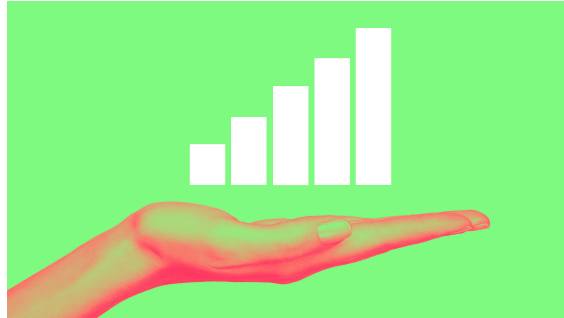


Present Your Data Like a Pro

by Joel Schwartzberg

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HBR Staff/CAP53/Getty Images

Summary. While a good presentation has data, data alone doesn't guarantee a good presentation. It's all about how that data is presented. The quickest way to confuse your audience is by sharing too many details at once. The only data points you should share... [more](#)

With so many ways to spin and distort information these days, a presentation needs to do more than simply share great ideas — it needs to support those ideas with credible data. That's true whether you're an executive pitching new business clients, a vendor selling her services, or a CEO making a case for change.

"Knowing how to develop and deliver a data-driven presentation is now a crucial skill for many professionals, since we often have to tell our colleagues stories that are much more compelling when they're backed by numbers," says researcher and consultant Alexandra Samuel.

No problem, you may say. A bar graph here, and a pie chart there, and you're off to the races, right?

Not so fast. Because while a good presentation includes data, data alone doesn't guarantee a good presentation. It's not the mere presence of data that gives the presenter power. It's how that data is presented.

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Showcasing data may seem simple in the age of PowerPoint, Prezi, Canva, Visme, Haiku Deck, and other nonsensically named technological platforms. But raise your hand if you've ever been confused by a chart

you saw at a conference or ever heard a presenter say, "You probably can't see this diagram well but what it's showing is..."? What could be a bigger chart fail than the chart itself being rendered useless?

How you *present* data can double — or decimate — its impact, so take note of these seven ways to ensure that your data is doing its job.

1) Make sure your data can be seen

This may sound obvious but sometimes you're too close to your presentation — literally. What is readable on your laptop may be far less so when projected on a screen. Your audience won't learn what it can't see. To avoid the debacle of sheepishly translating hard-to-see numbers and labels, rehearse your presentation with

colleagues sitting as far away as the actual audience would. Ask them, “Can you see this chart clearly?” If the answer is anything but a firm “yes,” redesign it to be easier on the eyes.

2) Focus most on the points your data illustrates

In comic book terms, you are Wonder Woman, and data is your magic lasso — a tool that strengthens your impact but has no value until you apply it purposefully. Don’t leave the burden of decoding your data to your audience. It’s *your* job to explain how the data supports your major points.

“Data slides aren’t really about the data. They’re about the meaning of the data,” explains presentation design expert Nancy Duarte. “It’s up to you to make that meaning clear before you click away. Otherwise, the audience won’t process — let alone buy — your argument.”

When you connect data to the essential points it supports, the transition should be explicit and sound like this:

“This data shows...”

“This chart illustrates...”

“These numbers prove...”

These transitions can be as important as the conclusions themselves, because you’re drawing the audience’s attention to those conclusions.

3) Share one — and only one — major point from each chart

The quickest way to confuse your audience is by sharing too many details at once. The only data points you should share are those that significantly support your point — and ideally, one point per chart. To keep your charts in check, ask yourself, “What’s the single most important learning I want my audience to extract from this data?” That’s the one learning you should convey. If you have several significant points to make, consider demonstrating each with a new visualization.

The mistake many presenters make is thinking they’re constitutionally required to share every bullet, idea, and data point on a slide. But if you’re sharing a pivotal trend that grew dramatically between 2014 and 2017, what happened in 2013 may be pointless. If 77% of respondents prefer one product and 21% prefer another, what the remaining 2% prefer may also be too insignificant to justify mentioning.

Data-presentation guru Scott Berinato says, “The impulse is to include everything you know, [but] busy charts communicate the idea that you’ve been just that — busy, as in: ‘Look at all the data I have and the work I’ve done.’”

4) Label chart components clearly

While you’ve been working with the same chart for weeks or months, your audience will be exposed to it for mere seconds. Give them the best chance of comprehending your data by using simple, clear, and complete language to identify X and Y axes, pie pieces, bars, and other diagrammatic elements. Try to avoid abbreviations that aren’t obvious, and don’t assume labeled components on one slide will be remembered on subsequent slides.

Some members of your audience are visual learners (like me!) who process what they see much better than what they hear, so your chart’s visual intuitiveness and clarity are crucial.

5) Visually highlight “Aha!” zones

Every valuable chart or pie graph has an “Aha!” zone — a number or range of data that reveals something crucial to your point.

Smart presenters explain the relevance of the “Aha!” zone orally, sharing the learning, trend, or story the data is telling.

Better presenters explain it out loud, but also write it on the slide as a bullet.

But the best presenters do all of the above AND visually highlight the “Aha!” zone itself with a circle or shading to reach the differentiated (aural, verbal, visual) learners in their audience, as well as to triple-reinforce the most important data takeaways.

6) Write a slide title that reinforces the data's point

Even when data is presented effectively on a slide, the most valuable real estate is the page's title because that's the first item the audience will notice and process. But all too often, presenters use generic words and phrases like “Statistics” and “By the Numbers” that serve no functional purpose.

Even when the titles are specific, like “Millennial Preferences” or “Campaign Awareness,” they can still be elevated with more point-specific titles like “Millennials Prefer Mobile” or “Campaign Awareness is Increasing.”

7) Present to your audience, not to your data

Many presenters look at their slides while they share data as if the PowerPoint *is* their audience. But only your audience is your audience, and, as fellow human beings, they receive your points best when you look them in the eye. This doesn't mean that you should never look at your data — just don't have a conversation with it. Glance at your slides for reference, but make critical points directly to your audience.

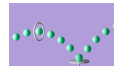
When presented clearly and pointedly, data can elevate your point's credibility and trustworthiness. Presenting data poorly not only squanders that opportunity but can damage your reputation as a presenter. Like Wonder Woman's lasso, it's a powerful tool to draw out compelling truths — wield it wisely.

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