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Humanize The Numbers

Story Telling And The Sales Engineer #2

“We have fantastic Sales Engineers! They really know and understand our products. I just wish they’d stop jumping into technical detail and feature rat holes which loses all the business users.” During initial conversations with sales/presales executives, or enablement leaders, I can almost guarantee that I will hear something along the lines of that first sentence.

It’s an age old problem, and you can’t just tell technical consultants *“don’t be so technical”* or push them into being Steve Jobs on every presentation. Sometimes you need the details! Learning specialists (like my wife) tell us that replacement skills work better than removal. For an SE that means replacing a list of features or speeds and feeds with something else – and that where story telling can be used. There are many parts of storytelling, and we’ll focus just on one small component - how to make numbers memorable and meaningful – and specifically how to humanize the numbers.

Here are a few ideas to get you started on the journey.

1. **Review Your Material.** Think of this as the Discovery portion of the exercise. Look for numbers, which include graphics like pie charts, in all of your PowerPoint decks, handouts, standard pitches and marketing materials. Print out the relevant parts and highlight the numbers. (As an added bonus, highlight all acronyms in a different colour).
2. **Reduce The Content.** Are the numbers really needed? If it is a speeds and feeds chart or a comparison chart between (say) two options, then that may be needed by the technical members of the team. In which case, should that be a slide, or maybe use a reference handout instead? I always ask three questions and if you don’t have an answer for each question, it’s a sign you probably don’t need the data.

So What?	Why is the number in the material? What purpose does it serve?
Who Cares?	Who, specifically, in the audience, is going to care about that number?
Says Who?	What is the source for the number? If it is your marketing or competitive intelligence groups, be careful.

3. **Relevance.** Most business users are not going to care about a large proportion of numbers in your pitch. Unless, of course, those numbers relate to Time, Money or People. Those three items are what economists call fungible – you can interchange

them. Saving 10 people a total of 15 hours a week each means 7,800 hours a year – almost 4 work years. Multiply that by the fully burdened cost of an employee (salary + benefits) and you get money.

4. **Reframe.** Choose the numbers that really matter to your customer, and then put them in their terms. Remember that most non-engineers have a hard time distinguishing percentages (300% vs 400%) or multiples (2x vs 3x) , small numbers (0.001%) or large numbers (23 petabytes).

Some Reframing Examples

That's the basic theory – but how do you put that into practice? Here are a few of my favourite examples.

1. **Saving Time.** The proposed system would enable warehouse workers to resolve certain problems five times faster. That didn't really resonate with the business users being asked to fund the system. One of the executives had a 90 minute commute into work every morning. *"Stefan – what kind of impact would it have on you if your commute was 5x faster? You'd have a 15 minute trip instead of 90 minutes. What would happen?"*
2. **Data Growth.** My client had a bullet point that stated Gartner says the amount of data will grow 50x by 2020. 50x is too big a number to comprehend – it's just big, and a lot of growth. *"See that whiteboard over there on the wall? That represents the amount of data you have now. Imagine a football field (any kind!) – That's the size you'll be dealing with in 2020. We can help you with that."*
3. **Uptime or Accuracy.** What does 99.99% uptime mean? Is that good? If you're talking about accuracy – is that good? 99.99% uptime means that you're down for about an hour a year. 99.999% means you're down for 5 ¼ minutes a year. Translate into meaningful terms.
4. **Many To One.** Another client was making a board presentation, and pitching a solution that would reduce the chances of a defect to about 12,500:1. Although there were substantial cost savings and obvious reputation increases they struggled to make 12,500:1 odds real. Then..

"Bill, I understand you play golf?" (Addressing one of the skeptical executives)

"Yes", replied the COO, *"very badly"*.

"12,500:1 are the odds of you hitting a hole-in-one."

"That's never happened", said Bill, smiling.. *"Sadly, I see your point"*.

You Try It.

These are some common benefits I discovered from accessing a few hi-technology corporate websites and their publically available materials.

Phrase/Number	Your Explanation/Analogy
Offices in 30 countries	
300% faster	
Reduces dwell time from 70 days to 12 hours	
1m OPEX savings	
12% productivity gain	
Saves 10 minutes per transaction	
Supports double the number of users	
..Now add your own	

Summary

Numbers can be very powerful – and a fantastic way to make a memorable point or plant a competitive differentiator. Yet to be memorable, that number needs to stick in the brain and remain there after you leave the room or terminate the virtual session. That’s where humanizing the numbers as part of your story can help. Listen to how others (sales, presales, marketing – it doesn’t matter) explain the numbers, and try some of your own explanations. Always remember to look at the numbers from a customer point of view, and not from your point of view. 99.99% of the time – that’s the right thing to do!

“There are two kinds of statistics, the kind you look up and the kind you make up”

Rex Stout

Talking Points is a monthly column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.

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