

Facts Just Aren't What They Used to Be (Jan 11)

By Jim Endicott

Probably one of the most fundamental, most foundational beliefs around the presentation process is that whoever makes the best case wins the day.

Key customers will be compelled to purchase your product or service based on a great datasheet. Partners will be overwhelmed with your command of a spreadsheet and opt-in. And employees will embrace the need for an extended pay freeze because of your compelling presentation of Q3 's troubling financials.

I have two words for you...not likely.

Unfortunately, current research would show that changing belief systems seems to happen a lot less often than we would like to believe. In a 2008 joint study with Duke University & Georgia State University, researchers set out to understand how effective facts are at swaying opinion. As a study context, they focused on documented misconceptions that prevail today around certain political views. Could blatantly false or unsubstantiated beliefs be corrected with an objective communication of the actual "truth"?

The results in a moment...

Although this particular study was politically focused, presenters must embrace the fact we are constantly trying to alter belief systems. When I get up in front of a group to deliver a keynote around winning the hearts & minds of busy people, I try to alter the belief system that a good deck of PowerPoint slides is all that is needed to win over an audience.

For you, it may be that global warming is a real threat, your software product can address issues that have been plaguing people for decades or that donating to your local non-profit can really change lives.

Let me net out for you what pages of research revealed: ***All information is filtered through an audience's existing belief system.***

When individuals believe something very strongly, the exposure to contradictory information (even if true) can actually reinforce the existing (incorrect) belief system. People will go to great lengths to avoid the cognitive dissonance created when their beliefs don't seem to jive with the facts.

Sorry to rain on your parade, but it would seem that facts and data work best when people already agree with us!

So what does it take to change hearts and minds? In the book *The Leader's Voice* (Clarke & Crossland), the authors studied the personal communication vehicles that leaders used to be highly effective. What they discovered is that there are three compelling "channels" used purposefully and at strategic times to create personal impact. They are 1) Factual 2) Emotional and 3) Symbolic.

The factual channel is great to prove, inform and justify but is weak in actual persuasion and influence. The emotional channel, best characterized by more right-brain influences like personal stories, relational interaction and visually-rich sensory stimulus, is the stuff that motivates and inspires change and can bypass an audience's natural defenses (and belief systems).

The third channel is the symbolic used to align thinking and focus efforts. (Have you ever had a manager that gave the whole team a physical object that had special meaning for creating a change in thinking?)

Unfortunately, today most presenters camp heavily on the factual channel and wonder why their presentations so often fail to achieve the results they worked so hard for.

You want to know why we teach executives to be better, more compelling storytellers? This is why. This is also why we help sales organizations work to balance a factual, data-driven appeal with a relational (emotional) story of impact or innovation. Changing what audiences think and believe is not for the faint of heart and it requires us to be much smarter.

For some, this will make perfect sense. For others, who are convinced their pie charts and tabular data is their secret sauce for getting the deal, I probably won't be changing your minds anytime soon.

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