

Using Empathy and Narrative to Ignite Research

NEIL GAINS

Tapestry Works

THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHY AND NARRATIVE

Listening and storytelling have always been critical skills for market researchers. With the increasing democratization of research, easier access to customer and market data, and the need for inspiration as well as information (and quickly, too), these skills have never been in greater demand. Stan Sthanunathan wrote in *Admap* (Sthanunathan, 2010) that, “insight is a passive concept. We (market researchers) must be active participants in providing inspiration. Through inspiration you motivate people to take action and provoke their desire to create something really new and different” (p. 24).

Listening and Market Research

The origins of market research were in listening—specifically in the golden age of radio and the blossoming of the advertising industry. Advertisers needed to understand audiences to sell sponsors. From small beginnings in the 1920s, the industry blossomed in the 1940s with the use of focused groups and theories of human motivation to improve the measurement of audience reactions. In the 1960s, the publication by Carl Rogers (1961) *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist’s View of Psychotherapy* had a profound impact on qualitative research practice, placing the research participant (or in Rogers’s case the client) at the center of study.

In the middle of the 1960s, George Gallup and others pioneered the use of public opinion polling and the belief that all consumer behavior could be measured through scientific research. These approaches became prevalent in the 1990s, with the globalization of the industry as well as many of the industry’s leading companies.

In the 21st century, market research has come full circle, and recent years have seen a return to earlier thinking, with an emphasis on the centrality of the consumer to the insight

process and increasing skepticism of more rational and directed approaches to questioning (Graves, 2010). Empathy and narrative are central to the way we *all* communicate, remember, and learn, including clients, market researchers, and customers (Rifkin, 2009).

A New Mindset for Research

Market research has become a big global industry (almost 30 billion U.S. dollars in 2009), with the top five companies accounting for 48% of turnover (ESOMAR, 2010b). This dominance is built on the process orientation of the large firms, but if market researchers are to inspire clients, we must strive to develop the skills of other creative professionals from advertising, design, journalism, and similar industries, using the whole brain to help us understand consumers' situations and engage with clients.

Daniel Pink (2005) describes these skills well in *A Whole New Mind*, arguing that they are central to future professional success in industries based on information, communication, and creative thinking. He discusses six core skills: (1) design, (2) story, (3) symphony, (4) empathy, (5) play, and (6) meaning.

Design Thinking

Design skills help researchers go beyond the functional and literal meaning of data and use them to create something emotionally engaging (and often beautiful or entertaining too). John Heskett (2002) once said, "Design, stripped to its essence, can be defined as the human nature to shape and make our environment in ways without precedent in nature, to serve our needs and give meaning to our lives" (p. 1).

Design thinking has become a buzz term, and IDEO and other companies are the darlings of innovation (as well as design). In reality, design thinking is based on many of the principles of good research, focusing on understanding problems, observing and talking to consumers, and using feedback to improve designs. Researchers can learn much from the importance placed on empathy with the consumer problem, with storytelling a key component of this (Brown, 2009).

I Wanna Tell You a Story

Stories are easier to remember than facts because stories are *how* we remember facts, not as isolated bites of information, but as sensory impressions connected together by their relationships to one another, their emotional relevance to our lives, and the order in which they occur over time. In essence, stories provide context enriched by emotion.

As Mark Turner (2006) says, "Narrative imagining—story—is the fundamental instrument of thought" (p. 4). Most of our experience, our knowledge and our thinking is organized as stories.

A Symphony of Data

Symphonies emerge from orchestras of musicians, who coordinate their efforts to create something much greater than the sum of their individual parts. Individual data are subject to analysis, but researchers must find the connections between these pieces of

information to develop a synthesis. Businesses need to understand broad market trends and patterns of behavior, as well as answer specific questions, and this requires the ability to create symphonies of data.

The brain is designed for pattern recognition, and works in analogies (e.g., metaphors), which help it to take isolated sensory inputs, connect them to previous experience, and then make predictions about future events (Hofstadter, 2007). Comedian, Sid Caesar said, “The guy who invented the wheel was an idiot. The guy who invented the other three, he was a genius” (Caesar quoted in Pink, 2005, p. 142).

Standing in the Customer’s Shoes

Empathy is the ability to imagine oneself in someone else’s position and to feel what they are feeling. This is not the same as sympathy, but rather to sense what it would be like to be somebody else and experience the world from their perspective (Rifkin, 2009).

