Numbers That Don't Numb

While driving around Los Angeles recently, I saw this billboard and was struck by its powerful presentation. Using a single composite picture, two words and two dollar figures, this ad quickly and clearly makes the case that spending priorities in California are upside down. What's working so well here is "social math," a technique in which numbers - that often can be cold and abstract - are placed in a context that conveys meaning. Social math can pack a serious emotional punch, but translating data into concrete contexts doesn't always add up as intended. In fact, poorly constructed equations can actually be more confusing than presenting raw numbers alone. Full Story *Please note: Apple Mail users may need to scroll down manually*.

Registration for Storytelling Master Class Closing Soon

"Telling Your Story: A Master Class for Nonprofit Leaders" will be held in Los Angeles on July 16th and 17th at the California Community Foundation, and if you're interested in attending, the time to register is now. The class is limited to 75 participants and we anticipate selling out this month, so click here for more information and to register online.

If you've never participated in any of our workshops or webinars, this intensive class will give you a solid grounding in telling personal stories, organizational stories, and delivering those stories (and more) in your presentations. And for those who *have* participated before, it will give you the opportunity to build on that experience and take your communications skills to a new level.
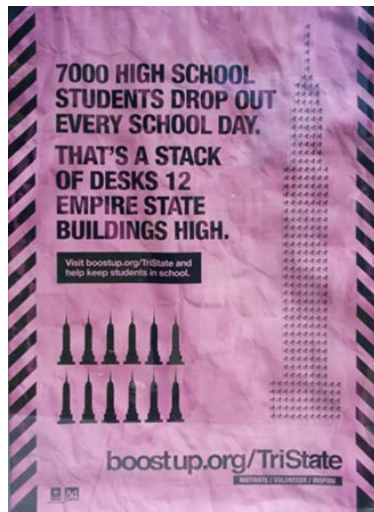
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Consider this example from the Ad Council's BoostUp campaign, which is using social math to contextualize the 7,000 students dropping out of high schools in the United States every day. The ad asks us to imagine a stack of desks as high as 12 Empire State Buildings, something that may be more difficult to picture than simply envisioning 7,000 students. In part, the problem is the mixing of measurement units: we are left trying to compute population into terms of physical space. If readers walk away from this ad thinking about the logistics of stacking desks on top of one another more than the magnitude of the dropout rate, an opportunity is lost.

Similarly, an article about waste in the Atlantic Monthly states "this year, the world will generate 2.6 trillion pounds of garbage - the weight of about 7,000 Empire State Buildings." Again, because we don't have personal experience with the weight of the Empire State Building, the 2.6 trillion pounds of garbage remains completely abstract.

Fortunately, the article eventually figures out how to bring the problem into focus, stating: "The typical person in a developed country produces about 2.6 pounds of garbage a day. That would mean the average American man, weighing 175 pounds, produces his weight in trash every three months." By converting the pounds of daily waste into something (or someone) we encounter every day, we are much better able to visualize what three months of trash looks like.

The trick to using social math effectively isn't simply avoiding comparisons to the Empire State Building (although that's not a bad start). To make sure you're effectively conveying both your data and message, we recommend three strategies to find the equation that underscores your point best.

Break your data down into smaller, relevant units of measurement.
Classic examples of this strategy include breaking the numbers down by time - per year, day, or minute - or by population, as with the oft used "per capita." The following example, taken from a National Geographic article on food waste, uses both time and population, while also converting the quantity from pounds to calories, a much more relevant and understandable unit for food.

> "The average American family of four tosses over 1,160 pounds of food a year - from scraps, to spills and spoilage. That's 1.2 million calories - enough to provide one person over 3,200 calories of food a day."

Compare your data to another figure to add meaning and create context.
One of the biggest challenges with statistics is getting your audience to understand how your data relates to their everyday lives. Try comparing your key data point with another number that is part of their day-to-day experiences. The example below, from an article in the online publication Medium, examines water consumption in personal terms.

> "Turns out that the water needed to grow two and a half pounds of beef, or ten 4oz hamburgers, is the same amount the average person uses to shower. For a year."

The math highlights the misconception that we consume the most water through our faucets. Creating a surprising contrast like this can bring attention to value inequalities and make your math memorable.

Connect your data to a story.
The most effective social math equations add up to something more - in the space between the numbers, a story begins to form. In our first example from the #SchoolsNotPrisons campaign (produced by Californians for Safety and Justice), the teenager pictured on the billboard serves as a protagonist faced with two distinct paths: prison and school. By juxtaposing the figures and placing them in a human frame, the ad evokes a story that moves the argument from statistics into the real world.

About Us

free-range thinking is written by Andy Goodman and Celia Hoffman. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit www.thegoodmancenter.com.

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