

How to Persuade with Numbers

Have a Translation Sentence

Think of numbers and statistics like a foreign language to your audience.

If you casually spoke French words in your presentation, you'd be expected to provide a translation so your audience isn't confused.

The same is true with your numbers.

Whenever you have a number in your presentation, provide a sentence or two of context before or after the number.

Example

You want people to understand the size of the state budget deficit at \$3 billion. Is that a lot? Is that a little? How is the audience supposed to know?

Solution

With a translation sentence, you could say:

"Right now, the state's budget has a proposed deficit of \$3 billion. That's about 7%. Or it's like spending \$107 at the store and trying to pay with only \$100. The store wouldn't accept it, and neither should the taxpayers."

Round and Make Concrete

You don't have to be precise when talking about data unless it's critical or technical info important to your audience. **It's better to be memorable and directionally accurate than precise and forgettable.**

Example:

You are discussing the fact that there are 1.72 jobs for every unemployed individual. That's a precise number but forgettable.

Solution

By rounding and making it more concrete, you could say: *"For every 10 unemployed people in the state, there are 17 open jobs."*

Make It Human Scale

Large numbers are abstract and harder to remember. Instead, consider what your data represents and how to make it to the scale of a single human.

Example:

A proposed energy policy is projected to increase electric bills by 30%. That's a lot, but people don't think in percentages.

Solution

Most people think of bills every month, *"If this proposal passes, your \$150 electricity bill will jump to almost \$200."*

The Bottom Line

Your goal is to create a feeling, not just give a bunch of facts. Think about presenting numbers so they are memorable and create an emotional response with your audience.

These rules were adapted from the book *[Making Numbers Count](#)* by Chip Heath and Karla Starr. Check it out if you want more tips on persuading with numbers.