

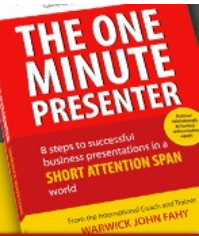
Speak like an Executive

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AUTHOR · EXECUTIVE SPEECH COACH · FACILITATOR OF LEARNING



"I help ambitious senior finance executives switch from technical expert to effective executive"



## Using Data to Influence



Photo credit: Carlos Perer

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## Using data to influence

*"There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics."*

The term was popularised in the United States by Mark Twain (among others), who attributed it to the 19th-century British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881). In today's information overload world, the need to use data in business is a necessary tool for an effective communicator. Big data is here.

Today's article looks at three guidelines when using data to influence your audience:

### 1. Don't lie or mis-lead

I once heard a CEO from a major coaching association stand up and give a confident presentation full of his insights, trends and forecasts from his research of talking with ... 16 people.

Now maybe these were the 16 most important people in the field. Or maybe they were the 16 most insightful people. But let's face it, it's a little dangerous to make big bold predictions from a sample size of 16. While industry leaders, gurus and media titans are great food for thought, they can often skew the outcomes. Always explain your sample size and the implications this has on the data itself.

Another common mistake occurs when visually displaying data. When you're using a bar chart for example, always use a baseline of zero. The two charts below will show you the impact of starting a baseline from anything else.

The first chart shows what looks like a massive increase in one year:



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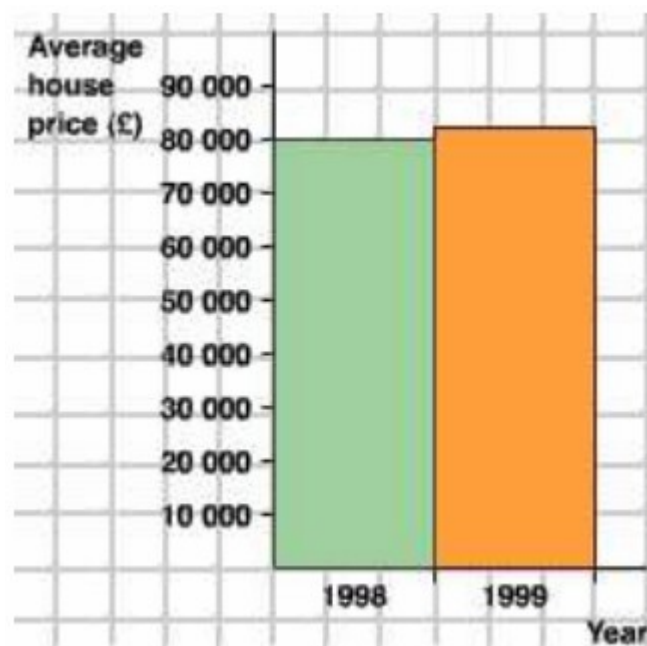
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You'll notice that the scale actually starts from 79,000 so that the increase from 1998 to 1999 looks significant.

Plotting the same data with a baseline of zero gives a different picture:



In this chart the increase looks much less “massive”.

## 2. Comparisons and contrasts

Single data points carry very little meaning and are instantly forgotten unless you are a subject matter expert within that particular niche.

I once heard an engineer stating that his products had helped to take out one billion grams of fat from the US diet. That sounds like a lot but can you imagine how much that is?

Instead, comparing it to population of New York City gives a better indication of the magnitude of how much fat was really removed.

When Apple were marketing the iPhone 5, they contrasted it's dimensions with the iPhone 4 so that the new phone was “18% thinner and 20% lighter”. This brings out the incremental improvements in a better light than may at first be obvious when comparing the two phones.

