



**POWER POINTS**

# How to use numbers properly in presentations and arguments

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When we pitch our ideas and proposals, numbers can overwhelm our audience. They can be numbing, and when they are very large they become abstractions – what is a trillion, anyway? And numbers can frighten those who aren't inclined to math.

Yet despite those drawbacks, we routinely cite numbers – the bigger the better – without providing a context that might make them understandable to our colleagues.

“Numbers aren't the natural language for humans,” Chip Heath, a professor at Stanford Graduate School of Business, and journalist Karla Starr write in *Making Numbers Count*. “If you're filling in databases, it's fine to leave numbers as numbers, but the second you want to use numbers in an argument or presentation, it's your job to put them in human terms.”

They ask you to flip through some of your recent presentation scripts or written proposals. Are there phrases like “to put this in context,” or “to put that in perspective,” or “by comparison?” If so, you have an idea of what is needed. If not, you might as well be talking gobbledygook to others.

Ideally, you shouldn't even need to use many phrases like those because you automatically translate numbers for people you are dealing with, inserting the context automatically. Indeed, there are many occasions where you can make the numbers easily comprehensible by not even using the exact figures.

Take this example: “The largest volcano in the solar system, Olympus Mons on Mars, is about 300,000 square kilometres in area and about 22 kilometres tall.” The numbers are

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No numbers. More clarity.

“You want people to see and *feel* the numbers, not just read them,” the authors state.

One technique they recommend is focusing on one person, one business, one marriage, or whatever other phenomenon you are discussing. In his 18 years in the NBA, LeBron James scored more than 35,000 points. Better to say: In those 18 years, he averaged 27 points per game. Anyone who has played or watched a game of basketball will understand that achievement. Or instead of the statistic that there are about 400 million civilian-owned firearms in the United States, offer this context: Enough for every person to own one and have around 70 million firearms left over.

We are told to be accurate when presenting numbers. Spreadsheets and other data give us numbers to several decimal points. And we often dutifully cite them, which may seem impressive but is usually irrelevant. If your new office is 5.73 times bigger than your old one, simply say six times bigger. Those who find out the actual number won't feel it's suddenly less spacious, the authors note. Refer to the number 2,842,900 as about three million. It's more user-friendly and effective.

They offer these two rules for regular, non-scientific situations: Simpler is better; round up with enthusiasm. Concrete is better; use whole numbers, not decimals, fractions or percentages.

But when your audience has specialized experience, they say you should feel free to abandon those two rules to share numbers they commonly deal with.

To help people understand quickly, they urge you to define new concepts in terms of something your audience already knows. Measurements are best expressed in comparison with the human body or popular items. They dug up these health campaign comparisons when the six-foot physical distancing guideline was first issued: One surfboard in San Diego; one tatami mat in Japan; two baguettes in France and, of course, one hockey stick in Canada. They stress that a truly interesting statistic doesn't just

## QUICK TIPS

- The first step in raising your visibility with your boss, colleagues and others is to offer assistance. Leadership coach Joel Garfinkle says that it may seem counterintuitive but offering help beats asking for advice or accolades. The biggest mistake is to tackle a project that would seem to show you as innovative except nobody is paying attention to the effort.
- It reduces frustration and saves time if you attach all relevant documents for recurring meetings to the calendar item, advises content strategist Zoe Kaplan.
- The best communicators understand the difference between a dialogue and a monologue, says consultant Steve Keating.
- Jason Fried, the CEO of software company Basecamp, notes that what you're making is in a perpetual state of "almost" right up until the deadline date. And, in fact, it's never right even after that.
- A PDF can easily be converted into a Microsoft Word document by right-clicking the PDF file on your desktop, choosing "Open With," and then selecting Word as the program you want to open it with, explains tech writer Allen Wyatt.

*Harvey Schachter is a Kingston, Ont.-based writer specializing in management issues. He, along with Sheelagh Whittaker, former CEO of both EDS Canada and Cancom, are the authors of When Harvey Didn't Meet Sheelagh: Emails on Leadership.*

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