

Turning Data into Stories

Figures often beguile me, particularly when I have the arranging of them myself; in which case the remark attributed to Disraeli would often apply with justice and force: “There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.” —Mark Twain

Mark Twain was one of this country’s most compelling storytellers, and his famous quip about statistics points to a broad truth worth understanding: numbers, data, and statistics can be used to tell powerful and compelling stories. Why is it, then, that market research reports are typically dull recitations of numbers, percentages, convoluted sentences, and foggy charts? Far from telling lies, most reports fail to tell any story at all. What market research desperately needs is more art in its storytelling along with the science of research to help managers and clients understand what matters and why.

DATA HAVE NO MEANING

Data never speaks for itself. Is 97% a large percentage or a small percentage? If it’s the number of businesses that need your new service, it’s huge. If it’s the percentage of airplane engines that continue to operate when airborne, it’s disastrously small. If it’s the percentage of voters who support a new health care initiative in Washington—well, it’s probably a mistake.

The *verstehen* method in social science (from whence Versta gets its name) emphasizes that all data gets its meaning from a complex web of language, context, history, and human intention.

Turning data into stories means extracting that meaning and making it explicit; it means moving beyond the numeric data and facts to gain a deep understanding of people’s worlds and experiences. The volume and complexity of a data set may be daunting, but ultimately it is tied to specific issues you care about, to questions you need to have answered, and to problems that are puzzling you.

HOW THE STORY HELPS

Market research can be powerful if it is used well. It can give you information and insight about customers, products, needs, pain points, and aspirations. But often it sits on dusty shelves because the reports are too long and too focused on presenting data. Turning data into stories takes the report off the shelf and helps it come alive. The benefits are huge for you and your organization.

Turning data into stories tells you what to do. There is nothing inherently “actionable” about data until it is embedded in a narrative that outlines the problem, the solution, and the options for what to do. Your manager and clients will act based on the implications of a story, not based upon a set of numbers, charts, or data points alone.

Turning data into stories helps you integrate seemingly conflicting data. Every good research effort yields surprises, variation, and data that seems to point in multiple directions at once. This usually means you have successfully captured the reality of what you are studying. But the goal is not to replicate reality, but to interpret it and understand it. Telling a story with the data will help you integrate and reconcile disparate streams of data. You will be able to explain contradictions, make sense of variation, and highlight priorities so that your manager and clients do not get lost in a forest of details.

Turning data into stories helps you avoid mistakes. An effective story helps reconcile conflicting data, and it forces you to be attuned to contradictions and variations that may not fit and that may require revising the story. Contradictions may actually be mistakes in the data, so you will find yourself wondering whether questions were asked in the wrong way, or scales were inadvertently flipped during programming. Reconciling conflicting data means double and triple checking that the data are right to ensure that every apparent contradiction fits. There are no surprises down the road with managers or editors saying, “This number doesn’t make sense!”

Continued on Back

Turning data into stories gets your research heard and understood. Like Twain, most of us are easily befuddled by statistics, especially if there are too many of them and they are poorly presented. But most people understand and can relate to a compelling story, even if that story is about numbers and supported with data points. What if instead of that last sentence, we had written: “98% of survey respondents indicated that they either strongly or somewhat strongly prefer receiving information via narrative methodology”? Ugh. That’s a sentence that will sit on a shelf.

Turning data into stories helps you communicate research to multiple audiences. The “facts” that come out of market research can and should communicate different messages to different audiences. Your sales team may need stories about

customers struggling and the specific ways your product will help. But your management team needs to know how big the unmet need is, and what strategic opportunities it presents.

While Versta Research staff have deep experience in several areas—financial services, health care, technology, and business process services—recent work about a disease called “ulcerative colitis” provides one example of the ideas outlined above. The data from our research compared physicians and patient attitudes about UC, with lots of numbers and measures about flares, levels of disruption to daily life, and so on. But the story we developed from the data was this: Patients with UC become so accustomed to pain that they under-report symptoms, and therefore physicians who are most attentive tend to underestimate the impact.

It was a compelling story that spoke to multiple audiences: patients, doctors, health care media, marketing and communications teams, patient educators, and so on. The research was heard and used at patient conferences, in scientific medical journals, on morning news shows, and beyond.

In future editions of this newsletter we will outline specific steps you can take to ensure that you create and capture stories in your data. The best stories are embedded in the very fabric of the research, from beginning to end. In the meantime we would be happy to think with you about your next project, or help you revisit current data to help make better sense of it. Unlike Twain, we tell only non-fiction stories, but with the same passion and conviction that will capture your audience.

Reprinted from the Versta Research Newsletter, December 2009

