Telling a Memorable Story with Your Data

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We've all heard the phrase "a picture is worth 1,000 words." It turns out that this is more than just an old saying. Research dating back to the 19th century has proven that our brains can grasp, process and retain pictures with much greater meaning than numbers or words alone.

This is called the "picture superiority effect," and understanding this basic human dynamic is critical to integrated marketers. It means that it is faster for people to understand many data points when they are displayed in charts and graphs rather than poring over piles of spreadsheets or reading pages and pages of reports.

Let's consider the marketing director who is trying to explain why she wants to devote more of her online media budget to mobile and digital advertising. Her boss is a big fan of magazines and is questioning the soundness of her decision. She needs to find data to support her position.

She could tell *her* boss that a 2015 industry report shows the continuing decline of print in favor of digital advertising and that this trend is also being seen among marketing budgets. Or she can *show* the following slide with an accompanying verbal narrative in a presentation. Which do you think is more compelling?

TELLING THE STORY

There are many different ways to analyze and interpret data — as Ronald H. Coase famously said in his *Essays on Economics and Economists*, "If you torture the data long enough, it will confess." Therefore, as marketers, we must have a very clear understanding of our objectives in order to protect against too much bias in our analysis. It is equally important to express yourself in a way that people will understand and retain, and to ultimately gain their collaboration and support. *And nothing builds collaboration like storytelling.* The story allows you to answer the meaningful questions you have as a marketer, as well as the questions your boss will ask, such as:

- What is working, and what is not working?
- Did we succeed?
- And in all cases — *WHY*?

To be a successful data storyteller, you need to master some basic concepts that can help you generate the best visuals, including:

1. Determining what you are trying to visualize and what kind of information you want to communicate.
2. Knowing your audience and understanding how they process visual information.
3. Using a visual that conveys the information in the best and simplest form for your audience — if you need to spend more than 30 seconds explaining the chart, it isn't working.
4. Understanding that *reporting is easy — recommending is hard.* Don't take the easy way out and simply report out a bunch of metrics and numbers. Take the time to understand what it means and add value.

But you also need to be careful not to go overboard in your storytelling. Some of the biggest mistakes I see marketers make in creating visual stories from data include:

1. *Death by PowerPoint* — Too many slides with too much information on each slide. Remember that you should never have more than one slide for every two minutes. Combine the slide with your narrative for added impact.
2. *Too good to be true* — Too much animation, flash or pizazz diminishes the value of the data you are presenting. Strive for purity and simplicity.
3. *The infographic that killed the whale* — Taking every single data point you can possibly imagine and turning it into one great, big, long infographic. No one wants to look at infographics that cannot be viewed "above the crease" or on one simple, horizontal slide.

CONCLUSION

As an integrated marketing professional, you will need to communicate and tell your story to other colleagues in the organization who are not as well versed in the statistics and the numbers, and who may be completely unfamiliar with the techniques and metrics of integrated marketing. Take the time to truly understand what the data means so you can tell your audience the story it is telling you — and what meaningful actions they can take based on that story.

Good marketers get good results, but *great* marketers are great communicators *and* get great results. By mastering the art of data visualization, you can build trust and respect, gain credibility and create collaboration among your peers, your colleagues and your boss.

