



free-range THINKING™

free-range thinking™ is a monthly journal of best practices, resources and generally useful stuff for public interest communicators who want to reach more people with more impact



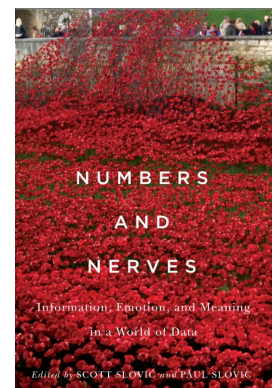
A Tale of Two Fundraisers

In February 2015, Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters of Los Angeles held its annual fundraiser, and besides the contributions collected in advance from ticket and table sales, the nonprofit raised an additional \$100,000 that night during a twenty-minute pledge drive. One year later, under nearly identical circumstances, JBBBSLA raised over \$200,000 during the pledge drive, and that was from an audience only two-thirds the size of the 2015 gathering. How does the organization account for *doubling* its return from a *smaller* group? The answer, quite literally, is an interesting story. [Full story](#). Please note: Apple Mail users may need to scroll down manually.

Making the Case for Stories and Data Together

Human beings are funny when it comes to numbers and narratives. On the one hand, we know that we must apply rigorous measures to serious problems such as homelessness, unemployment, and climate change. And yet, when the data come in, we are often numbed by the numbers and fail to respond to impending crises. Tell us a good story, on the other hand, and tears will fall, crowds will form, and money will flow - and sometimes in the wrong direction.

In their timely new book, *Numbers and Nerves - Information, Emotion and Meaning in a World of Data*, Paul Slovic and Scott Slovic have assembled a series of essays examining our differing reactions to stories and data. Besides discussing their own groundbreaking research, the father and son team also offers interviews with and writings by Nicholas Kristof, Annie Dillard, Terry Tempest Williams, Bill McKibben, Homero and Betty Aridjis, and many others.



Read the book and draw your own conclusions, but my biggest take-away is that public interest communicators need both numbers and narratives to make their case. As the Slovic's write in the book's opening essay, "In the past two decades, cognitive science has increasingly come to support the claim that we, as a species, think best when we allow numbers and narratives...to work together."



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June 6, 13, 20 & 27
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on Webinars

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Click on the class title to read more!

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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Here in Los Angeles - as in many major cities - there are times each year when you could eat dinner five nights a week at charitable functions. Fundraising fatigue, consequently, is a real problem, especially for nonprofits who rely on these events to bring in a significant portion of their annual operating income.

Randy Schwab, CEO of Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters of Los Angeles, is one of those people, but he recently found a way to cut through that fatigue and exceed fundraising goals.



Jewish
Big Brothers Big Sisters
of Los Angeles

In 2015, JBBBSLA was celebrating its centennial, so the annual February fundraiser had a special glow - over 750 guests streamed into the Hyatt Regency in Century City. After the requisite amount of cocktails and hors d'oeuvres, guests were led into a large theater for the live (and mercifully short) fundraising portion of the evening. A few videos highlighting honorees were shown, several awards were handed out, and then Schwab made his ask: "Our one-to-one mentorship program serves kids from 6-18 years old," he told the crowd. "Mentoring can have a significant impact on a child's life. Whether

experiencing social or emotional challenges, or seeking additional enrichment and support, there are many circumstances in which a child may benefit." He then outlined what financial gifts could accomplish, starting at the \$10,000 level.

Schwab instructed the guests on how to donate via their phones, and as he did, a large "thermometer" was projected on a screen to chart the rise in donations in real time. Individual donors' names scrolled on-screen below the thermometer as contributions were recorded. "Nobody likes the appeal part of the program," Schwab candidly admits. "It is the least engaging time of the evening." After about 20 minutes, the thermometer finally rose past its highest temperature (\$100,000) and guests happily exited the theater to the awaiting desserts.

By the numbers, the event was a success but Schwab still felt something was missing. When he reviewed post-event surveys, certain feedback confirmed this feeling. The comments were largely positive, but every so often an attendee would report *I still don't really understand the impact of what you do.*



Randy Schwab

"It doesn't matter how much you tell them what you do in plain English, they are looking to understand it on a different level," Schwab hypothesizes. "I think if we were to drill down into what they're saying, we'd find that they're used to workplace mentoring or casual mentoring, not mentoring that really changes someone's life. They are looking to feel the importance of what we do, and I know we weren't giving them that."

A few months later, Schwab found a solution to this all-too-common problem. While attending the annual gala for Friends of Israeli Defense Forces, an organization that supports Israeli soldiers, Schwab experienced his own moment where he "really understood the organization in a different way." A video about an Israeli soldier was followed by the soldier appearing on stage to tell his story. This was a turning point for Schwab. "I realized that if we could tell *our* stories live in front of five hundred people, we could get five hundred people to connect with us in a different way, too."

With the help of his VP of Development, Laurie Feldman, Schwab determined which clients to approach about telling their stories at the next fundraiser. Alan Karbachinskiy, who had been matched with his mentor at age 14, quickly agreed to tell his story. After screening several other clients, Feldman found a well-spoken teenage girl who had been involved with JBBBSLA's Camp Bob Waldorf for a number of years. For several weeks, Feldman spoke regularly to both storytellers over the phone, helping them draft their stories, encouraging authenticity and honesty.



Alan Karbachinskiy

On February 4, 2016, 470 guests gathered at the newly renovated Petersen Automotive Museum for the annual gala. Once again, cocktails and appetizers were followed by a brief pledge drive, but this time it started with Alan, who took the stage to tell his story. "In 2011, when I was 14 years old, I was homeless living in a Salvation Army group home with my mother and sister," he began. He had the room's full attention as he went on to detail his first meeting with Navid, his mentor, and he shared what the relationship had meant to him over the years: "Having a Big Brother has helped me rise up when I was emotionally low, helped me keep fighting when I just wanted to give up, and he always *always* saw the potential in me that I wasn't able to see. Navid is my best friend, an inspiration, an outstanding mentor, and just as big of a goofball as I am."

At the end of his story, Alan pointed to his mentor, who was seated in the crowd but had not been identified until this moment. Navid, beaming, rose to thunderous applause. "It was a really beautiful moment," Schwab recalls, "because Alan was so proud of his mentor." The second story was told to similar fanfare and then the appeal immediately followed.

But this too was different. Rather than donors gifting via text

message, each guest was given a number to hold up similar to buyers at an auction. A professional auctioneer took the stage, and as she went through levels of giving, starting at \$10,000 and working down to \$100, she interwove aspects of the kids' stories into each appeal. The donations came in rapid fire, and after 15 minutes, the room had nearly reached the goal of \$100,000.

Just as the appeal was wrapping up, a man who had never donated before asked for a microphone. "I've never seen anything like this," he told the room. "I'm going to give \$100,000." The crowd erupted into applause again.

The appeal had raised \$200,000, with 20% more people donating than in the year prior, but the impact of the stories was actually far greater than any number could evince. As the audience was being led out of the theater, people that had been coming to the gala for years approached Schwab to tell him how moved they were by the event. He knew he had found the missing piece.

"There's no question," Schwab says, "when we've asked 'What did you like most about the event?' 'What did you connect with?' 100% of the people we asked said: *It was the story*. For me, success is more than the dollars raised, it's the connection that the donors have to the agency. Their connection will keep them donating year after year. And it is unmistakable that their connection to us was amplified by those stories."

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