



IGNITE360

STORYMASTERS
DATA STORIES

Stop Drowning in Data and Sinking Your Story.
Tips on Righting the Ship and Keeping Your Audience Afloat and Focused.

Our brains are far more engaged by storytelling than a list of data points.

Researchers are obsessed with data.

To us, all data is good data and we love to gather, consider, compare and share it.

But when it comes to storytelling, we must resist the urge to include and show all of our data, especially when it comes to quantitative storytelling. Our stories are adrift in a tumultuous sea of data and our audience is going down with the ship.

When you consider **the ultimate goal of storytelling in business is to inform in order to influence action**, then it is clear that information clutter and data overload must be avoided.

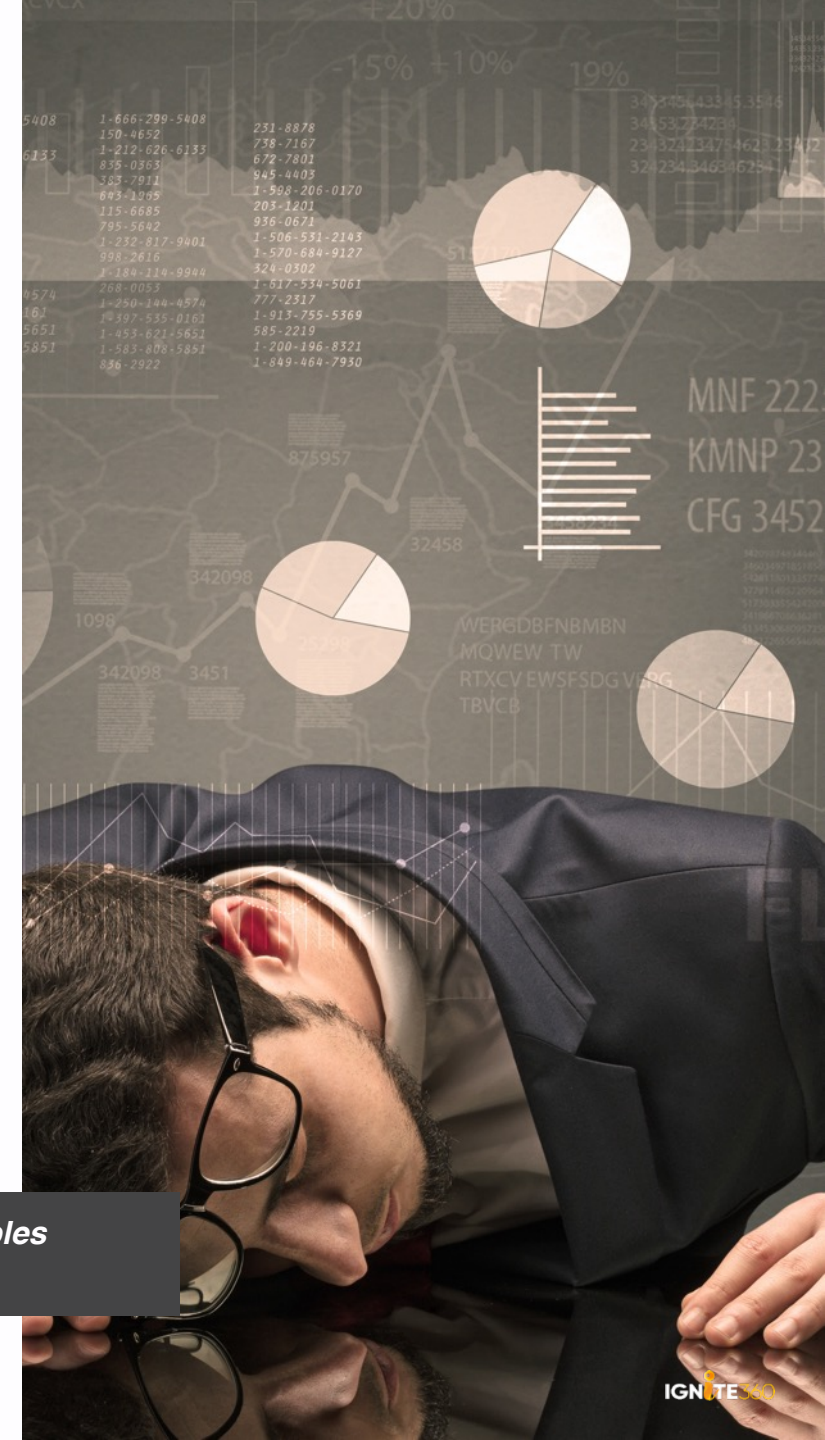
And here we have the heart of the problem. Has our love of data blinded us to the truth? Our quantitative stories are often too complex, overly statistical, too long and lacking in impact. Embracing this truth has never been more critical. Decision makers are short on time and attention and the pace of business has never been faster.