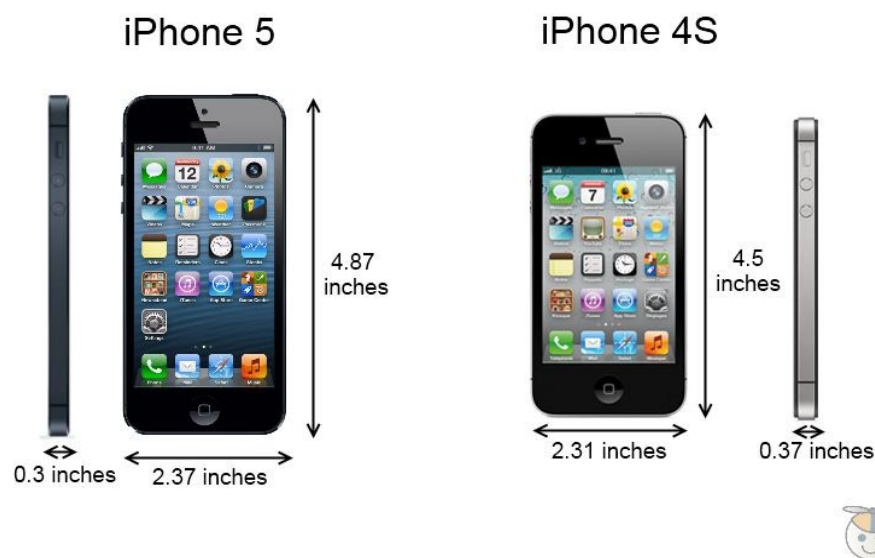
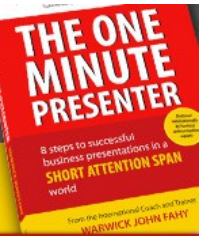
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Comparisons and contrasts are especially useful because they take a complex subject and should the most important similarities or differences.

Remember that the amount of detail you show will depend on your audience. So the example below show how Apple compares and contrasts in China, where a higher comfort with technical specifications and a higher focus on price exists.



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iPhone				立即购买
	iPhone 5[S]	iPhone 5[C]	iPhone 4[S]	
电话	 <p>iPhone 5s 现有银、金和深空灰三种颜色，配备 A7 芯片、Touch ID 指纹识别传感器、采用更大的 800 万像素感光元件的 iSight 摄像头和 iOS 7。 <a href="#">了解更多 &gt;</a></p>	 <p>iPhone 5c 现有绿、蓝、黄、粉和白五种颜色，配备 A6 芯片、800 万像素 iSight 摄像头和 iOS 7。 <a href="#">了解更多 &gt;</a></p>	 <p>iPhone 4s 现有黑、白两种颜色，配备 A5 芯片、800 万像素 iSight 摄像头和通过语音控制的智能助理 Siri。 <a href="#">了解更多 &gt;</a></p>	
容量和价格 <sup>1</sup>	16GB RMB 5,288 32GB RMB 6,088 64GB RMB 6,888 <a href="#">立即购买</a>	8GB RMB 4,088 16GB RMB 4,488 32GB RMB 5,288 <a href="#">立即购买</a>	8GB RMB 3,288 <a href="#">立即购买</a>	

### 3. Tell your story behind the numbers

Whatever your data set, you can always find a way to personalise or humanise the way you introduce it. This is known as telling the story behind the numbers.

Overwhelming an audience with a slide back full of numbers is not an effective way for them to internalise or remember your message. Instead, your data should be used as a way to strengthen the message you wish to convey throughout your presentation.

Whatever story or anecdote you choose to share it should follow these checkpoints:

#### A. Memorable or meaningful to the audience

The audience can relate to the story, understand it quickly and likely to remember it.

#### B. Impactful

Help your audience remember the point by making your story clear, concise and finish with a precise point.

#### C. Personal

Ideally, as an expert on your subject, you'll be able to share a story that comes from your experience. This adds credibility to you as the expert.

Types of business stories:

- Give an example from your own experience
- Share an example that you've observed your colleagues doing

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- Share a customer story
- Give some insight from your company's culture or values
- Recount the lessons from your CEO or founder
- Explain how this number was reached
- Show what the number means to the audience

## Adjust to your audience

In a Harvard Business Review article titled "How to Tell a Story with Data," Dell Executive Strategist Jim Stikeleather explains how you can divide up your audience based on their technical knowledge.

These levels are novice, generalist, management, expert and executive:

The novice is new to a subject so likes it clear but not too simple.

The generalist is aware of a topic and looks for an overview and the main themes.

The management seeks detailed understanding.

The expert wants to deep dive into discovery and limit vague storytelling.

The executive needs to know the significance and conclusions.

## Conclusion

Using data to influence is a necessary part of an effective communicator's arsenal. Use these guidelines to ensure that your data doesn't bore the audience but engages and leads them to the points you wish them to remember. First, never mis-lead. Then use contrasts and comparisons to give context to your data. Finally, add anecdotes, stories and examples to personalise the main points you wish them to remember.



I help business professionals from technical backgrounds become more influential when communicating with their senior leaders in cross cultural environments

### About the Author

“Warwick helps C-level executives, working in multinational companies based in Greater China, who need to become more confident and effective in their spoken communications. Warwick helps the executive project a clear message allowing them to express their opinions powerfully and gain respect from senior managers even when under pressure.”

Warwick is the author of “The One Minute Presenter: 8 steps to successful business presentations in a short attention span world”.

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