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Data Tells, but Stories Sell: Go Beyond the Data To Persuade Audiences

By Joey Asher, Speechworks

Data is a valuable tool. It can provide untold benefits in terms of analysis, understanding, and decision-making. But when it comes to presentations, data can be a real liability. This is because speakers often fall into the trap of relying solely on data to convey their messages. What many don't realize is that verbal communication is not a good data-delivery medium. So what's a presenter to do?

First, it's important to understand the four major problems with relying too heavily on data in your presentations. Then you need to know how to solve those problems.

Problem #1: Credibility

Let's face it: Data has a real credibility problem. The ability to instantly validate facts has made skeptics out of all of us. We instinctively know that 72 percent of statistics are made up*, and Google has made it possible for us to confirm that on the spot.

The next time you hear a speaker casually toss out a statistic that raises your eyebrow, watch how many people in the room go straight for their smartphone. In

this situation, the speaker's credibility can be blown in the blink of a cursor.

But even when the numbers are technically accurate, we all know that data can be manipulated to support a specific narrative.

For example, if I'm seeking funding for a study on the mental well-being of people of below-average height, I could cite one expert who has spent significant time living among the vertically challenged and whose research has concluded that six out of seven of them are not happy. Technically, that is a valid citation, and it serves to bolster my case very well.

I mean, sure, maybe I failed to mention that my sourced "expert" was Snow White, and that the six subjects who weren't Happy were Bashful, Sneezy, Grumpy, Doc, etc., but you should never let the facts get in the way of a good argument, right?

The bottom line is that speakers who fail to heed the credibility problem of data put their own credibility at risk.

**This statistic was made up, but you probably already Googled that.*

Problem #2: Comprehension

Speakers give their audiences too much credit.

"Wait ... what?" you say.

That may seem like a condescending statement, but think about it. When we sit in a meeting, attend a conference, or listen to a sales pitch, the speaker is presumed to be the expert on the topic he or she is presenting. It's the speaker's job to convey some amount of information to us to inform us, convince us, or persuade us. Our job is to listen, understand, and retain that information.

But here's the thing: It takes 10,000 hours to become an expert in something, but the average presentation only lasts about an hour.

Even in front of the most sophisticated audience, no amount of slides packed with numbers, charts, graphs, and statistics will get listeners to the same level of comprehension as the speaker.

Add to that the industry-specific nomenclature, the insider lingo, and the tendency by many speakers to commit "death by acronym," and many audiences



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end up downright confused and at a loss for what they're supposed to take away.

The bottom line is that using mountains of data to get an audience to comprehend the speaker's message is not possible. Nor should it even be the goal.

The goal should simply be to get your listeners to trust you. It should be about creating a connection with them and persuading them to follow your lead.

Problem #3: Connection

If you know anything about the *Star Trek* franchise, you're aware of the alien species known as Vulcans (Mr. Spock being the most famous). One of the most remarkable things about Vulcans was their ability to do mind melds.

To perform a mind meld, Vulcans would make physical contact with another being, and in doing so, could share their thoughts and knowledge. It was like opening a portal between their minds—everything the Vulcan knew, the other being would know.

If Vulcan mind melds are science fiction, why do so many presenters try to perform them on their audiences?

Many speakers mistakenly think their role as a presenter is to get all of the

information from their minds into the minds of their listeners. They think that if they can just relay enough data, they can help their audiences achieve total understanding and, therefore, gain buy-in for their ideas.

But Vulcans were devoid of emotion. They couldn't relate to humans in any meaningful way. Maybe that's why they started doing mind melds—it was the only way they could connect with others.

Thankfully, as speakers, we have the ability to connect, and we can do so pretty easily. And we don't have to rely on a total knowledge transfer.

Problem #4: Retention

Conveying numbers, facts, and other data points to audiences who aren't likely to be able to recall them later is not only futile, it can be downright detrimental.

According to Edgar Dale's Cone of Learning, people can only remember about 20 percent of what they hear. To underscore this, we play a memory game in our communication skills workshops. We explain that we're going to read a list of 20 random words to participants, and then ask them to write those words down from memory. Most people can only recall three to five of the words. They feel like their memory failed them.

But neuroscientists don't see this as a failure of the memory; they actually see it as a very desirable outcome.

Art Kohn, Ph.D., is a cognitive scientist who focuses on corporate learning and performance improvement. He explains that, at every moment of every day, thousands of pieces of sensory information are flooding your brain, which actively suppresses most of it so you are free to focus on what you perceive as the most essential things.

It's no surprise that data that lacks context, relevancy, or interest is typically deemed unessential, and the listener's brain quickly dismisses it.

But even worse than not remembering the data is the chance that your listeners remember it wrong. Speakers often rely on their audiences to become unpaid disciples: to spread their message to buyers, decision-makers, or executives. If those disciples spread a confusing, inaccurate, or otherwise unintended message, the results can be catastrophic.

The Solution

The good news is each of these problems can be overcome by using something as timeless as communication itself: stories.

Volumes of research exist to support the effectiveness of using stories in addition to—or even instead of—data to persuade. In fact, the science is clear:

- We register stories as evidence that makes data believable
- Stories create an emotional connection that data alone can't
- We relate stories to our own experiences, making the message easier to understand
- Stories provide tangible details that stick in our minds in a way that data doesn't

Science aside, we know that when we're in the role of listener, we want to hear stories. Here, I'll prove it: How many of

you DVR'd "C-SPAN" last night? Now how many of you DVR'd "The Bachelor"?