How, as researchers, can we resist the urge to include all that beautiful data and, instead, tell a compelling story? Not too surprising, we find the tenets of great storytelling apply regardless of data type and methodology.

In order to be effective, our stories must:

- Be shaped by **who our audience is and their needs**
- **Provide relevant context** – set the scene
- **Articulate a Big Idea** – present one take-away for the audience
- **Engage and draw attention to what is important** – grab and keep your audience's focus
- **Simplify complexity** – make it easy to understand in order to inspire action

Now, let's break this down and apply these principles for improved quantitative storytelling...



The Most Important Thing to Remember is **You Must Know Your Audience**

We've shared this in previous installments of our Storymaster's series. Before you can dive into all that delicious data, you must ask and answer questions about your intended audience.

- **Who are they?**
- **What is their relationship to the topic?**
- **How well do you know them and, perhaps equally important, how well do they know (and trust) you?**

Answers to these questions will help guide your approach to the story and point to how much convincing your audience might require.

If trust already exists and your audience has been close to the insights journey, you may choose to cut to the chase and share the recommendation up front and then illuminate your supporting data. If the opposite is true, it may be better to spend more time developing the context and offering strong data support before getting into the call to action.

Only after you've considered your audience should you begin to craft your story.





If Content is King, Context is God

In a 2014 Harvard Business Review article, Thomas H. Davenport, author of the book, *Keeping Up With the Quants*, revealed “10 Kinds of Stories to Tell With Data.”¹ Stories dealing with Time – Past, Present, and Future – were called out as distinctive. Stories about the Future utilize predictive analytics while stories of the Present are often derived from survey data and explanatory survey stories.

As might be expected, stories of the Past use descriptive analytics to tell “what happened last week, month, quarter or year.” Davenport holds little stock in the latter as he describes stories about the past as “not the most valuable form of story.” He may have a point. Reflecting on what happened vs. what is or could happen does not make for the most compelling content. But, let’s give history its due as a supporting player in our quantitative storytelling.

Looking backward is a great way to bring vital context to your story. It can set the stage for a brand or business’s current situation and is an excellent tool to level set and ground your audience in where things have been.

But be careful not to let the past information and data overwhelm the present story you want to tell. Go back to your first step. Review the audience assessment in order to decide upon the type and amount of context, or history, you provide. Is the audience familiar with past data or is it new to them? Be sure to include only the background information that is relevant and essential.

¹ Davenport, Thomas H. “10 Kinds of Stories to Tell with Data.” Harvard Business Review. May 5, 2014.

Getting Biggie With It

Another way to avoid the ‘all the data but the kitchen sink’ trap is to force clarity on your big take-away. What is the BIG message you need to tell in your story and what data can best help you tell it?

Cole Nussbaumer Knaflic, author of *Storytelling with Data: A Data Visualization Guide for Business Professionals*, identifies the difference between exploratory analysis and explanatory analysis. Exploratory analysis is the process of looking at all our data to find the story. As researchers and story crafters, we all begin in our own world of exploratory analysis. It’s how we find our story. However, Knaflic contrasts that with explanatory analysis which is the mode we should be in when crafting our insights story. Here we “turn data into information that can be consumed by an audience.” (19)

Knaflic calls this revealing the pearls within all those oysters we’ve opened up. ²

As you move into explanatory analysis Knaflic promotes a few steps to help us get there.

First, start with a storyboard.

Use post-it notes and add headlines, one per post-it. Lay them out and review them. How does the story flow? Does it make sense? Is your argument sound? Re-order and see if that works better.

This is a great visual outline to help shape an overall story arc. On the right is an example from Knaflic’s book where she illustrates a storyboard to structure a communication about a summer science learning program. (32)

Next, consider a three-minute pitch. If there were only three minutes in which to tell a story, what would it be? Write it out. This pushes you to focus on hitting the key points and driving to a strong Big Idea. What is the “so what” of the story and what do you want your audience to do about it? Your Big Idea should reveal the tension of your insights along with a sense of what is at stake if your audience doesn’t act on it.

Now, with storyboard post-its in hand and your three-minute pitch perfected, it is time to truly build a data-supported story.



² Knaflic, Cole Nussbaumer. *Storytelling with Data: A Data Visualization Guide for Business Professionals*. John Wiley & Sons Inc. New Jersey. 2015.

Focus On Data That Matters (Most)

Data should assist and support your Big Idea.

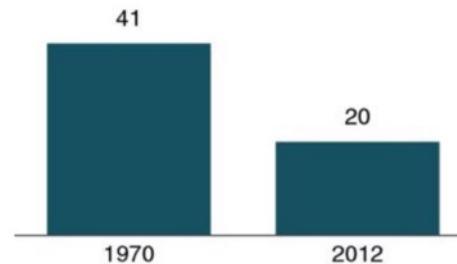
But it is your job to keep the audience focused on the picture you are painting. When identifying relevant data sets, consider what matters or what really stands out. There may be data comparing overall satisfaction scores on multiple brands – your brand versus a wide range of competitors. Do you really need to show all of it? Maybe highlighting your brand score versus one dominant competitor would be more relevant to your Big Idea versus sharing a slew of different scores? Maybe instead of a point-in-time score, the true insight revolves around year-over-year changes in scores on a few key measures in order to show improvement opportunity relative to your ratings in the past. Perhaps the Big Idea isn't about comparing yourself to the competition at all. Just because you have the data, doesn't mean it is the best data to highlight.

