AutoCAD software because they care about AutoCAD software; people use AutoCAD software because they want to design a LEED-certified building, or reimagine an elevated railway as a walking park, or develop a perfectly dimpled golf ball.* ***People want to create.***

4. Explain how the product helps them achieve those feelings

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

The benefit of cloud document storage is that it makes work easier. The benefit of mattresses is that they help you feel refreshed. The benefit of AutoCAD software is the software helps you create. Like that.

5. Explain what the product does

Finally, explain the features. Make the product the hero. Go into detail. And remember your Ogilvy: "The consumer isn't a moron; she is your wife. You insult her intelligence if you assume that a mere slogan and a few vapid adjectives will persuade her to buy anything. She wants all the information you can give her."

If this communication process seems similar to Amazon's famous "work backward from the customer problem," you're not wrong. We must always begin with the end in mind. And, in this case, 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.

Steve Bryant
Head of Content

Steve specializes in content strategy, branded content, product development, and editorial operations. Yes, he'd love to get a drink.

@stevebryant Steve Bryant

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