That is, empathy is about mimicry, something that is wired into all of us via mirror neurons in the brain, which behave the same whether we feel something ourselves or watch someone else feeling it. Emotions drive the decision making of consumers (Damasio, 2006), and as Daniel Goleman (1995) says, “People’s emotions are rarely put into words; far more often they are expressed through other cues. Just as the mode of the rational mind is words, the mode of the emotions is nonverbal” (p. 96–97).

Play for Success

Being playful is one of the keys to triggering your creativity, opening your brain to new possibilities and unlimited connections. Innovation companies focus on play as a key tool of creativity, and that’s not just because they are grown kids.

In fact, the open curiosity of our youth is critical to the learning process and to discovering new ideas, and Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (1996) sees a high correlation between creative individuals and a playful attitude. Even Albert Einstein acknowledged, “Games are the most elevated form of investigation.”

Making Meaning

The motivational engine driving all our lives is the search for meaning (Bruner, 1990), and the purpose of market researchers is to identify the meaning in the data that we collect so we can guide and inspire our clients. Meaning emerges naturally from well-designed research, which playfully engages consumers allowing us to empathize with their individual situations and connect this to our client’s business through a clear and simple story.

Researchers start their search for meaning by listening to customers and prospects.

LISTENING TO UNDERSTAND

There Are Many Ways to Listen and Observe

New technologies are increasing the accessibility of consumer voices (through mobile and web-based platforms) and behavioral data (through transactional databases). This technology

gives researchers access to online interactions and chatter, social networks, location-based data, picture and video capture of moments in time, purchase and consumption patterns, and much more. Alongside more established tools, the following (nonexhaustive) list provides an introduction to the latest approaches to listening.

Online research is now the largest data-collection methodology at more than 20% of revenues (ESOMAR, 2010b), but it has not fundamentally changed the nature of the problems addressed, the questions asked, or the analyses used for quantitative research. However, increasingly, online research employs panels of prerecruited and profiled participants, ensuring fast and cheap access to target groups and improved ability to collect information longitudinally and cross-sectionally to better integrate behavioral, attitudinal, and demographic information. Such integration and databasing will increase in the future, and it will be especially powerful when used to correlate customer relationship marketing (CRM) data with other customized information.

In the qualitative sphere, the Internet has facilitated online focus groups and longer-term discussions (i.e., over days and weeks), allowing participants to interact with one another when appropriate (e.g., bulletin board discussions). This has further developed into developments such as netnography (ethnography devoted to the study of online cultures and communities; Kozinets, 2009) and the use of mobile devices for data collection.

Online communities have become a growing tool in research, paralleling the growth of social media, reflecting the rise of the use of peer-to-peer platforms online (or moving from a one-to-many to a many-to-many model of research). This includes the collection and interpretation of user-generated media (blogs, photos, videos) and the growth of techniques such as crowd sourcing, enabling participants to take much greater control of the research process.

Interpretation of such content has seen the development of analytic tools including the ability to mine textual information to identify patterns of common response. Buzz mining has developed through both commercial software (often brought in-house by multinational research companies) and free applications, such as those developed by Google and Twitter to track popular online topics.

All of these developments are merging in the rapid growth of online research communities (or MROCs), which are panels of participants recruited specifically to facilitate market research and, usually, devoted to a specific brand, category, or client. Such communities cross the qualitative-quantitative divide with relatively few members who are highly engaged and involved in the activities of the community. They are often set up to provide an ongoing resource for a client, allowing fast and cost-effective feedback on a wide range of business issues.

Poynter (2010) provides an exhaustive description of methods and many case studies, including well-documented examples such as EasyJet's online community and the use of buzz mining by RTL Netherlands to give weekly feedback on the X Factor TV show. Perhaps one of the best-known examples of an online community is Starbucks's use of MyStarbucksIdea (<http://mystarbucksidea.force.com/>), through which Starbucks have received thousands of ideas for new products, services, and improvements, more than 100 of which have already been successfully introduced.

The Ears Use Many Senses

Thus, market research listens to consumers in many ways, methods falling along a continuum of directed closed questions in surveys through increasingly open questions and dialogue and, finally, to completely undirected observation, content analysis of online interactions and opinions, and statistical analysis of behavioral databases.

