

SPEAKER

IT'S STORY TIME!

THE PERFECT FIT

Selecting an Appropriate Story

WHAT YOU CAN

LEARN FROM
**HANS CHRISTIAN
ANDERSEN**

DIFFERENT WAYS TO

TELL A STORY

**STORIES
THAT SELL**

MERGING **STORY**
AND **DATA**

**SELLING THE
YOU FACTOR**

USE STORIES
FOR ONLINE MARKETING

SWITCH
YOUR NICHE?
PAGE 12



BY LORI L. SILVERMAN AND KAREN DIETZ, PHD

Imagine that you just agreed to speak at an event and must weave the latest research on the topic into your talk. It's tricky. How do you keep everyone engaged and energized while sharing facts and figures?

Here's an example. We started with the following fundraising research:

Apparently, statistical information dampens inclination to give to an identifiable victim. This result is consistent with the tendency to give less to an identifiable victim after learning about the discrepancy in giving. When jointly evaluating statistics and an individual victim, the cause evidently becomes less compelling. This could occur in part because statistics diminish the reliance on one's affective reaction to the identifiable victim when making a decision. (Deborah Small, George Loewenstein, Paul Slovic)

Kind of ho hum, wouldn't you say? What about this version?

Deborah Small, a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania, teamed up with two colleagues to conduct some interesting research. They divided their subjects into three groups. The first group received information about a nonprofit and data about its relief programs. The second group received a story about the plight of a young girl the organization helped. The third group received both the story and the data. Everyone was given \$5 and asked to make a contribution. The first group gave a small amount. The second group gave the largest amount. The third group gave the same small amount as the first group.

Still not doing it for you? What if we build a story around it?

Have you ever wanted to know the real secret to getting people to reach into their back pocket, grab their wallet, open it up and give you money? Deborah Small, a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania, teamed up with two colleagues to conduct experiments to answer this question.

Participants were divided into three groups. The first group was given lots of data about a nonprofit—how long they'd been in existence, the size of their annual budget and staff and spending on various programs, information about their constituents, a list of their funding sources, and the like.

a matter of **ACTS**

Three steps for keeping audiences riveted when talking about data

The second group heard a story—and only a story—about a young girl who lacked food, clothing, housing and education and how difficult it was for her to live each day, along with how the nonprofit had provided services that made a significant difference in her life.

The third group heard both the story about the young girl and the same data about the nonprofit that the first group was given.

Everybody was handed five dollars and asked: “Please donate.” And you know what? Everyone gave. The first group, who received only the data, gave only a small amount. The second group that heard the story gave more than twice as much as the first group.

How much money do you think people in the third group gave—the group that heard both the story and the data? Do you think they gave more money than those who heard only the story? If so, guess again. Now, this may surprise you. The group that heard the story and the data gave the exact same

tiny amount as that group that only heard the data. Oh, my heavens. How can this be? It’s so counterintuitive!

What do you think caused these results? Here’s what Deborah and her colleagues learned: You need to “free the story from the data.” Data and information on their own don’t create empathy toward a nonprofit or those it serves. When a story—and only a story—is shared, significant empathy is produced, and people willingly give more.

The researchers discovered that the way the data accompanied the story completely undermined any empathy the story created, leaving people with the same lack of emotional connection that the first group experienced. That’s why they gave the same tiny amount as the first group.

Now you know the secret to getting people to reach into their back pocket, grab their wallet, open it up, and give you money. You need to “free your story from the data.” Go make it happen!

EXPLORE the DIFFERENCES

What’s different about these three versions? The first one attempts to transmit complex factual information. The second is a description of this information. Neither makes you say, “wow” or want to take action. At best, they may elicit an “I understand” or “That makes sense.” Sharing data and information—and the reporting of complex research—are about sense-making—whereas version three is about meaning-making.

When melding data with storytelling, you need to stretch into meaning-making. It’s not enough to wrap graphics around numbers and deliver them in a slick package. Nor is it the audience’s responsibility to extrapolate meaning from the numbers. It’s you—the person sharing the data—who has to craft and tell the story.

The reaction you want to strive for is, “I get it! This is how this data relates to me. I now know what to do.” Here’s how.

STEP 1: What's the data trying to tell me/us?

Sit quietly with the data. Continually ask, "What's this data trying to tell me/us?" Here are other ways of asking this question:

- **What's the context?** Think of yourself as a tour guide. Share the who, what, where, when and why surrounding the data or research and its collection. How can you make it simple to understand?
- **What's the data really about?** This isn't always easy to determine. Sometimes it's not about the surface information, but the underlying implications.
- **What one piece of data will make someone's eyes pop open?** Did something surprise you? Did the data change over time?
- **What comparisons, trends, patterns and relationships define the data?** Think about what the data is contrasting. Highlight polar opposites and bring them to life for people.
- **What's the key message?** Sift through the messages about what the data is telling you and select the most critical—the one that'll move people to action.

STEP 2: Create a story from the data's meaning.

Now that you have a better sense of what to communicate, storify the research like we did by:

- Setting up a dilemma the research is trying to solve.
- Putting names and faces to people (i.e., the researcher, a subject in the study, etc.).
- Using images and sensory material to create a visual language (i.e., heard, handed, grab, wallet, back pocket, five dollars, budget, give).



- Using contrast between research groups so others can easily see them in their mind's eye. Magnify the disparities between each group.
- Repeating key words so they stick and help others recall the story.
- Sharing a surprising discovery.
- Interpreting the data and giving people a phrase to remember and take action on.

STEP 3: Decide on a story structure.

Here are a few simple story structures to use to organize your material.

- **The Deductive Argument Wrapped in a Story Approach:** Set the context first. Tell your audience the dilemma (problem or conflict) and then run deductively through the steps. Deductively means: To do X, you have to take steps A, then B, then C, then D, and then E to reach the conclusion, F. If you take those steps, you'll work through the challenges and resolve the situation. This will lead to ... your key message.
- **The Butler Did It Approach:** The book *Freakonomics* by Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner uses this technique. When discussing the drop in the U.S. crime rate since the 1970s, the authors set up the beginning of the story with the context, characters and problem. Then they

go through the data. Instead of giving a chart explaining the No. 1 reason for the drop in crime rates, they pose seven possible reasons. Could it be this one? Could it be that one? Maybe it's this reason. They present the final accurate reason as the last option, deliver their interpretation, and then provide the key message.

- **Set Your Story as a Map Approach:** Think of the data as presenting a journey in visual format across space and time. Decide on your key message and action steps, and then work through your data or research to display it as a map that helps you deliver a story about the journey a character takes through it.

These questions, crafting tips and story structures will help turn boring data into a winning presentation that'll have audiences rallying around your cause instead of sleeping in their chairs.



Lori L. Silverman offers business storytelling training, keynotes and consulting. She's written *Stories Trainers Tell, Wake Me Up When the*

Data is Over and Business Storytelling for Dummies. She helps organizations think and act differently when creating strategic plans and when implementing messy organizational changes. Visit www.partnersforprogress.com and www.business-storytelling.com.



Karen Dietz, PhD, is a veteran in business storytelling, and is one of the originals in the field. In 2013, Wiley published her book, *Business Sto-*

rytelling for Dummies, and she spoke at a TEDx Conference in 2014. Dietz partners with JVA Art Group to bring corporate stories to lobbies.

Sections of this article were adapted with permission from *Business Storytelling for Dummies* (Wiley, 2013) by Karen Dietz, PhD, and Lori L. Silverman.