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Origins of The Menu Approach: A Demo Survival Success Story

A Never Stop Learning! Article

“It’s a *huge* opportunity...”

- Inexperienced salespeople everywhere!

What’s in This Article for You?

- A fabulous set up
- A terrifying surprise
- An elegant solution
- An unexpected payoff

A Fabulous Set Up

Many years ago, I had been banished to Switzerland (OK, it was a delight!) serving in a combination of roles, including as a semi-super presales person for our recently released flagship product. One of our most experienced sales reps asked me to fly up to Uppsala, Sweden to “do a demo” for a major prospect on a certain date. We agreed to meet the evening before the demo at a restaurant to review the plan.

Tore G, our salesperson, was somehow unable to arrive that evening and left me a message to meet him the next morning at the prospect’s facility, about thirty minutes before the demo was supposed to begin. At this point, you (dear reader) have *exactly* the same discovery information that I had at that time: None!

The next morning, I arrived at the prospect’s entrance gate, went through security, and was escorted to the location where the demo meeting would take place. Interestingly, it was not a conference room, it was not a mid-sized meeting room; it was an *auditorium* already filled with 200 or more prospect participants.

I still had *zero* information from Tore about the plan for the demo and no idea about what to show.

Our flagship product was a rich toolkit that could do many things, ranging from databasing of pharma discovery information and research materials inventory to research intelligence and analysis and much more. I connected my laptop to the auditorium display system, tested a few of these applications, and let Tore know I was ready. I was still assuming that he had a plan.

A Terrifying Surprise

Two important notes:

First, the demo was scheduled to run from 8:30 AM to 12 Noon – three and a half hours.

Second, there were now about 250 people in the auditorium, all pharma research scientists across a broad range of job titles: medicinal chemists, synthesis chemists, bioassay, scale-up, metabolism and toxicology folks, and more. Each job title had their own specific needs and applications desires.

And I *still* had no info, no plan, and no agenda from Tore.

Precisely at 8:30 AM, Tore stood up and announced to the audience, “Good morrrrning ladies and gentlemen, I’ve brought my technical expert from California, Peter Cohan. Here he is!” And then Tore sat down.

I stood up and looked across the audience, 250 Swedish pharma research scientists, and asked, “What would you like to see?” The response was the sound of crickets in an empty room and shrugs.

(Imposter Syndrome Alert: Outwardly, I may have looked calm, but inside I felt like my stomach was tying itself into intricate knots...!)

An Elegant Solution

So, I had numerous applications that I *could* demonstrate, but really didn’t know where to begin or how to engage and satisfy that large audience for three and a half hours. I decided to let *them* determine what to show and in what order.

I asked, “Show of hands: How many of you are interested in seeing a chemical inventory application?” I did a quick, rough estimate of the number of hands and reported, “Looks like about 25% of you, thanks.”

One of the things I learned while working as an English speaker in Continental Europe was to write as I spoke, so I opened a new Word document and captured these results and shared them with the audience, writing, “Chemical Inventory – 25%.”

“How many of you are interested in improved ways to generate SAR Tables: Structure Activity Relationship Tables?” Many more hands went up. “Wow,” I said, “Looks like about 85%.”

I added that to the list:

Chemical Inventory – 25%
SAR Tables – 85%

“How many of you would like to see some chemical similarity searching examples? OK, looks like 35%.” The list grew:

Chemical Inventory – 25%
SAR Tables – 85%
Similarity Searching – 35%

“Who would like to see what is possible with a database of commercially available compounds? Wow – about 75% of you. Thanks!” The list now looked like:

- Chemical Inventory – 25%
- SAR Tables – 85%
- Similarity Searching – 35%
- Commercially Available Compounds – 75%

“And who is interested in exploring our metabolism databases? OK, about 20%. And what about tox? Hmmm, that’s about the same 20%. And how about an integrated ADME (Absorption, Distribution, Metabolism, Excretion) data source? Ahhhh, looks like 50% of you...” The list continued to grow:

- Chemical Inventory – 25%
- SAR Tables – 85%
- Similarity Searching – 35%
- Commercially Available Compounds – 75%
- Metabolism Data – 20%
- Toxicity Data – 20%
- ADME – 50%

After about ten minutes we had a complete plan for the three-and-a-half-hour meeting. I reorganized the list in order of the most popular applications:

- SAR Tables – 85%
- Commercially Available Compounds – 75%
- Lead Finding – 70%
- Lead Optimization – 70%
- ADME – 50%
- Similarity Searching – 35%
- Chemical Inventory – 25%
- Metabolism Data – 20%
- Toxicity Data – 20%
- ...

I was also cognizant that many in the audience were only interested in one or a few topics, so I outlined the following agenda, based on my expectations of the time required for each topic. I offered, “You are welcome to come and go as you please to see the applications of interest to you...”

8:45 – 9:30
SAR Tables – 85%

9:35– 10:05
Commercially Available Compounds – 75%

10:10 – 11:05
Lead Finding – 70%
Lead Optimization – 70%

11:10 – 11:20

ADME – 50%

11:25 – 11:45

Similarity Searching – 35%

Chemical Inventory – 25%

11:50 – 12:15

Metabolism Data – 20%

Toxicity Data – 20%

...

12:20 – 12:30

Wrap-up and Summary

(Note the clever inclusion of the five-minute “passing periods” to give people time to arrive and leave between topics.)

Well, the demo was a tremendous success!

The audience came and went in accord with their interests, with surprisingly good attendance across all of the topics. And, of course, I applied the [Great Demo!](#) principles of “Do the Last Thing First” and “Peel Back the Layers” within each topic, making them lively with strong prospect engagement and questions. Not bad for a generally reserved, cautious Northern European audience!

An Unexpected Payoff

Now, I hear you ask, “What was the purpose of this demo meeting?” Great question!

It was to determine the number of users for a paid pilot. And, as a result of stumbling into [The Menu Approach](#), we were able to more than double the value of the pilot, from about 60 users (as originally forecast by Tore) to 150 users. This yielded a sizeable order of about 600,000 Swiss Francs (about \$421,000 USD at that time) and helped us to make our numbers for the year.

You can find full details on The Menu Approach and its surprisingly effective companion, Vision Generation Demos, in the [Third Edition of Great Demo!](#)

Postscript:

Many presales folks, when reading or hearing this story, will shake their heads knowingly about “how could that salesperson put you in such a position?” But consider: He managed to organize a 3.5-hour meeting with 250 scientists in the audience on the strength of “You’ll see a great demo.” *That’s* a rather amazing sales skill, wouldn’t you say?

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