Interactive Storytelling: The Secret to Driving Action from Data
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Interactive Storytelling: The Secret to Driving Action from Data

Introduction

Why is it that we remember some presentations and not others? Data can be compelling, but without a story to frame it, we are not engaged. This isn’t just a theory; research from neuroscience shows that facts light up two areas of the human brain while stories light up six, engaging us on multiple levels. And facts alone beg questions: in the absence of a story, we find ourselves prematurely questioning the data and its validity rather than really listening to the person presenting the information.

With this in mind, it might be time to ask yourself: are your presentations putting people to sleep? Do you have the data to drive decisions, but presenting it still takes too long? Do you find yourself going back to reports to pull more numbers or to explain where they came from? Do you find that the reports you create aren’t being used?

The sole purpose of data isn’t to create charts and graphs. Data alone doesn’t drive people to action. But data can be enlightening and powerful. The purpose of data is to answer questions and spark curiosity. But the key is presenting the data in a meaningful and memorable way.

That’s where interactive storytelling comes in. Interactive storytelling drives results, closing the gap between data and action. It’s a compelling way to present data, and luckily, it’s a technique you can easily learn to use.
What’s Missing?

Business users have reams of data at their disposal but they don’t know what to do with it. Users have data, dashboards, charts, and graphs. They want to make data-driven decisions, but find that they get bogged down.

Part of the problem is the sheer volume of data. Data is expanding at a staggering rate, growing tenfold from 4.4 zettabytes in 2013 to 44 zettabytes in 2020, according to IDC. Some business users don’t know which data is important to their work, and they’re overwhelmed by the deluge of information. Where do they start their analysis? And, perhaps more importantly, where do they stop?

When users do make a decision based on one data set, it elicits a rash of questions about the unknown, which increases their own fear, uncertainty, and doubt. What if some other data set completely negates their decision? What if the action based on their decision fails miserably and is traced back to the user? In the absence of confidence, it’s safer to do nothing at all.

Users spend a lot of time putting together reports — reports that no one uses because the data is not presented in an engaging format. Without a storyline, data is hard to retain and lacks context. The audience doesn’t understand why the data is important. Questions give way to more questions, and problem solving is postponed until presenters can follow up with answers — long after the meeting has taken place and interest has waned. As a result, organizations see little or no return on investment on their data and analysis tools.

Business users need a way to feel confident about their data insights and to help others feel confident about them, too.
The Power of Storytelling

Storytelling helps bring data to life. It is the act of communicating the insights or discoveries you found during data analysis and the conclusions you’ve drawn within a logical sequence. More importantly, storytelling adds context, engagement, and emotion to fact. There are three reasons why you need to build a story around your data.

① Stories have a beginning, middle, and end

Stories create a structure for presenting data. The process of exploring data, on the other hand, can be nonlinear and unstructured. Discoveries may take you down many different paths before you get to a conclusion. Storytelling turns that nonlinear process of discovery into a linear conversation.

This structure lets you organize data into a meaningful narrative and create a guided pathway that is linked to the original data source. The audience can follow along with the story, taking in and accepting each data point along the way so that when you get to the conclusion, you’ve already addressed potential issues that would raise concern or cause disagreement. Instead, the audience can see how the pieces of the story form the greater whole — your conclusion and next steps.

② Stories are memorable

Stories also strengthen the impact of data. According to Jennifer Aaker, General Atlantic Professor of Marketing at Stanford Graduate School of Business, “Stories are remembered up to 22 times more than facts alone.”

Humans are wired to tell and remember stories. Storytelling is how we communicate information and ideas. It also spurs interest in a variety of subjects — and the same is true with data. Numbers in a spreadsheet don’t engage us. A story makes the same data digestible, contextual, and memorable.
Interactive Storytelling: The Secret to Driving Action from Data

How to Tell a Story with Data

Building a story with data isn't difficult. The first step is to determine the story you want to tell. Chances are you're already doing this. It's the process of rolling up your sleeves and digging into the data, exploring it, analyzing it, and allowing it to persuade you. Once you have your information and you know what you want to tell your audience, then you begin building your story.

The goal is to take your audience on a journey of discovery similar to the one you went through, but with a narrative. You're going to streamline the story by avoiding some of the dead ends you encountered and intentionally guide your audience down a specific path.

As Tom Davenport says in his classic article, Why Data Storytelling is So Important and Why We Are So Bad at It, “Data preparation and analysis often take quite a while, but we need shorthand representations of those activities for those who are spectators or beneficiaries of them. It would be time-consuming and boring to share all the details of a quantitative analysis with stakeholders. Analysts need to find a way to deliver the salient findings from an analysis in a brief, snappy way. Stories fit the bill.”

A Data-Driven Story

We already know that people like to eat ice cream on hot days. As the author of the story, you then introduce data points the audience probably doesn't know about. For example, provide data points that show that people don't buy ice cream from the grocery store on hot days. Then you present your conclusion: People don't buy ice cream on very hot days because they worry it will melt on their way home from the store. Finally, you present an actionable decision based on this conclusion. When the weather forecast indicates a heat wave, the store puts signs on its freezer doors to encourage ice cream sales in advance: “Don't be left out in the cold next week — be prepared for the heat wave and get your ice cream today!”

