



FINANCIAL
STORYTELLING:
KEEPING YOUR
AUDIENCE
AWAKE



Let's face the facts! When you present financial data to an audience, it's boring. Remember the scene from "Ferris Bueller's Day Off" when Ben Stein is lecturing his history class and says, "anyone" about ten times? Remember the looks on the student's face? Are you getting the same looks? I know you are!

My first thought is, who is in your audience? Are they accounting, finance, analytical types like yourself? I like to refer to them as left brainers. Are they the sales, artsy, creative types? I like to refer to them as the right brainers. If your audience is made up of a lot of right-brainers, just know this: they would like to tell you "not to confuse me with the facts" because the more facts you use, the less they are paying attention to you. "Anyone...anyone?"

Even you left-brainers get bored when only facts and figures take up all the space on a PowerPoint slide. Ever attend a continuing professional education course in accounting or finance? Have you ever seen slides so full of data and information that it makes your eyes tired? While the speaker is talking, the audience is not listening. They are either reading the slides or reading email. "Anyone...anyone?"

Let's bring the numbers and facts to life by using storytelling techniques. According to Rosemary Smyth's article "Storytelling- A Must Have Tool for Financial Advisors" explains why stories are so compelling. "Stories communicate facts in a compelling way, wrapping those facts in emotion – which is something that adds a "human angle" to information that might otherwise quickly be forgotten. Stories take concepts and add relatable context, helping listeners apply technical information to their lives. Stories have a beginning, middle, and satisfying conclusion and we're hardwired to want to hear the whole thing. We have no problem turning out dry facts, but we actively listen to an engaging story."

Financial Storytelling

"Our profit grew by 25% over the last two years." What is the most powerful item in this sentence? That's right, "25%." so why are you burying it the middle of the statement! That is similar to a comedian putting the punchline in the middle of the joke. Put the 25% at the end of the sentence. "Over the last two years profits grew by 25%." That creates impact. It grabs the audience's attention.

Now you have their attention, and you are about to lose them if you don't have a story on WHY revenue grew by 25%. Go find out why. Here how that might go.

Through your conversations within the organization, you discover that a large part of the growth is due to the hard work of a particular salesperson. You might say, "The majority of the profit growth was due to the success of our salesperson Jennifer. Jennifer has been building a relationship with a Fortune 500 company over the past two years and it paid off because they are our newest client." You have just added the human element to the data and told part of the story.

Props and Visuals

Put your content in a context that everyone can understand. For example, when you are presenting the income statement. Instead of talking about millions of dollars, which most of your audience can't relate but they can relate to a single dollar bill. We all can. So get a \$1 bill and blow it up to 3'x3'. Start your presentation like this: "For every dollar, we receive from our customers, 22 cents goes to payroll," then flip over a sheet of paper that covers 22% of the dollar. Continue until all the expenses (with some grouping) are flipped over. If any part of the dollar is still showing, that is profit which could represent 2 cents. Then you would state "for every dollar our customers give us, we keep 2 cents." Then add, "2 cents seems like a small amount. However, it equates to our company profit of 11 million dollars." Here is an opportunity where you can extend the conversation on ways to control costs to increase the company's ability generate a larger profit which could lead to higher salaries.

Financial storytelling takes a lot of work, but your goal is to connect with the audience, so they have a better understanding of the financial health of the organization. In the article, "Perfecting the Art of Financial Storytelling: Beyond the Numbers" by Geoffrey Mogilner, and I paraphrase, "The goal of financial storytelling is to break through the noise and connect with your audience, and by doing this, you then maintain their focus and present complex information in a way that your audience can better comprehend."

Always remember that you speak the language of business, and that is a foreign language to most of your audience. Reduce the "white noise" by telling more stories, use less data and fewer numbers so you can empower, inform and connect with your audience. Isn't that the goal, anyway?



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