Trends in Analog Versus Digital Print

■ Digital Advertising   ■ Digital Print   Analog Print
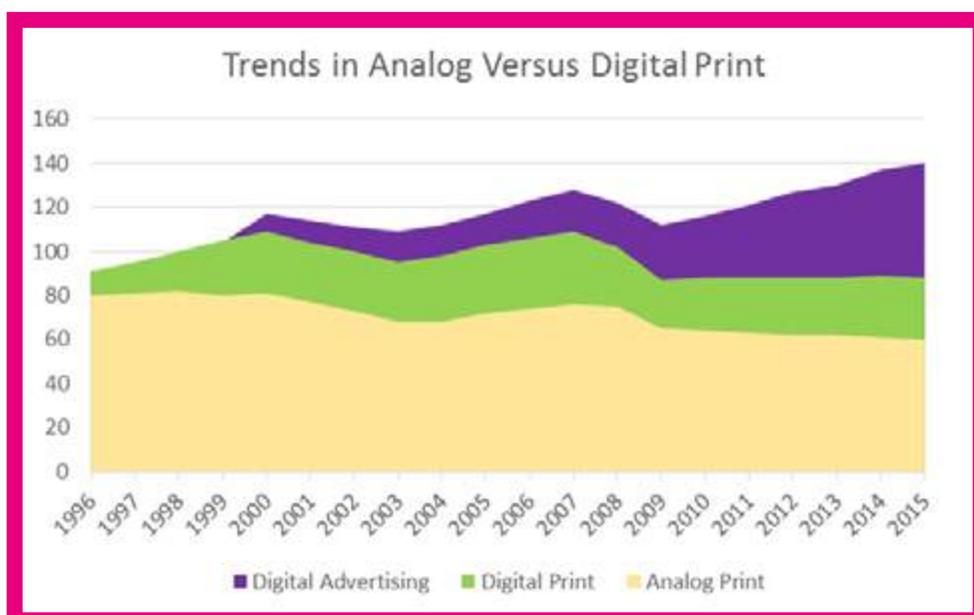
Additional Author Bios

Cyndi W. Greenglass is a founding partner and senior vice president of strategic solutions at Diamond Marketing Solutions, a $100M data-driven communications company. Cyndi is a member of the executive management team, where she manages the strategic planning process and participates in strategic acquisitions. Cyndi was named into the Top 100 Influential BTB Marketers by Crain's B@B Magazine twice and is the 2012 CADM Chicago Direct Marketer of the Year. She is an adjunct instructor at both Aurora University and WVU and lectures on data-driven marketing strategies nationally.

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Abhishek Jadon leads content and data strategy for Gatorade. In this role, he is responsible for developing digital branded content that focuses on authentic storytelling and for the implementation of marketing technologies to drive media optimization and content personalization at scale. He brings 11-plus years of experience in executing digital campaigns, conceptualizing digital strategy and leveraging technological trends at leading CPG companies, including Pepsi, Kraft and Cadbury. He provides a unique perspective informed by a global mindset developed through an international exposure of living and working in four different countries along with roles within cross-functional teams.

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@ Scale" p 24.

Amanda Slavin is a millennial and Generation Z expert and the CEO/founder of CatalystCreativ, an experience studio focused on helping cities, brands and institutions flourish by developing educational and inspirational strategy, along with on and offline campaigns to engage millennials. Amanda and CatalystCreativ have worked with brands spanning from NPR, Dell, Ekocycle and Starwood Hotels. Amanda was listed on last year's Forbes 30 Under 30 for marketing and advertising. She is a founding advisory board member for NPR's millennial arm, GenListen, and an advisor to Mama Hope and I Am That Girl.

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Spiegel Research Center

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Tom Collinger is the executive director of the Spiegel Digital & Database Research Center; senior director of the Medill Distance Learning Initiative; and an associate professor at Medill. He is a widely recognized expert and speaker in the areas of integrated marketing communications; direct, database and e-commerce marketing management; customer loyalty; customer relationship management; and channel integration.

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Yorgos (George) Askalidis is a doctoral student in the Computer Science Theory group at Northwestern University. He received his B.S. and M.S. in mathematics from the University of Athens. His research revolves around online user-generated reviews. His area of focus is around the relationship between reviews, biases and usefulness of information to potential buyers.

Vijay Viswanathan is an assistant professor in the Medill School of Journalism in media and integrated marketing communications, and a research associate of the Spiegel Digital & Database Research Center. His research interests include media choice and multitasking, brand management, consumer psychology, marketing strategy and marketing mix models.

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