I rest my case.

As speakers, though, we often neglect to tell stories. But telling stories isn't complicated. Here are a few simple ideas that can help.

Characteristics of a Good Business Story

When it comes to a good business story, it must be:

1. Relevant – The story needs to support a key point you're trying to make. We're not just sharing stories for the sake of sharing. If it's not obvious what the relevancy is, find a way to make it abundantly clear for your audience.

2. Detailed – The details are what make stories interesting and help them stick. Don't just tell me about the time there was some client who had a problem. Tell me that six months ago you were visiting Big Box Company in St. Louis. As you were walking the warehouse floor with John Jones, the head of distribution, he confided in you that shipping times had increased by 11 percent over the past year, and they were struggling to understand why.

3. Short – Your stories need to be short. We're not waxing poetic around the campfire with Cookie here; we're telling business stories to make a point and persuade. How short? It's relative, but 30 to 60 seconds should be sufficient in most cases.

Structuring a Good Business Story

In terms of how to structure your stories for maximum clarity and impact, strive for: situation, action, result.

In other words, start by setting the stage and explaining the situation (or problem, challenge, goal, etc.):

"Six months ago, I was visiting Big Box Company in St. Louis. As I walked the warehouse floor with John Jones, the

head of distribution, he confided in me that shipping times had increased by 11 percent over the past year, and they were struggling to understand why."

Then discuss the action that took place (the thing that happened, the solution you provided, etc.):

"I offered to conduct a simple LEAN audit for John to see if we could nail down the problem. My team and I spent two days on-site observing their operations. We discovered there was insufficient aisle space between their new shelving units to fit two forklifts at once. So one forklift operator was often idling at the end of an aisle waiting on the other one to finish. We suggested widening the aisle space so that two forklifts could operate within the aisles at once."

Then share the result (the outcome, benefit, etc.):

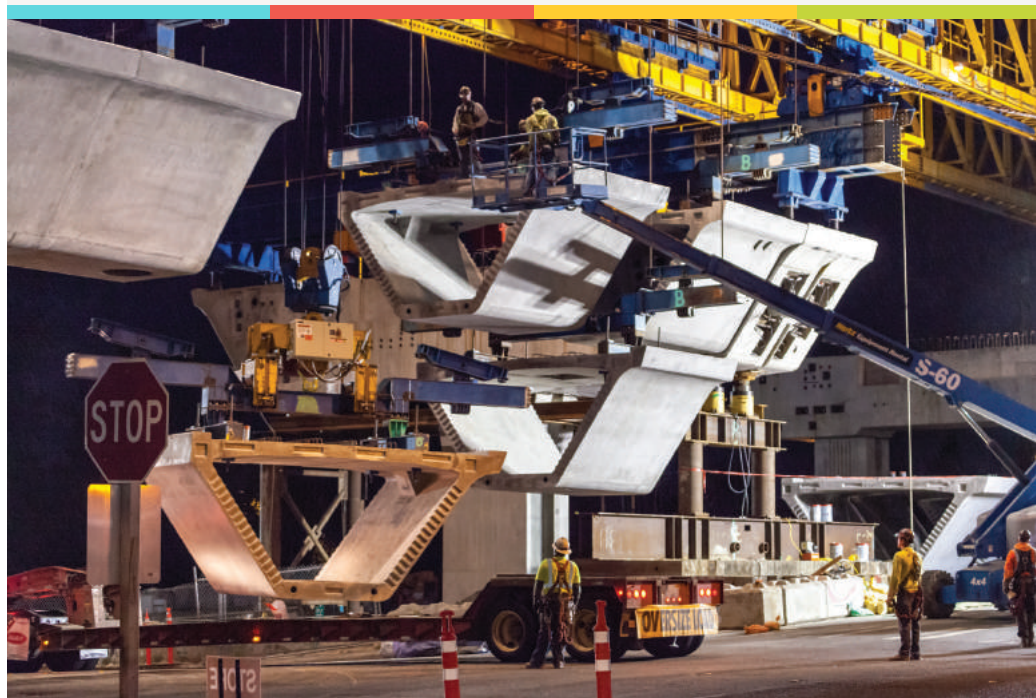
"By simply widening the aisles between their shelving units by six feet, two forklifts were able to operate within the aisles simultaneously, and their shipping times returned to normal by the end of the month."

My call to action is simply this: The next time you give a presentation, rather than loading your slide deck with charts, graphs, numbers, and statistics, tell the stories behind that data. Use a lot of detail and make it interesting to paint a picture that your listeners can visualize. Not only will it help them to understand, relate to, and remember your message, but it will boost your credibility as well. ■

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Learn more during the breakout session, "Data Tells, but Stories Sell: Go Beyond the Data To Persuade Audiences," on Thursday, July 13, at 10:30 a.m. in Indianapolis during the SMPS annual conference.

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You've Outsold Your Resources—Now What?



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Indianapolis: A Marketing Success Story



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How a Marketing-Driven Company Flourishes



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Using Technology To Tell Your Story and Crush Your Competition



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Righting a Wrong—Restoring Client Trust After a Service Failure



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Run Your One-Person Proposal Team Like a Gourmet Sandwich Shop



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