



Stories or Data: Which Makes the Stronger Case?

And what happens when you use both? A 2007 study offers some surprising answers.

Imagine you're a college student studying in your school's library when a woman approaches holding a clipboard. She says if you'll complete a short survey about technology - how you use computers, cell phones, iPods, etc. - she'll give you five dollars. You make a quick calculation (a tall latte and a muffin for very little effort), and follow her to a study hall where about a hundred other students are gathering.

You complete the questionnaire and receive an envelope containing five singles. As you pocket the cash, you notice the envelope also contains a letter from Save the Children asking you to donate some of the money to help fight hunger in Africa. The solicitation contains statistics about food shortages in Malawi, lack of rain in Zambia, and the dislocation of millions in Angola. You make another calculation (skip the muffin) and drop a couple of bucks in a donation box conveniently located near the exit.

Outside the study hall you run into a friend who's just completed the same survey. "Did you give your money to Rokia, too?" he asks. When you look at him quizzically, he shows you the letter that was in his envelope. It's also from Save the Children, but instead of using numbers to make the case for a donation, the letter tells a story:



The picture of Rokia that accompanied her story

"Rokia, a 7-year-old girl from Mali, Africa, is desperately poor and faces a threat of severe hunger or even starvation. Her life will be changed for the better as a result of your financial gift. With your support, and the support of other caring sponsors, Save the Children will work with Rokia's family and other members of the community to help feed her, provide her with education, as well as basic medical care and hygiene education."

Moved by this appeal, which includes a picture of Rokia, your friend has donated all five dollars. And as you look at the two letters side by side,

December 2009

Stories or Data?

Which makes the stronger case?

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Meetings Worth Having

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you begin to realize that the research project you just participated in wasn't really about technology after all.

Lesson One: A Story Beats Data

This experiment about "the identifiable victim effect" was conducted at Carnegie Mellon University in 2007 by Deborah Small, George Lowenstein and Paul Slovic. The reactions of the two students are fairly representative of the results. On average, students who received the fact-based appeal from Save the Children donated \$1.14. Students who read the story about Rokia donated an average of \$2.38, more than twice as much.



Paul Slovic

"When it comes to eliciting compassion," Paul Slovic says, "the identified individual victim, with a face and a name, has no peer." Put another way: people relate more to personal stories than to numbers, and when the numbers are particularly large (e.g., millions displaced and going hungry), we simply cannot relate and instead look the other way.

But what happens if you *combine* stories and data? Will this produce an even more persuasive argument, one that engages both the emotional and rational sides of the brain? Slovic and his colleagues tested this scenario as well, and the results may surprise you.

Lesson Two: A Story Beats a Story Plus Data

In a third experiment (that was part of the same study), students who completed the technology survey were given an envelope with five dollars and a different solicitation from Save the Children. This letter told Rokia's story but also included statistics about persistent drought, shortfalls in crop production, and millions of Africans who were going hungry.

While students who had read Rokia's story *alone* donated an average of \$2.38, those who read the story *plus* the data donated an average of \$1.43. Slovic attributes this nearly 40% fall-off to what he calls the "drop in the bucket" effect. When people read about Rokia, he explains, their emotions are engaged and they are inclined to give. But when they also read about the millions who are in distress, "the data sends a bad feeling that counteracts the warm glow from helping Rokia," he says. People may still give, but they will give less.

Even with these results, Slovic adds, good causes may be able to combine stories with data to positive effect. If you tell a story about someone your organization has helped and then explain that she is just one among hundreds currently benefitting from your efforts, the supporting data may have a different impact. In this instance, says Slovic, the data "will indicate that [your] organization is trustworthy and effective. Donors care about that." He is quick to add, however, that this is an assumption on his part that has not been confirmed by research.

"If I look at the mass I will never act," said Mother Teresa. "If I look at the one, I will." The research conducted by Slovic and his colleagues has the same message, one that is not without a measure of irony.

About Us

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GOOD IDEAS FOR GOOD CAUSES

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If you truly want to persuade people, tell them a story. On this point, the data is clear.

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A Smarter Strategy for a Smartphone World

US PIRG is putting toy safety information into the hands of holiday shoppers with a web site designed especially for smartphones.

So you're at the toy store working your way through your holiday shopping list when you spot the next candidate for purchase: an Elmo lunch bag. Everyone loves Elmo, you think to yourself, so this has to be a winner. Before you put the lunch bag in your cart, however, you whip out your iPhone (or BlackBerry, or Droid, or whatever) and visit a new website: www.toysafety.mobi

Stripped down to basic text and very few images, the site loads quickly and clearly on your screen. You click on the link "Unsafe Toy List from 2009" just to be careful, but when you scroll through the names and pictures of toys, sure enough, there's Elmo staring back at you. And next to his smiling furry face is the frown-inducing warning "Phthalates in excess of ban."

Even if you don't immediately recognize phthalates as an endocrine disruptor that can cause children serious harm, you're probably putting the lunch bag back on the rack. And in this moment, the US Public Interest Research Group (US PIRG) has taken another step towards its goal of protecting children from unsafe toys.

For 24 years, US PIRG has been issuing reports on toy safety, but this is the first year the information has been rapidly accessible by web-surfing mobile phones. Sites intended for viewing on mobile phones have been active since 2006 (many with a dotMobi domain name), but US PIRG is among the first in the public interest sector to use this technology in support of its mission.



Which raises two questions: is there a service your organization offers that people need when they're out and about? And if so, why aren't you making it easier to access with a dotMobi site?

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Twice Upon a Time

Take your storytelling skills to the next level with The Master Storytellers Workshop.

If you've completed one of my storytelling workshops and want to learn more about narrative nonfiction writing, the ***Master Storytellers Workshop*** is for you.

In three one-hour classes (with two weeks between each class), you'll have the opportunity to write up to three stories and receive personalized feedback from both your classmates and me. We'll also explore topics not covered in previous storytelling workshops, including:



- How to craft scenes that make your story come alive
- How to find stories in abstract work
- Different techniques for opening and closing a story

The workshop will be limited to just 10 students, so each online session will be highly interactive with plenty of time to discuss your work. And each student will have the option of scheduling one-on-one consulting sessions between classes.

The next session will run on January 15, January 29 and February 12 (9-10a PT each day). Tuition is \$375 per student, and discounts are available to organizations that register three or more. To download a complete course curriculum and register online, [click here](#).

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Meetings Worth Having

Yes, it's possible, and we can show you how in two online classes in January at The Goodman Center.

Your organization probably invests countless hours in meetings every week, so why not invest two hours to make sure they actually accomplish something. **Meetings: Less Pain, More Gain** is an interactive and fun webinar that has already helped numerous public interest groups, businesses, and schools. Our next classes will be held January 26th and 28th (9-10a PT) and tuition is \$250 per student. To learn more and register online, [click here](#).



If you hold meetings or trainings online - and you'd like to improve these, too - join us on January 22nd (11a-12n PT) for **The Webinar on Webinars**. In an engaging and fast-paced hour, we'll show you:

- How to keep participants engaged from beginning to end
- How to use your two assets (voices and visuals) to maximum advantage
- What we learned from talk radio that makes webinars work



Tuition is \$125 per student and discounts are available when you register 3 students or more. To learn more and register online, [click here](#).

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