MINING BUSINESS DATA
Build better Dialogflow chatbots

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Writing for your peers vs writing for your customers

I am a consultant/coach for people who wish to build chatbots using API.AI. As I try and build an audience for my freelancing business, I have been faced with an interesting question. I will call it the "Writing for your peers vs writing for your customers" question. Others have written about this topic, my perspective is specifically for the case where your peers are highly technical, such as programmers.

Two articles, two viewpoints

I started thinking about this after reading two separate articles in the span of about a week. The first one is by Erik Dietrich, who writes this on his excellent blog post on turning tech hobbies into side income:

> *Many years ago now, when I first setup this site, I showed it to my dad, a CFO at the time. I told him that I planned to moonlight doing freelance work, and that I would blog about programming topics. He furrowed his brow and pointed out that the people who would hire me to do programming probably didn't care to read about programming topics.* **He suggested I write to an audience of prospective buyers of programming services.**

The second one is an article by Nate Berkopec about self-publishing a technical book made me realize that there can sometimes be a pretty big difference between the two types of audiences.

" *The pages on my blog weigh about 10 kilobytes in an era where most publisher's websites weigh nearly 10 megabytes. I send emails to my newsletter in plaintext, and I don't track clicks. All of my content is secured with HTTPS/TLS. I don't use trackers anymore - I recently removed Google Analytics from my site when I realized it didn't really matter to me. My course (detailed later) did not have any form of DRM, and I even shipped the "source code" (markdown files) to my purchasers.* **In a technically savvy audience, like mine, people notice this sort of thing, and they respect you for it.**

The differences

"Present to inform, not to impress. If you inform, you will impress". Fred Brooks, Author of "The Mythical Man-Month"

After all, there are differences between writing for your peers and your customers.

Assumption of prior knowledge

When you write for your peers, you make a whole bunch of assumptions about prior knowledge. You might create a step by step guide to API.AI, but they are intended for other programmers who already know what state diagrams are. (A side note to my technical reader: I don't think this is wrong. I once heard an interview of a famous programmer and author, Jon Skeet, who said that balancing precision and concision is one of the toughest things in technical writing. If technical writing lacks rigor, it actually becomes *harder* to read and follow. IMHO, rigor in technical writing is dependent on the utilization of known symbolic representations to the fullest extent possible.)

When you write for your customers, however, you will go in the other direction, minimizing assumptions and probably going one level higher. You talk about business problems, and how your services can help.

Specificity

When you write for your peers, your post will read like a Stack Overflow answer (although that is something Nate doesn't recommend). Given that your peers are seeking very specific

answers, you are trying to be as specific as possible. I am not saying that is the only way it works, just that I don't go to a blog post about "How to do task X in programming language Y" expecting to read about the business benefits of doing task X.

When you write for your customers, you are trying to generalize.

Tools of the trade

When you write for peers (and your peers are highly technical), you may need to rethink the tools of your writing trade (e.g. WordPress can be slow compared to a static site).

When you write for your customers, you will err on the side of being business friendly. For example, in one of my articles, I needed to use a tabular structure, and I had to install a plugin just for that. Maybe you can do it without plugins, but again, you ask : are you trying to inform, or to impress?

So what?

I don't think anyone would be surprised by these differences. But these are all factors we need to be aware of when we are trying to build an audience. There is also the issue of consistency - if you write only for your peers, or if you write only for your customers, then any articles which are intended for the other audience will seem a bit out of place.

In this blog, I am trying to combine the two, and I am not sure if I am going about it in the right way. 🙂

Have you faced a similar issue? Do let me know in the comments!

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