

Lessons Learned in Communicating with Data: Ten Tips from Andy Krackov

- 1. As one wise data person once told me: “If you can’t be with the data you love, love the data you’re with.”** Unfortunately, that dataset you yearn for that has the exact demographic breakdowns you want simply may not exist, even in this age of data, data everywhere. For example, there may be lag time with the opioid data that gets reported. Make do with what’s available, using what you can get as a proxy for what you think you need.
- 2. Create data stories, not just data visualizations.** While it’s true that a picture (or map or chart) may be worth a thousand words, that picture + words can be worth infinitely more. Find ways to integrate the visualization you’re creating into a larger narrative and broader canvas where you can tell a story to make your point. Your story needn’t be long – the digital equivalent of a one-page brief with a few graphs and a related story with poignant photos, quotes or a video may be all that you need to engage your readers.
Example: <https://www.dataspeakslouder.com/healthcare/>
- 3. Appeal to both the heart and the head.** It’s natural to assume that presenting data means our arguments should all be logical and fact-based. However, it can be advantageous to appeal to audiences’ emotional side, too. After all, we’re all influenced differently. For some, the logic of data speaks to our head. Others might be persuaded by a story and/or touching photo that targets our heart. And some of us may be persuaded by both. Why should we need to choose? Through data stories, we can appeal to the heart and the head.
Example: <https://workshift.us/numbers/>
- 4. Enlist writers, designers, and community members to help you tell your story.** Another wise data person once observed to me that “the hardest thing for a data person to do is to speak English. The second hardest thing for that data person to do is to write in English.” If you’re a data person who lacks such communication skills, don’t try to harness your inner Hemingway. Your time may be better spent by finding those within your community who possess the capacity to communicate effectively. And it’s just as important to enlist those with lived experiences to tell their story through photos, quotes

and other means that can add color to the data.

5. **Don't start with the full story.** We often focus on larger data reports. But we live in an age when we're consuming information on the go, often from our cell phones – e.g. while we wait in line for the bus home from work or make breakfast. In such situations, we can't expect our audiences to digest a long report. It's much better to lead with a graph on Twitter or something similarly brief to entice someone to read on. That graph can link to a fact sheet with the main points, which, in turn, can link to the full report.

Example: <http://tinyurl.com/y6k69oam>

6. **Make large numbers relatable.** The cognitive psychologist, Paul Slovic observed that “our cognitive and perceptual systems seem designed to sensitize us to small changes in our environment, possibly at the expense of making us less able to detect and respond to large changes.” He concluded by noting that, “If I look at the mass, I will never act.” His point – that we cognitively don't have the capacity to digest large numbers – means that we need to be creative in illustrating numbers that may feel like an abstraction to people. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's opioids landing page starts with a striking statement: “Opioids (including prescription opioids, heroin, and fentanyl) killed more than 42,000 people in 2016, more than any year on record.” While the historical comparison is useful, that 42,000 figure still feels like an abstraction. What if we instead could show what 42,000 looks like?

Example: <http://graphics.wsj.com/lottery-odds/>

7. **Always talk to your users.** Before you build a data story or some other data product, ask your audiences what messages most resonate with them. Find out, too, how you can best package information in ways that will encourage them to engage with your content and activate them to take action. Think through, for example, whether your users will be most likely to read your findings on a computer, a tablet device or a phone. Or, ask if what you want to convey would best be shared through a live data presentation or in some other face-to-face format.

Answers to these and other questions that allow you to walk in your users' shoes will help you understand how best to present and format your data findings – perhaps a slide show or a printable fact sheet may make the most sense. And the best way to get these answers is to go out and meet with your audiences and to learn about their needs – before you build, during the development phase, and after launch (so that you can continually refine).

Example: <http://overdosemappingtool.norc.org/> (click a county, then click “view details”)

8. **We all need coaches when digesting information that's about us.** When presenting data about a program to someone who manages that initiative, they're bound to have conflicting feelings in what they see, especially if the results are not as positive as they hoped for. And, as we know, the trend lines with opioid-related data are not always

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moving in the direction that we may want to see. Keep in mind end-users' receptivity to digesting findings that you present. Perhaps they may need a coach – that is, someone who can sit down with them to objectively share the analysis and discuss possible next steps.

- 9. Create a call to action.** Data findings often are presented in an FYI way – that is, it's interesting, perhaps even worthy of forwarding to colleagues, but there isn't an overt call to action in the data visualization. Think about whether you can include such a call to action in what you're communicating. For example, could your readers be persuaded to sign up to join a campaign or your coalition? Could they register to get alerts when these data are updated, so that you can include their contact info in your databases? Can they send a note to an elected official, presenting targeted data for their region? Before you publish, think about the ways in which you can create calls to action from the data you're presenting. After all, your audiences can be your information ambassadors to help you spread and amplify your message.
- 10. Finally, let's not forget to make data fun.** We shouldn't assume that, because it's data, it needs to be serious. There are a number of organizations – particularly news outlets – that are turning data into games and intellectual exercises. Their goal is to draw the user in, engage them in the content, and encourage them to share the findings with others.

Example: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/04/14/upshot/drug-overdose-epidemic-you-draw-it.html>