Article from
Innovators & Entrepreneurs
August 2019
Issue 68

Three Simple Steps to Avoid Demo Disaster
Kevin Pledge

Demos can be the hardest presentations to give and often are the most important to get right. This summer, my company launched its new online distribution platform; the launch event involved about three hours of live product demonstration. In May, Microsoft kicked off their developer conference with a disastrous live demo.

The keynote event, known as Build, was to be kicked off with a live demo by John Knoll and Andy Chaikin using Microsoft's virtual reality headset known as Hololens. These two industry veterans are not new to giving presentations like this—Knoll was one of the original developers of Photoshop, and Chaikin (although his name was spelled Chaikan on the official Microsoft video feed) is an established space historian and author. The video can be found on YouTube. You have to forward 52 minutes to see the segment I am referring to.

They kicked off the keynote by saying how they were going to re-create the moon landing with the power of Unreal Engine and Hololens 2. Chaikin said, "What made it possible is this," opened his arms—and nothing, nothing happened at all. Chaikin joked that doing a live demo is harder than landing on the moon, and the two of them then said thank you and walked off the stage, leaving a confused audience thinking it was part of the show. About two minutes later, Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella continued, presumably where a successful demo had been expected to finish. Not only did the failed opening ruin the start of the keynote, but references to moonshots and space scattered through the rest of the presentations were totally lost on the audience.

This is not the first time big tech conferences have seen embarrassing failures. The Samsung CES event in 2014 saw film director Michael Bay walk off stage after his teleprompter failed.

What should they have done? Here are three ideas:

• **Preparation.** The No. 1 reason for presentation failures is lack of preparation. Normally, you would expect Microsoft to be thoroughly prepared, but if you can't even spell the presenter's name correctly, clearly you have not prepared adequately.

There is no excuse for lack of preparation. Sometimes deadlines come faster than you expect, and repeated preparation is the easiest thing to cut. In the case of the Microsoft event, there was a whole team preparing the presentation and they acted like amateurs.

• **Have a fallback plan.** Technology can be tricky and unpredictable; even if you are let down by technology, you should still be able to continue with the presentation. This may

sound contradictory, and it certainly isn't what the audience is there for, but it is naive to expect everything to go smoothly all the time, especially with new technology.

At my product launch, I had several contingencies, even videos ready to fall back on in case I couldn't connect to the internet—this wouldn't have made the same impression of a live demo, but it's better than nothing. Recording the demos in advance only took a couple of hours, but it gave me the extra security that, fortunately, I didn't need.

• **Explain what is going on.** If all else fails, explain to the audience what is going on, and what they should have seen. At the Microsoft event, the audience was confused, and the presentations continued as if nothing had happened. Why not step back, take a breath and explain what happened?

I guess it is embarrassing to explain that you didn't prepare enough, and you didn't have a fallback plan. It may just be easier to simply slump off stage, but you owe it to the audience, who have given up their time to hear what you have to say.

CONCLUSION

Technology demos can be the hardest type of presentation to give as they can go wrong due to external factors that you can't predict. It is better to be over prepared and not need contingency plans than have an embarrassing failure. It is worth remembering that, if something goes wrong, the audience is supporting you to find a solution. They are there to learn something, and while you may not be able to deliver the stunning presentation you had hoped, don't let them down by simply giving up.

Kevin Pledge is founder and CEO of Acceptiv. He also chairs the SOA's Actuarial Innovation & Technology Research Committee. He can be reached at *kevinpledge@gmail.com*.