

Inducing Sales By Product Demo: ‘Step By Step’ Or ‘Show And Tell’?

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Problem of practice

Want to know more before purchasing a product? Experience a product demo, which marketers use to convey product features and benefits, connect with the consumer and drive purchase intentions. Most customers value product demonstrations, but are all product demonstrations equally effective? Recent [research](#) by Christine Ringler, Nancy J. Sirianni, Joann Peck & Anders Gustafsson suggests that a process demonstration (showcasing a step-by-step approach) can significantly increase a customer's purchase intentions, compared to an outcome demonstration (focusing on the end benefits).¹ These insights are crucial for marketing and sales managers and retailers across product and service categories in both offline and online contexts. A better understanding of effective product demonstrations would lead to positive customer experiences and greater purchase intentions²

¹ The article 'Does your demonstration tell the whole story? How a process mindset and social presence impact the effectiveness of product demonstrations' by Christine Ringler, Nancy J. Sirianni, Joann Peck & Anders Gustafsson featured in Volume 52 of *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* talk about how product demonstrations can create positive customer experiences and effectively boost purchase intentions

The demo 'dilemma'

They say a picture is worth a thousand words and product demonstrations (demos for short) embody the saying perfectly. Product demos are presentations created by marketers that showcase how a product functions, along with its features and uses; help build trust in the product and address buyers' apprehensions. One survey indicated that 75% of customers say **product demos** are crucial in their decision-making process.³ Good product demos can also create a sense of urgency, significantly influencing customer purchase decisions, with a **study** showing a 177% increase in sales in the store on the day of product demo.⁴

Product demos are also effective across offline and online contexts. **41%** of consumers who view an in-store product demo make a purchase, while consumers who watch online video demos are **64%** more likely to purchase the product.^{5,6} Now, even B2B companies are joining in, with **96%** of the companies surveyed planning video-based product demos.⁷

So, product managers and marketing managers should consider adding and enhancing demos. The question is – what kind of product demos can better influence buyers? A 2023 **survey** points the way – 88% of the respondents found *detailed and interactive* demos helpful in making better purchasing decisions.⁸ However, engaging customers effectively and figuring out which type of interactive product demo can positively impact purchase intentions can be tricky.

A marketing manager must first decide between two kinds of product demos: process demo or outcome demo. A process demo shows a *step-by-step approach to using a product*. For example, a company promoting an air fryer may choose to show the various steps of making fries while using the product, such as the settings for preheating, placing the food item, setting the timer, removing the fries after they are done, plating, and then serving them. Meanwhile, the outcome demo showcases the *finished result due to the product's use*. Here, the air fryer promotional campaign may just highlight a video of crispy potato fries plated aesthetically and placed next to the air fryer.

The research by Ringler and colleagues suggests that for most contexts, the use of process demos is superior. However, managers should consider switching to either outcome demos or a hybrid, if their offering is 'non-hedonistic' or the demo has characteristics such as high social intensity.

When process demos?

The research suggests that the step-by-step approach of process demos makes consumers feel more focused and deeply involved. A process demo encourages customers to follow along, visualize themselves using the product and get drawn into the product story. For example, a salesperson for a headphones brand demonstrating how to pair wireless headphones creates a mental process for the customer, allowing them to imagine how they can integrate the headphones into their life (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: How process demos lead to higher purchase intentions



Source: Created by the author based on original research article

However, when viewing outcome demos that emphasize the result, there is likely to be little or no focus or immersion in the story. This type of product demo leads to consumers mentally skipping to the end outcome without specific details about the process. For example, if the salesperson shows the headphones as already paired, the customer will feel disconnected from the product story.

This insight, pointing to the power of process demos, applies not just to in-person demos but is also a powerful tool for digital demos, as well as business to business (B2B) contexts.

Data shows that 96% of marketers believe that demo videos are an essential tool to enhance the buyer's understanding of the product or service

Demo the digital way

Brands are increasingly opting for the digital route via social media and live video shopping, especially since the pandemic, when online demos were responsible for driving significant growth in engagement and sales. Platforms like TikTok, YouTube and D2C websites are now scalable [opportunities](#) for process demo-focused storytelling.⁹ Data shows that 96% of marketers believe [videos](#) are essential tools to enhance the buyer's understanding of the product or service.¹⁰ For example, Tesla's website offers a process-driven [experience](#) that allows customers to explore every aspect of the self-driving feature.¹¹

From consumers to businesses

While much of the product demo research and practices have focused on consumer contexts, its implications in B2B environments are just as critical. A [McKinsey study](#) found that buyers are 80% more likely to purchase from a company that provides personalized experiences, including tailored product walkthroughs and demos relevant to their specific use case.¹² This indicates the value of one-on-one, process-focused demos in B2B settings, particularly when the product is complex or needs configuration. Also, it has been seen that interactive [product demos](#) in B2B SaaS can lead to a 94%

increase in qualified leads.¹³ B2B purchases often involve complex, high-investment solutions, longer buying cycles and multiple stakeholders. In such scenarios, process demos become essential tools for buyer education and persuasion.