Although interrogative styles (e.g., surveys and focus groups) have dominated research in the past, the increasing accessibility of transactional data and online content outlined previously (Poynter, 2010), and increasing skepticism of the value of directed questioning (Graves, 2010), are leading to a shift to less-directed research and greater two-way dialogue. This has many advantages, allowing the more natural expression of consumers' real opinions, beliefs, reactions, and behavior.

However, researchers must always beware that opinions stated online are just as subject to social biases as face-to-face interactions, and often more so. Indeed, behavioral scientists know that very little of human interaction and communication is based on language (the words we use), and studies of public speaking and mass audience communication put the importance of words at about 7% of the overall impact of a presentation. This compares with voice (tone, inflection, pauses, etc.) at 38% and body language at 55% (Mehrabian, 1971). Evolutionary biology and psychology have recently claimed that color vision evolved specifically to help us better understand other humans, by reading the color of their faces (Changizi, 2009)!

Thus, while listening is important for research, this author believes that observation of real behaviors will almost always be the most accurate approach to understand the *why* of consumer behavior, allowing researchers to develop true empathy for the consumer's situation.

Should Researchers Participate?

The directedness or openness of an interaction with a research participant defines one important dimension of an interaction. Another critical dimension is the level of involvement of the researcher, defining the likely influence of a researcher's behavior on the participant, from overt (active) interaction in a face-to-face interview, through less direct interactions on the phone, via e-mail, or in online communities through to covert (passive) observation, web scraping, or database mining.

Covert observation and listening reduce the bias of the researcher's influence on participant, but this is not always a good thing. Graves (2010) argues that covert observation always gives more accurate information, but this is only true if you believe that there is no value in questions or dialogue (as he does).

However, empathy is not passive, and listening should not always be a silent process. Good listeners are dynamically engaged in a conversation, even if they only contribute a small amount to it. Interruptions and questions help us get more out of a conversation, clarifying where unclear, probing for more detail, and also acknowledging and encouraging the participant's contribution to the conversation. Empathy is always *overt*.

Perhaps the best approach is to watch and listen first, studying the consumers' emotions and seek clarification through questioning last.

THE RIGHTS AND WRONGS OF LISTENING

Ethical Issues

The increasing access to data brings new ethical challenges to the research industry, too. Historically, market research has relied on approaches based on trust and transparency, with voluntary informed consent and confidentiality being important keystones of participation. Recent publicity surrounding web scraping has highlighted the difficulties in using web-based data, which can compromise both of these principles. For example, in “Scrapegate,” Nielsen BuzzMetrics accessed discussions within a closed (or walled) online community of PatientsLikeMe.com and reported them back in some form to a private client to the consternation of some members of the community (Angwin & Stecklow, 2010).

ESOMAR and other organizations such as the Market Research Society (MRS) in the UK are running hard to keep up with developments in the industry, constantly updating guidelines to reflect new practices, and both published new draft guidelines in 2010 (ESOMAR, 2010a; Market Research Society, 2010). Privacy is challenging in the online environment, with many arguing that there should be an assumption that what is written online is in the public domain.

However, even Facebook has had to back down on completely public access, and current codes of conduct reflect that market research professionals must not abuse the trust of participants or exploit their lack of experience or knowledge. In other words, the onus sits with market research to ensure that participation is voluntary and that participants have no expectation of privacy (in cases where they are not informed of the research).

Similarly, the onus is on market research to maintain confidentiality of respondents. Even when aggregating responses, for small and niche target samples (e.g., business to business [B2B] or employee research), there is clearly a danger that individual participants may be identified unintentionally through personal details or attributable comments and opinions.

As tools and techniques develop, codes of conduct will need to adapt to new realities, but we should never forget that good research needs partnership. Participation rates for traditional research have plummeted, and we must focus relentlessly on improving the experience of research for everyone by adapting approaches to suit the needs of participants. Use of game-based approaches, flexible questioning, and simpler and easier tasks must all be used to create more enjoyable engagements.

Listening Is All About Timing and Context

Our minds work through networks of associations, so the first ideas (setting the frame of reference) at the start of any conversation are very important to framing the rest of a dialogue and the direction it takes. Context has a dramatic effect on our decisions, as can be seen in the experiments of behavioral economists (Ariely, 2008). That’s why it is so important to think carefully about how questions are asked and to consider the context in which they are framed.

While vision helps us see what is happening around us (and where), our hearing helps us interpret when things happen, giving us a sense of time and causality. Timing and order

are very important when listening to consumers, giving a sense of those things most important to them, the relationships between their ideas, and the certainty of their opinions.

