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Say It With Numbers!

Get To The Point: Harnessing the Power of Numbers

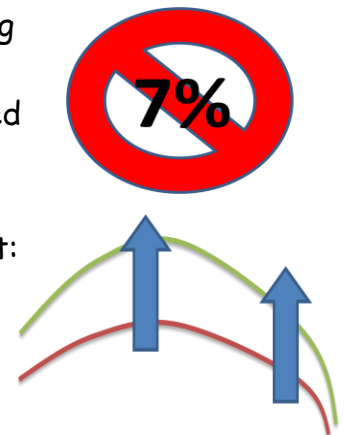
There are decimal points, power points, starting points, counterpoints, tipping points and points of view, but how do you make a Very Important Point (VIP) within a presentation and then ensure that it "sticks"?

One out of the box approach to differentiating yourself and your company or service is to make your opening or closing point using numbers. It is instantly more memorable and serves to get your unique business value across without resorting to text or complex bulleted Power Point decks. Persuasion rates among audiences increase by over 40% when they see a visual as well as hear the words - but there again, 59% of all statistics are made up anyway.

Numbers, Not Mathematics

Any numbers, visuals or charts you use need to be relatively self-explanatory. Anything which requires the audience to perform mental math detracts from your VIP. Numbers require heavy brain cycle processing, and while that is going on, the audience is not listening to you.

1. **Using a single number.** Last month's (July/August 2008) Talking Point dealt with the 7% myth - the completely incorrect statement that only 7% of your presentation message is carried in the content. So I can use an image like this ..
2. **Use a graph/chart.** Add the appropriate labels and a statement: "using our compression technology you will be able to increase the flow rate through these pumps by up to 50%." Note the red line is the bad current state, and the green line is good and desired future state.



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| <p>3. Tell a numerical story. Write 3-6 numbers on the whiteboard, or reveal them in a slide, and then ask if anyone in the audience knows what they mean. Feel free to comment that they are NOT tomorrow's lottery numbers, because at least half the time someone will say that. Then use the numbers to tell a story. The example is how I used numbers to convince a SVP of Sales not to respond to every RFP.</p> | <p>66 12.1 5.3 11.7 (6.4) 2</p> | <p>Completed RFPs Win Rate % \$M Revenue Direct/Indirect cost \$M We Lost Equivalent Sales Heads</p> |
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Internalize the Numbers

Many numbers don't make sense by themselves, and they need to be internalized and explained for the audience in bite-sized chunks. Three methods to accomplish this are human scale, emotional charge and context.

1. **Measure in human scale.** Very small or large numbers are incomprehensible to the human brain, so convert the numbers by using a timescale or a distance. For example, Three Trillion Dollars is a massive number - so "if I gave 100 people in this room One Million Dollars to spend every day, it would take you all over 83 years to do it" is a conversion to human scale.
2. **Play to emotions.** 99.9% accuracy sounds like an admirable goal. However, if the North American medical system ran at that efficiency, over 500 people would die from botched operations, and 12 babies would be given to the wrong parents every day. Do you really want to settle for 99.9%?
3. **Put it into context.** I saw this excellent example cited on the web: While reading a book about the 1854 cholera outbreak in Dickensian London, the author stated that the worst hit area of London was densely populated Berwick Street, with 432 people to the acre. So what? The author then places that fact into context by noting that even with skyscrapers, Manhattan has a population density of 100/acre.

Making The Point!

Once you have your delivery mechanism and visual set-up, how should you actually present the Very Important Point?

1. **Obsessive use of data.** Short term memory (the equivalent of human RAM) can hold about five facts or numbers at a time. So delivering a steady stream of complex numbers which require mathematics or contextual listening means the audience is not listening to you. If you are dealing with a single image or number then you have no issue, if you are presenting multiple numbers, you need to find a way to allow the audience to discard or file the older facts. Summarization or one of the internalization techniques listed above will help you.
2. **Keeping the score.** We all use numbers in everyday life to keep the score or to measure results - it may be our bank balance, football scores, or calories eaten, but numbers equal achievements. So if you have an opportunity to keep visual track of points covered or results achieved (i.e in a checklist or scorecard) refer back to that several times in the presentation - or even use an easel/whiteboard in parallel.
3. **Finish what you start.** By using numbers to make your initial Very Important Point, you also have an opportunity to use those same numbers - even the same slide - to serve as your "Compelling Conclusion" by reinforcing your achievement or persuasive argument with the audience.

Summary

Instead of saying it with flowers, try saying it with numbers. Examine your next sales or marketing pitch, and see if you have the opportunity to start with a numerical opener - you'll be amazed at the reaction!

"The generation of random numbers is too important to be left to chance."

Robert Coveyou, Oak Ridge National Laboratory

Talking Points is a monthly column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.

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