One way to help your audience focus on what matters, is to strip away all the different data points and simply home in on a single, arresting data point. Through all of this, it is important to consider what data will have the desired impact.

Here is one example Knaflic uses to illustrate this point. Below is a graph from a Pew Research report on stay-at-home moms. (39)

Children with a "Traditional" Stay-at-Home Mother

% of children with a married stay-at-home mother with a working husband



Note: Based on children younger than 18. Their mothers are categorized based on employment status in 1970 and 2012.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of March Current Population Surveys Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS-CPS), 1971 and 2013

Adapted from PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Although a graph like this can be used to provide a point of comparison from one year to another, Knaflic argues this isn't really necessary to support the point.

↓
Instead, she suggests using simple text to highlight the point.

20%

of children had a **traditional stay-at-home mom** in 2012, compared to 41% in 1970

Keep It Simple

The term cognitive load is key to choice and selection of data for display in our stories.

Too much information, at one time, can cause a mental strain on the audience and, let's face it, they really

shouldn't have to do so much work in order to receive your message. It is important to reduce your audience's "mental processing power" (71) and cut back on clutter. White space is your friend. And, here again, resist the urge to fill up available space on a slide with more data. As Knaflic so expertly points out, "White space in visual communication is as important as pauses in public speaking." (84) You need to let your data, and your key point, breathe on the page just as a speaker needs to take a big breath when presenting the information.

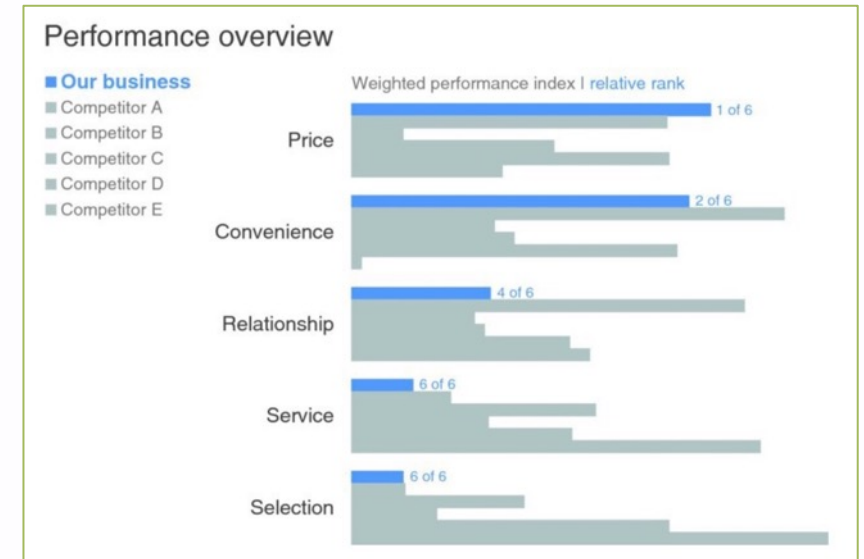
One way to do this is by avoiding the busy eye chart and the too-busy graph. Another example from Knaflic illustrates this point well.

Here is a pretty busy, colorful graph of weighted performance scores for multiple companies against several different territories. (86)



It's confusing and a lot is vying for our attention. It takes a long time to absorb. A graph like this represents a data-forward but not exactly an audience-first mindset.

Now, consider a revamped graph where color and contrast are used strategically to point to our brand's performance including relative ranking among all competitors. (87)



As Knaflic calls out, this version allows the eye to scan easily across the blue bars and quickly see how our business is doing and where our strengths and opportunities lie. It's a much lower cognitive load on the audience.

In the End Your Audience Will Thank You.

Regardless of the method or type of data, the tenets of great storytelling are applicable. Context matters as does focusing your story on the Big Idea. We don't have to be professional designers in order to apply the principles of engaging the audience to focus on what matters (most) and keeping things simple. Decluttering our message and our slides can also help us declutter the mind and ensure our stories swim in calmer waters. So, next time you find yourself creating a story supported by quantitative data, think about your audience first, get out the post-its and storyboard it and then look for what you can take away versus what you can jam into it. Your audience will thank you for throwing them a lifeline.



Thanks for exploring the world of quantitative storytelling with us!

We'd love to continue the conversation with you.



Curious about how to **pinpoint your Big Idea** in your sea of quantitative data? Not sure **how to best represent a data point with a visual**? Want to **strategize about story**? We've got answers! Email us at storymasters@ignite-360.com