For example, the first responses of a participant reflect those ideas most closely and directly associated with the idea in the question. Later responses may reveal less directly connected thoughts, triggered by their initial responses. In addition, the speed of a response to a question provides a clear indication of spontaneity and, therefore, of the real feelings of the participant. The longer a participant thinks about a question before responding, the more likely it is that their answer reflects consideration of its social acceptance and rationalization of a behavior, of which they may not be fully conscious.

In normal social interactions, words constitute a very small proportion of communication, and, where possible, observation of expressions and body language should be used to provide context to any interpretation of a consumer's responses.

FROM DATA TO STORIES

Making Ideas Stick

In *Made to Stick*, Chip and Dan Heath (2007) discuss the key rules of making ideas sticky, and demonstrate how to successfully communicate information and ideas so they are remembered and acted on by your audience. These are important lessons for preparing and presenting research findings, and empathy and narrative play critical roles in creating memorable meaning!

Their formula (Heath & Heath, 2007) spells SUCCESS: simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, emotional stories, and their book summarizes these rules clearly and engagingly, although the same ideas are central to countless other guides to screenwriting, copywriting, presentation skills, and the use of stories in business.

Acronyms are useful ways to make messages stick, and can be applied to any presentation, by reducing the key messages to a few simple ideas and, ultimately, to one word or phrase. For example, I recently worked on an insight mining exercise to reduce multiple research presentations and reports down to a simple summary. What worked most effectively in summarizing was to provide five key themes: simplify, humanize, attract, persuade, and explain. Having presented the summary to several very different audiences, I am pleased to say that everybody remembers the central message to SHAPE the path to purchase!

Less Is More

Simplicity is critical in an age where clients and researchers are deluged with data. This does not mean dumbing down, but rather keeping a clear and fixed focus on what are the key insights in your data, and what is their meaning for the client.

For researchers, concreteness and credibility should come naturally from the data (provided the research is well designed and executed), but again, focus is important to ensuring that your message is clear. Credibility and concreteness are obscured by too much information, which inevitably sends mixed messages, so focus attention on the most important (and believable) evidence and leave out less important details.

Emotional connection through real consumer stories should be at the heart of all research presentations and reports, but always provide an element of surprise to maintain your audience's interest in the plot. Our brains anticipate events and their sequence, making constant reference to prior and present experience, and, therefore, unexpected elements create much more interest and engagement than long-anticipated ones.

Some of the best lessons in storytelling come from masters of the craft in Hollywood (and Bollywood). I recommend watching at least one good movie every week, and don't be ashamed to steal ideas for your presentations and reports. Dorothy Parker once said that, "the only 'ism' Hollywood understands is plagiarism."

I have used movies and TV shows (as well as mythology) on many occasions to make my material more interesting, including *Star Wars*, *The Godfather* trilogy, and *Toy Story*. One of the most enjoyable presentations I have seen reviewed habit and attitude data under the theme of *Mythbusters*, setting up a series of current myths about the category that were refuted by the evidence from the research.

Equipment for Business

One of the masters of the craft is Robert McKee (1998), who has trained many successful Hollywood scriptwriters. He quotes Kenneth Burke at the beginning of his book *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*: "Stories are equipment for living" (p. 1), and he goes on to provide a master class in how to create insightful and inspiring narratives.

The importance of stories explains why quantitative researchers often struggle to gain the same acceptance as their qualitative colleagues. Our brains are designed for understanding specific examples (by experience or by watching or listening to others), and not to compile data and evaluate evidence in the same way as the discipline of statistics would.

Our ancestors did not have access to large data sets, but had to rely on real-life examples! All of us tend to generalize from one example to the population (hence, Hume's problem with induction), and our memories for such inferences are inherently sticky. In marketing, word of mouth will always beat the polished ad campaign because evidence is evaluated based on trust in the source.

That's why engaging your audience to empathize with your subject is so important. If we identify with a story, we literally feel it ourselves, imprinting its characteristics on our mind much more powerfully than any array of numbers can do. And this is the basis of successful storytelling.

THE CRAFT OF STORYTELLING

Substance, Structure, and Style

Storytelling in research consists of three main elements. The **substance** of your story will be the individual data and facts that are used within the story to provide the content. The **structure** is the way in which the data are arranged around a series of events within a narrative, highlighting key relationships and important patterns. The **style** is the way

you present the narrative and color the events, gradually revealing the development of the ideas toward a strong conclusion.

