

Delivering Complex Data That Sticks

Through Story and Visual Elements

Web analytics, social media data and email metrics are flooding businesses with information in greater quantities than ever before. The amount of raw data floating across multiple spreadsheets can be overwhelming. While the hard facts are useful for adding strength and credibility to any exchange, deciphering these datasets and presenting them into meaningful information is often an agonizing experience.

The ability to interpret online metrics accurately and then relay that message clearly to others is both an art and a science. The goal is not only to provide valuable information, but also to make it stick. Typically, people like and remember stories. Thus, the presenter who can engage the audience with an interesting explanation of the data often outshines the person with the best answer wrapped in a boring package.

Providing Structure

So, how does one organize information so it speaks clearly and resonates with the audience? Clarinet's Vice President of Design and Innovation, Kelley Ruger, suggests using the following process:

- ✓ First, define the problem that needs to be solved.
- ✓ Second, find the key messages within the data that adds value and makes a connection.
- ✓ Third, present the information in a three-act story arc: identify where the business is now, where the business is going and how the business will reach the desired goal. Give decision-makers easily digestible answers that set reasonable benchmarks, measure company performance and spot attractive business opportunities.
- ✓ Finally, look beyond basic metric reporting and reveal the answers that the data unlocks in an interesting visual and/or story.

Enhancing Meaning

It's true: people are visual creatures, and a person's ability to learn improves with the use of visual aids. According to Geoff Ball, a graphic facilitator, 80 percent of a person's brain is dedicated to processing visual information. So, combining the right visual aid with the right color scheme, which attracts attention and augments the story, is important to inspire and educate. Together, these design elements can significantly impact the story of "how many" and the relationship within the data.

To enhance the meaning of information, color alone can be used in a variety of ways, such as naming places and things, measuring quantities and illustrating representations. Meanwhile, visual aids in the form of charts, graphs and pictures help simplify complex information.

Some of the most common types include:

- Pie charts to represent percentages of the whole
- Bar/column charts to compare groups of data
- Line charts to reveal trends over time
- Pictures to illustrate people, places or things
- Venn Diagrams to present relationships between sets of data in overlapping circles
- Maps to delineate political boundaries and population densities
- Timelines to highlight the occurrence of events

When exploring visualization options for reports and presentations, be creative and use some imagination. Keep in mind that large datasets need to be visually appealing, easy to understand and represent the data truthfully, by using consistent

scales and units of measure. Employing the right graphical element will help provide a quick snapshot of the complicated relationships riddled throughout the information and will reinforce the message with the audience.

Implementing Change

To make the transition from mundane data-laden reports to interesting stories, Ruger suggests starting with infographic-based data that adds supportive narratives or examples that connect with the audience. The idea is not to create something that is new, but to make an association with existing information that triggers the mind. He advises using universal truth stories. He explains, "These are stories that are used to communicate widely understood values, beliefs or situations regardless of race, ethnicity, religious beliefs or gender. For example, everyone at some point in business has experienced loss, fear, doubt, change or complexity. Seeing a character in a story experience these difficulties helps the audience understand and empathize with the situation." The bottom line is to bring the data to life within an organization by telling a compelling story. Match the universal truth story with the key messages in the data that resonates with the audience.

Making Connections

From the very beginning of time, pictures and stories have been a mainstay for conveying information and swaying the audience. They communicate ideas more clearly and have greater impact than using complex data, such as metrics and analytic reports alone. Yet, as the workplace becomes more sophisticated, the need to communicate complex ideas clearly becomes increasingly important. Using story and visual elements together to explain data-rich information helps facilitate understanding, makes a better impression and conveys important answers so action can be taken on the right opportunities. ■

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The more elaborate our means of communication, the less we communicate.

—Joseph Priestly