In a nutshell, process demos boost purchase intentions, as they help customers focus and get absorbed in the product, but this effect does not always hold for outcome demos. This insight applies to both consumers and B2B scenarios, in offline and digital contexts.

Insight to implementation

So, how can marketing and sales managers leverage this insight into their own product demo strategy? Here's a handy guide:

Structure demos around processes: As mentioned, marketers should prioritize process-oriented storytelling to immerse customers in the product's journey. Such step-by-step demos engage the consumer and create the connection between actions and outcomes in their mind. Take Samsung's [advertisement](#) showcasing the steps involved in using its built-in AI features.¹⁴ It ensures customers feel confident about using the product post-purchase, making them feel deeply involved.

Leverage digital platforms effectively: Marketers need to design digital demos to replicate the engagement of in-person experiences to the maximum extent possible. Platforms like TikTok and YouTube can be ideal for showcasing process narratives, but marketers must ensure the content encourages immersion and deep focus. For example, a cooking brand can offer interactive recipe tutorials on YouTube, where viewers can follow along.

Use storytelling principles: Marketers can also incorporate identifiable characters, realistic scenarios, and a straightforward, imaginable plot to enhance absorption into the product story. Don't forget to ensure the product is the 'main character'. For example, a juice blender [demo](#) could narrate the story of making a smoothie, with the ingredients acting as supporting characters and the blender as the hero.¹⁵

Keep in mind: While process demos are more engaging, they are time intensive, as they require crafting



compelling storylines with relatable characters and production investment, especially when tailored to different segments. Implementing such digital demos involves costs in video production, editing tools or agencies and engaging with skilled content creators. Also, the sales staff needs intensive training to execute the demos.

Pro Tip: Research indicates that when consumers feel a strong personal connection with a brand and feel that it

Handy implementation guide:

- Structure demos around processes
- Leverage digital platforms effectively
- Use storytelling principles

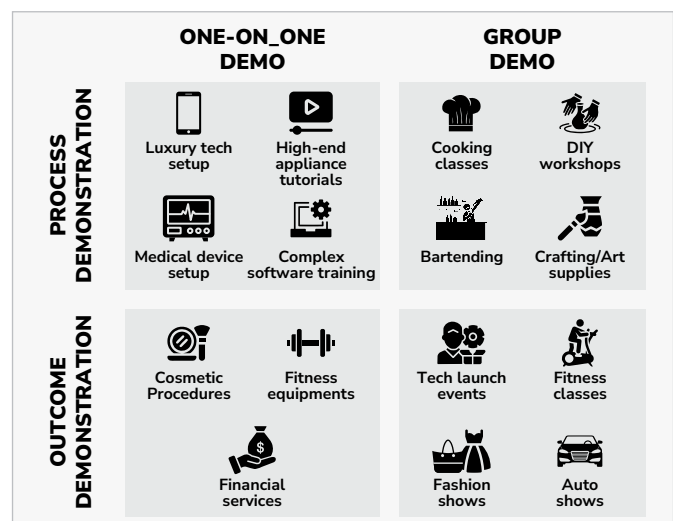
reflects their identity, they are more likely to trust and buy from it, especially when demonstrated through relatable scenarios. Marketers can create more emotionally impactful demos by integrating the feeling of products reflecting the buyer's personal identity into product demos through story-like scenarios.

Choosing the right strategy

In most, but not all, contexts, process demos are more effective than outcome demos. Consider the cautionary tale of **Google Glass**, Google's much hyped product.¹⁶ One major reason for the failure was the company's emphasis on innovative technology rather than a hands-on demo of its practical use. This could have contributed to consumer confusion and lack of interest, ultimately leading to the product's failure. The key takeaway? Having the appropriate product demo strategy could be the determining factor for a product's success.