Thus, narrative and empathy are key components of your story, supporting the substance of your data with an internally consistent structure and a personal style.

The Substance of Your Story

The starting point is your data and all the related information you consider might be relevant for putting together your story. This could include information from other projects conducted for the client, secondary data, your personal experience with the product and category (always try to experience the product or service you research for yourself), the client briefing, and background of the project.

In fact, backstory is a very important concept in plotting narrative and critical to good screenwriting. Good writers know their subjects inside out and outside in, and they use this understanding to drive narrative and create tension. Think of the *Star Wars* films where Luke Skywalker's lineage is only revealed at a crucial moment as he fights Darth Vader, and with the revelation, much of the previous action suddenly makes sense.

Similarly, you know much about your client's business that lies outside the research itself but can inform the way you present information, helping you create tension and drama by revealing key pieces of history as you develop your story. That doesn't mean that you need to document this information in your presentation or report. As with all your data, you should focus only on those elements critical to the flow and substance of the narrative, ensuring it is internally consistent and takes your audience on an inevitable course to a logical conclusion.

The core of your substance should be a protagonist (or protagonists) who is (are) the central character(s) in your narrative—the brand or product or the consumer. Make sure you really know your protagonists, and develop your narrative around them. What are their goals, dreams, and aspirations? What are the barriers that they need to overcome to reach their goals? What is their relationship with other characters in the story, and where are the tensions in their relationships (which will be the most interesting part of the story)?

In a good story, there will always be an inciting incident, an event that is the reason for the story to exist. Try to see this event from the protagonist's perspective, and understand clearly the end goal of the protagonist. This should be a specific business goal. If your protagonist is a brand or product, then business value is created by growing share, increasing penetration (growing the category), increasing price (and profits), or cutting costs (and increasing profits). What is their goal, and what is stopping them achieving the goal? If your protagonist is the consumer, then think about where value is created for them: What is their personal situation, and what are the jobs that they need to get done in their life (which will be where brands come in to the picture)? Above all, what does the protagonist have to lose or gain? If the answer is nothing, then the story will have no interest for your audience.

Plotting the Structure

The first structural decision in a story is to find the controlling idea of the plot. How and why does your protagonist undergo change in the story, moving from one condition to a

new (and hopefully better) place? There should always be a cause and a value underlying the controlling idea. Put simply, what is the outcome of the story (what does the client need to do), and why is that the outcome (why do they need to do it)?

Structure will revolve around key events in your story, which will be the key insights from the research. In screenwriting, the law of conflict (or antagonism) is a key principle of plot development: Nothing moves forward without conflict, and progression depends on setting up and resolving tensions between characters in the story. When I used *Star Wars* as the theme of a presentation, guess which character represented the brand and which characters represented the (then fast-growing) competitors?

So you need to decide what are the key events in your story and what information you should include and exclude. The best time to do this is *before* you start writing or opening your presentation software. Put all the relevant information on a table (or sit with the data tables and/or transcripts) and highlight only those data without which you are not able to reach your outcome (the reasons why within the controlling idea). The process should be the same as storyboarding a commercial.

Take these data and draw the relationships between them. Which data support the outcome, and which do not? Which data relate to each of your key insights (insights will always come from connecting different data together rather than from individual data points)?

You should also challenge whether the data are completely consistent. Do they show a clear pattern of events leading to an inevitable outcome? Consider alternative ways to read the data and what impact that might have on the outcome. Is there a different way of reaching your conclusion? Is there any way that the data would support the opposite conclusion? If there is, then step back and reevaluate your original research hypotheses.

Plot is your choice of events and their design in time (McKee, 1998). Or to put it another way, plot is there to navigate your way through a story so when you are confronted with many different alternatives, you inevitably choose the correct path.

In selecting the events that you include in your plot, think of unity and variety. Your plot should be internally consistent and largely inevitable, but including a variety of ideas and different points of view will help keep the story interesting and engaging.

Use an Involving Style

Language is a tool for self-expression and never an end in itself, and the great scriptwriters always add language as the last part of the puzzle. In fact, in some great movies, language features very little—in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the first words are spoken 20 minutes into the film! So always, develop the plot and events first, adding commentary only at the last moment.

