

MAKING NUMBERS COUNT

The Art & Science of Communicating Numbers

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ISBN 978-1-77687-081-3

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MAIN IDEA

How do you make the numbers you use in your business and in presentations really zing? The reality is nobody really understands numbers all that well. Most people have terminology for the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, and then everything else just blurs into "lots".



To really make numbers come alive, there are four general principles to follow:

- 1** Translate #s to Human terms
- 2** Ground #s in Familiar scales
- 3** Emotional #s Use astutely
- 4** Use #s to build Scale models

"These practices, because they work with our natural instinct, can help experts cursed with their knowledge translate their expertise into a blessing. Math can reveal truths about the world the human mind was never built to intuitively grasp. If you can use math, you have a valuable skill. If you can use it and make it clear, bringing what is obscure and distant into the range where others can see it and feel it – well, then you have a superpower. Superman could see through walls; you can make the walls invisible so everyone else can see through them."

– Chip Heath and Karla Starr

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1. Translate numbers to human terms Pages 2 - 3

Numbers don't come naturally to a lot of people. Therefore, to make your numbers stand out, translate them into terms that are familiar to humans. Comparisons are particularly effective. Which do you remember easiest? "Pakistan has an area of 340,000 square miles" or "Pakistan is about the size of 2 Californias." Translate numbers into terms humans will relate to.

2. Ground numbers in familiar scales Pages 3 - 4

One of the best ways to get people to understand your numbers is to use a scale your audience already knows very well. Give people a scale which is familiar, concrete, and human-friendly.

3. Use emotional numbers astutely. Pages 5 - 7

A great way to breathe life into statistics is to combine objective analysis with appeals to emotions. Connect the numbers you want to highlight to preexisting pools of emotion in your target audience, and you transform dry statistics into motivators of action. This is what history's greatest achievers have frequently done, and you should do the same.

4. Use numbers to build scale models Pages 7 - 8

Another good way to orient people to an unfamiliar statistic is to give them a well-known frame of reference first. Establish some landmarks that will help them understand the context without being an expert. A good way to do that is to build a scale model first, and then use that to enhance understanding and attention.

