

Shocking Statistics: How to find and use them

In the 1980s, a study about Pentagon waste revealed a shocking detail: a single toilet seat cost US taxpayers \$640. Despite the report's hundreds of pages, this one number stuck with people.

This \$640 toilet seat became a symbol of government waste. People latched onto the sheer ridiculousness of the cost. For over 40 years, this illustrated wasteful government spending.

This example shows the power of a single shocking statistic. While we might think more data is better, most people are too busy to dive into complex details. A single, well-chosen number can make your point and stick in the minds of your audience.



Why it Works

Why did the \$640 toilet seat become so memorable and how can you use this same tactic?

It has an Emotional Impact

The price is so high that it doesn't pass the "straight face test," and it immediately suggests government waste and abuse.

It's Relatable

Most people have bought a toilet seat or seen them in stores. They know they usually cost less than \$100. This provides an anchoring effect, helping people understand the large gap between what it should be and the actual price.

It's Unique and Memorable

The fact is funny to tell and interrupts the pattern of typical government spending discussions. You don't expect to hear about the government buying toilet seats.

The Bottom Line

Finding the perfect number will take some work. But by combining relatability, emotional impact, uniqueness, and storytelling, you can craft a memorable number that resonates with your audience and effectively drives home your point.

5 Questions to Craft a Compelling Statistic

1 What's the one thing I want my audience to remember

This question helps you find the perfect number. Decide if you want to highlight a problem's scale or the solution's effectiveness. Look for stats that evoke that feeling.

2 Is there one number that shows this best?

You might not always have a \$640 toilet seat, but you can find a category of numbers. In the book "Switch," Chip and Dan Heath share a story of a manager advocating for bulk purchasing. Instead of spreadsheets, he displayed hundreds of gloves, each with price tags, on a conference table. He showed the same glove cost \$8 at one factory and \$17 or \$22 at another. This category of numbers clearly showed the need for an improved procurement system.

3 If I flip the number, does it have more impact?

Sometimes, you can flip a number for effect. If only 20% of people succeed, you might instead emphasize that 80% fail. This technique works particularly well with percentages or ratios.

4 Can I make this a story, not just a statistic?

Adding a narrative makes stats more memorable. For example, instead of just saying, "When Governor Shapiro was renovating the governor's mansion, he spent \$2,450 on a dog door," try this:

"Have you ever bought a dog door? You know, those things that let your dog go outside? You or I might spend a couple of hundred dollars. But what if you're the Governor, renovating the governor's mansion with taxpayer dollars? How much would he spend? If you're Governor Shapiro, you'd spend nearly \$2,500 for a dog door.

That's the problem with Harrisburg: everything is ten times more expensive when it's taxpayer money. If you ask the governor's office, they say the dog door was returned, but that's after it was reported... presumably to keep them out of the dog house."

5 Would a normal person find this interesting?

Separate what you find interesting from what resonates with the general public. Run the number by regular people and see their reaction. If it's a dud, try to understand why it didn't work and go back to the drawing board.