While I don't advocate keeping silent with your client, "show don't tell" is a great principle to follow when communicating results. Invisible expression empowers your audience to work out the answers for themselves and feel greater empathy with your protagonist and the events in your plot, creating a much more powerful engagement with the material. This means that messages are more likely to be remembered and acted on.

To build empathy and interest, always think about your characters and how they would interpret the events in your story. First from the point of view of your protagonist, but also consider other perspectives. How would competitor brands see events? What would the

consumer think? All the characters will have expectations and much of the interest in your story will lie in how closely the course of events matches these expectations.

Above all, consider the expectations of your audience. What are they expecting to see, and how can you use their expectations to pique their interest in your narrative? Surprising your audience with unexpected plot twists will ensure they stay interested, but any surprise should be consistent with the plot and previous events (so avoid the *deus ex machina* ending).

Several tricks can be used to build engagement, introduce surprise, and reinforce messages. Metaphors and analogies help your audience create an emotional connection with your material, enabling them to link ideas to previous experience and broader themes and ideas. And always use humor, if and when appropriate, to lighten the tone.

Jokes are based on the element of surprise, delivering a payoff that is not expected from an initial set up. Juxtapositions and combinations of unusual elements can also help introduce unexpected elements, which help lead to new connections and insights, especially when these elements are taken from outside the research itself.

Finally, repetition is an important principle of learning, and do not be afraid to repeat key messages or even key events (perhaps with a shift of emphasis or a new point of view). Also, use emphasis and pauses to help dramatize the story and give focus to the most important messages. Pauses also help your audience absorb material and reflect on important ideas. So silence is a golden opportunity for you to take a breather and let your audience catch up.

Aristotle wrote that the ending of any story should be “inevitable but unexpected” (Aristotle quoted in Russell & Winterbottom, 1972, p. 74), or as William Goldman wrote more recently, “Give the audience what it wants, but not the way it expects” (Goldman quoted in McKee, 1998). Thus, the payoff at the end of your presentation or report must be consistent with all the events leading up to it, but if it is completely predictable, then it will be uninteresting and unlikely to engage the client.

Above all, the payoff should bring your audience to a different place than where they started. Progression is the key to any great story, providing the audience with the satisfaction that they have been on an enjoyable journey and discovered something new. In particular, always consider whether you can generalize findings, developing universal truths or ideas from the specific results of the research and providing the most satisfying progression of all.

TOP-10 TIPS FOR STORYTELLING

Here are my top-10 tips for storytelling, with examples from one of the best presenters in the world (see *The Presentation Secrets of Steve Jobs* by Carmine Gallo [2009] for more examples).

1. Spend as much time as possible preparing your thoughts and identifying your controlling idea (the inner truth of your narrative). You should be able to write this in a single sentence (no more than 50 words). This will guide you as you develop the material, providing clarity on where the story should end and what events will be included in the journey. Steve Jobs is a master at this, creating short punchy

headlines as focal points for his narratives (for example, “Today Apple reinvents the phone,” “The world’s thinnest notebook,” and “1,000 songs in your pocket”). SHAPE and *Mythbusters* served a similar purpose for me.

2. Be clear on the protagonist of the story (brand, product, consumer). What does the protagonist want? What is their motivation? Who and what is getting in the way of them achieving their ambitions? Steve Jobs is messianic in selling Apple as a hero, frequently pitting his company against an evil protagonist, most notably Big Blue in the famous 1984 Super Bowl commercial and more recently Microsoft.
3. The story should be structured around your key insights, and these events will drive your narrative forward. Make sure you control the flow of information, only revealing what is important to the plot of the story. Steve Jobs always sets out a roadmap of his (sometimes quite long) presentations, providing clear markers of what is to come. For more straightforward-results presentations, I often reveal the key messages at the start of the presentation and then provide the supporting evidence around these messages in the main part of the presentation. This “tell them what you’re going to say, tell them, and then tell them what you have just said” style of presentation provides very clear structure around key insights and actions, and it helps communicate important messages in a style many consultants and clients prefer.
4. Set up the story clearly at the beginning, using your opening statement to set expectations and provide clear direction. Remember that the enjoyment of the story depends greatly on audience expectations and how they are met, so the opening is critical to managing your audience’s reactions throughout. For example, in 2007, Steve Jobs’s opening statement on unveiling the iPhone was that he would that day be introducing three revolutionary new products: a widescreen iPod with touch controls, a revolutionary mobile phone, and a breakthrough Internet-communication device, going on to finally explain that all three breakthroughs were in fact one device. Research audiences like to have clear direction (as mentioned in the previous point), which sets expectations and still leaves room to combine key insights into unified recommendations.
5. Decide on your persona (or personas), and narrate your story from one or more perspectives to create empathy and engagement. Focus on your protagonist, but use other points of view to help create interest and tension in the story, making sure that you are authentic and believable in each persona. Steve Jobs is strongly identified with the Apple brand, and presents a consistent, passionate, and engaged persona.
6. Always know where you are headed, and ensure that your audience only knows at the conclusion of the story. Manage events and flow of information to ensure that there is always some element of surprise, even if the conclusion is inevitable. Surprise is key to keeping your audience engaged. In an earlier example, Steve Jobs presented “three” new products, building suspense and tension until he eventually announced, “Today, Apple reinvents the phone.”