So, are process demos always more effective? Not necessarily. Managers must consider three important factors before determining the most appropriate demo strategy. First, *whether a consumer is viewing demos individually or in a group*. Research suggests that when individuals are around others, it may lead to the person feeling self-conscious or distracted, and not getting absorbed in the product narrative, leading to lower purchase intention. As many as 79% of consumers are more likely to **engage** with a brand offering less socially intense demos.¹⁷ Hence, managers can focus on creating environments that reduce social distractions. Conversely, managers should avoid process demos in large group settings, such as retail stores and even in live online sessions. Although group demos can sometimes face challenges, there are also cases where they prove effective (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Matrix with recommended demo strategy across product/ service categories



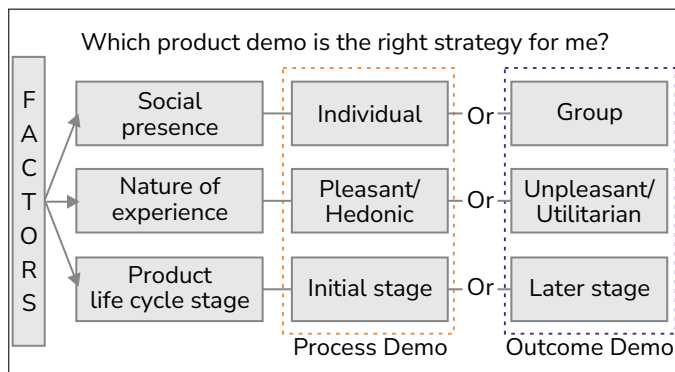
Source: Created by the author based on the original research article

Second, managers must consider whether the *consumption experience* is pleasant or unpleasant. For hedonic offerings like gourmet food or luxury skincare, process demos can immerse consumers in the pleasant step-by-step process of consumption and boost purchase intentions. In contrast, for *unpleasant consumption experiences*, such as dental appointments, and for utilitarian products like vacuum cleaners, outcome demos work better by shifting emphasis onto the result, such as a perfect smile.

Third, the *product life cycle* stage influences the choice of strategy. In the initial stages, product demos help create awareness, educate customers and build confidence. As familiarity grows, shorter outcome demos, as [Apple watch](#) tutorials, prove more effective.¹⁸

Figure 3 highlights how a manager can select the most appropriate demo strategy based on consumer's social setting, the product's nature and its life cycle stage.

Figure 3: Choosing the right product demo strategy



Source: Created by the author based on the original research article

Best of both worlds

It need not always be a battle between product demos or outcome demos. A manager may also opt for a hybrid approach— show some key steps of the process and highlight the end benefits. For example, a cosmetics brand might [demonstrate](#) the application of a product (process) to encourage mental immersion, and then highlight the before versus after results (outcome) to

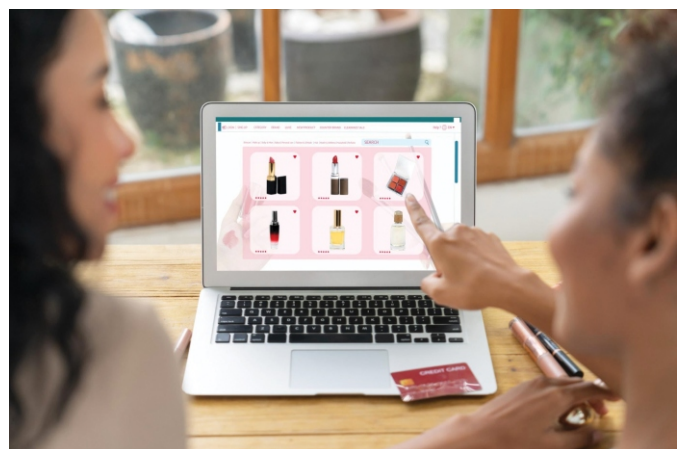
convey efficacy.¹⁹ The ['unboxing videos'](#) are another example.²⁰ These videos guide their viewers through setting up a product, providing an understanding of the journey and showcasing the product's final form and immediate usability.

B2B companies like HubSpot, Salesforce and Oracle are increasingly using customized, personal demo environments that emphasize the process and outcomes. These demos often combine low social presence (asynchronous videos or 1:1 meetings) with hybrid demo formats for greater conversion rates.

This mix of process and outcome helps bridge the gap, providing step-by-step instructions to help the customer feel absorbed in the setup, visualize the product use and create a mental image of the end state and the benefits for an aspirational appeal.

Tailored for impact

Thus, marketers can improve brand and sales outcomes by tailoring demos based on product type, target audience, channel and social context. For instance, process demos are more effective when the product is new, offers a pleasant consumption experience or requires the customer's involvement to integrate the product into their routines. When done right, product demos can maximize the impact of a crucial consumer touchpoint, deepen consumers' absorption and engagement with the product story, increase purchase intentions and drive stronger sales outcomes.



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