Stories are persuasive

Stories make data persuasive. A big part of decision making is getting buy-in from others. Sometimes hard numbers are enough. More often, however, you need something that connects your audience to the data on an emotional level to get their support. Stories enable you to do that.

Storytelling lets you talk about how the data relates to people and specific scenarios. You can inspire imagination and galvanize supporters for your cause. Use storytelling to persuade and collaborate, and it will help you drive decision making so that you can move forward with your ideas more efficiently.
Guidelines for Data-Driven Storytelling

While there are no hard and fast rules for writing a good story, there are general guidelines that will help ensure that your data-driven story is effective. To build a good story based on data, start by thinking about the ending. You need to know where you’re going before you can start the journey. In this case, the destination is your strategy for increasing ice cream sales.

Next, you need to choose the data points that support your decision or conclusion. Ideally, these data points evoke curiosity: if it’s so hot and customers like to eat ice cream on hot days, then why aren’t they buying it? You also need to make the audience care: if we understand why customers aren’t buying ice cream, we can potentially address that issue and increase ice cream sales. Offer some suggestions and ask the audience for their input. Should we display waffle cones and toppings for an ice cream sundae party near the ice cream section to help shoppers envision themselves enjoying ice cream with friends and neighbors? Or should we offer thermal reusable bags at a discount to allay fears about melting? Whet the audience’s interest by offering to follow up with data from A/B testing in different locations and the impact on hot weather ice cream sales.

Change is at the heart of any good story and is necessary for it to move forward. In this case, you are changing the audience’s assumptions about ice cream sales and consumer buying habits.

Finally, when building your story, use what you know. Draw upon your experiences for colorful anecdotes. Everyone likes ice cream, so draw the audience in with a mental picture about eating your favorite ice cream flavor on a hot day. Contrast it with another graphic image: nobody likes to come home from the grocery store to discover melted ice cream all over the trunk of a shiny new car.

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Effective Data-Driven Storytelling

- Start by thinking about the ending.
- Create an emotional hook for the story.
- Choose data points that support your decision or conclusion.
- Share a condensed version of your data journey with surprises encountered along the way.
- Engage the audience: offer suggestions and ask them for input.
Technology’s Role:
Taking Your Story to the Next Level

You can write your story on paper or present it using PowerPoint, but the most engaging stories elicit conversation. Storytelling should be interactive — similar to a “Choose Your Own Adventure” book. To do that, you need technology that allows you to go back to the data source and trace exactly where the data came from.

That’s crucial because there’s no way to anticipate every question an audience will raise. Inevitably, somebody will challenge the data or ask, “What if...?” The ability to go back to the application and there and address the concerns before continuing with your story ensures that nobody is left behind. Everybody reaches the end conclusion together or, if necessary, you have a productive conversation that enables decision making to continue moving forward right then and there.

Stories Should be Told and Retold

Stories can be transformative, but only if they're consumed. The technology you use for storytelling should enable you to share them within the system and via PowerPoint and PDF. This ensures that you can communicate your ideas to anyone who would benefit from them.

Similarly, stories should be curated. A library is more valuable than any single book within it, and the same goes for your stories. When you keep your stories in one place, you can refer to them later when new stories are written. You can tell bigger stories as a result and cross-reference them as appropriate. With all your stories in a central location, based off of the same dataset, you can be assured that there's consistency between your stories.

Five Signs You’re Not Telling an Effective Story

How do you know whether you’re telling an effective data story? If you experience any of the following during a presentation, chances are you’re not telling a good story

1. Blank stares
2. Too many questions about your conclusions
3. Too many questions about the data
4. It’s not clear what to do with the data
5. It’s not clear what the data means to the business
Conclusion
The concept of storytelling with data isn’t new. Humans have been telling stories throughout history. Stories are key to presenting data effectively.

CITO Research believes that interactive storytelling must be made accessible to all business users so that everyone is empowered to persuade, collaborate and, ultimately, drive action. Qlik® has figured out a way to do that. Qlik is a thought leader and trusted partner in this space. Its innovative approach to business intelligence and analytics empowers IT organizations to propel their business forward to compete and succeed in today’s rapidly changing data-driven business environment. The Qlik platform delivers powerful self-service visual analytics capability to all business users while meeting IT’s need to meet and exceed operational objectives.

Qlik Sense® Data Storytelling allows users to capture and present their insights at a point in time. Data stories enable users to present a guided story or pathway through a set of analyses, ensuring that decision makers get a clear picture of the business case in an environment where there is trust in the data. At any time, users can dive back into the application within the story to further explore data. As a result, Qlik takes data beyond individual analysis, driving communication of insight and facilitating group decisions.

Visit www.qlik.com for a free download of Qlik Sense today to start telling your story.