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So, what's your story then?

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Many researchers and data analysts are master craftsmen in their professions. They know how to ask questions (whether of people or data sets), set parameters, mitigate for bias and tell you what is and is not statistically significant. Some are even masters at connecting the dots, divining the key insights emerging from the data. Few, however, are inveterate communicators of those insights such that they have real business impact. They don't know how to tell the story in a way compelling enough to ensure that action is taken. And so their precious insights remain just nice to know.

Why is this? Some people will tell you "I am not a story teller". Others (of the more traditional persuasion) will say that their job is just to provide impartial information. And yet others will say that 150-page PowerPoint decks are what their clients want and demand. The underlying truth here, however, is that this is the way that we have always done it. It is our comfort zone.

An insight is not an insight unless it leads to action

But the other truth is more brutal: an insight is not an insight unless it leads to action. And nobody – but nobody – takes action on the basis of a 150-page deck. As a wise CMO at Meredith said ten years ago "The presentation should last ten minutes, the conversation should go on for hours". Senior management do not have the time, interest or stamina to suffer through an hour-long presentation replete with methodology, charts stuffed with numbers and graphics, and miniscule fonts. What they want and need is the story in ten minutes or less and an indication of what it means and what they should do about it. Until we take that lesson to heart, our insights are seeds sown on fallow ground.

So, how do we communicate our insights effectively and with impact? Some will tell you that technology is the answer – and sometimes it is. Keen as Mustard's experiment with Coca-Cola shows how email-delivered infographics can effectively disseminate insights to intermediate stakeholders. Dashboards can deliver essential metrics in real time to busy executives who depend on them. But communication of *real* insights that lead to *real* action still needs a human being. Why? Because humans (including senior management) relate to stories and preferably stories with emotion. And only other humans can deliver that.

Three things to know before you present

So, for any humans out there looking to hone their story-telling skills and see their insights have real impact, here are a few tips for success.

Focus!

Before you deliver any presentation, ask yourself these two simple questions:

- 1) What is the one impression that I want to leave behind?
- 2) What is the one thing that I want to have happen as a result of this presentation?

The one *impression* is the nub of the story that you want to stick in people's minds, the one thing they will talk about for days afterwards, the one learning that will live on. The one thing you want to have *happen* is the outcome that the story leads to, the action that will ultimately have positive impact. Everything else is surplus, even if it fascinates you or backs up previous research or confirms somebody's pet theory. It's the same idea as Michaelangelo put forward when asked how he could form such beautiful sculptures: "Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the **sculptor** to discover it." You are the sculptor and the data is your block of stone.

Use emotion!

Human beings (unless they are sociopaths) respond to emotion. It is no coincidence that Shakespeare's plays are divided into tragedies and comedies, or that his poetry consists mainly of love sonnets. Or that JFK said of Churchill, "He mobilized the English language and sent it into battle", meaning that he used emotion to stir the nation into resistance. Stories – all stories – use emotion to get their message across. Very often, the best stories will start off on the dark side, painting a picture that is threatening or problematic. They will then build the tension that results from that start until they then *relieve* that tension with a solution. The best thriller writers do this to you again and again, taking you on an emotional roller-coaster ride. While I don't recommend doing this with your CEO, a little bit of darkness, tension and relief can engage his or her emotions and make them *involved* in what you are saying.

So, don't be afraid to use these techniques when building your ten-minute presentation. Or perhaps it's better in a video? One research agency client of mine is masterful at building 3-minute movies for the C-Suite using exactly this technique – with spectacular results.

Who's the audience? And who are you?

All of us who have been through presentation training are familiar with the mantra “know your audience”. Few, however, really go to the lengths required to *really know* their audience. Of the eight people in the room, do you really know them all? The guy with his arms crossed at the end of the table? The woman checking her phone? Do you know where they are coming from? Do you know what they have invested in this presentation? Do you know what the results might mean for their departments or even their careers? Do some research on them. Find out what they have riding on this. Maybe even seek out a meeting with them before the presentation itself so that they are not blindsided by the story – and use a bit of empathy to ask them “what does this mean for you?”.

What we are rarely told in presentation training, however, is to ask the question of yourself “who are you?”. Are you a researcher who is coming to report results? Or are you a consultant coming to propose solutions? Or maybe you are an influencer, using your credibility in the organization to urge a particular course of action? Or, more rarely, a guru – an expert to whom senior management will listen with respect and open ears? It is up to you to decide who you are in this particular instance, based on the story you have to tell and your previous history with the group to whom you are presenting. Once you know who you are, the story itself will begin to flow.

This article does not even begin to scratch the surface of insights communication. But I hope it has given a few pointers on how you can communicate with a view to action and impact. If you can do that, you will be viewed as an investment, not a cost line item.

And, God knows, none of us want to be a cost line item.