7. Every story has a beginning, middle, and end, or to put it more formally, a complication and denouement. The middle of the story will be where most interest lies and where tension and conflict should appear. Within these three movements, a story should be unified, with all elements clearly connected. Steve Jobs usually builds a presentation or communication in three parts, provides clear signposts throughout, and always saves the best part until last. John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama have also benefited from the rule of threes (as have I)!
8. Make sure that you periodically pull together the threads of the story, using key events or insights to make clear the connections between characters and any change in their relationships. Steve Jobs and other great presenters will provide regular signposts and breaks throughout their presentations. A good rule of thumb is to take a breather every 10 minutes, before your audience's brains overload on information, and this is a good opportunity for a quick rewind and reminder.
9. Focus on the meaning of the story for the audience. Clearly communicate how the protagonist changes during the course of the narrative and what that means for your client. Steve Jobs always focuses on the question, "Why should I care?" talking to the benefits for the end consumers rather than the product features (compare and contrast with some of Bill Gates presentations). For instance, he introduced Apple's presentation software, "Using Keynote is like having a professional graphics department to create your slides. This is the application to use when your presentation really counts" (p. 64). I always bring my presentations back to the four sources of client value, which brings the findings to life, making the implications real, tangible, and valuable.
10. Always leave a few loose ends and some unfinished business. By leaving some unanswered questions, you allow your audience flexibility in bringing their interpretation to the story and their ideas within the framework that you have provided. Steve Jobs will often add a "and one more thing" at the end of a presentation, answering at least one of the questions that are still in the audience's minds.

Most marketing research presentations are not global marketing events, but the principles and examples in these 10 tips apply to any presentation where you need to engage and communicate. My experience (from the perspective of presenter and audience) has always been that the best presentations have a clear protagonist, plot, purpose, and payoff. This is easy to develop when you focus on the meaning you want to convey to your audience, summarized best in three questions to ask yourself before every presentation. What would I like my audience to know? What would I like them to feel? And what would I like them to do?

THE PAYOFF

Clients and researchers alike learn most successfully through the mental simulation of events rather than the anticipation of outcomes. In any form of communication or learning, behavioral change comes from the journey itself and not from reaching a particular destination.

Pop psychology tells us all to visualize success, but this is wrong. Success comes from practice, and mental practice is two-thirds as good as real practice (Medina, 2008)!

Mental simulation works because our imagining brain is using the same neural circuits as our doing brain. The brain mirrors activity so the simulation of an event feels the same as the event itself, and mental simulation is strongly tied to our emotions. The most effective stories are simulations triggering the same emotions and mental connections in you or your audience as if you had made the journey yourselves.

Empathy and narrative are powerful because they provide the context and emotions missing from words and numbers on a page. Stories put information and knowledge into a framework, which is more true to life and helps us understand the situation of others, feeling as if we were in their shoes experiencing the same events.

Above all, empathy and narrative automatically bring us into a state of readiness, mentally prepared to internalize and act on the behaviors we have just simulated. If market researchers are to truly drive business change, we must understand consumers' situations and stories, connect them to our lives and the needs of clients, and share their true meaning.

We must ignite our research with empathy and narrative.

FURTHER READING

Armstrong, K. (2005). *A short history of myth*. Edinburgh, UK: Canongate.

Duarte, H. (2010). *Resonate: Present visual stories that transform audiences*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Tierno, M. (2002). *Aristotle's poetics for screenwriters: Storytelling secrets from the greatest mind in western civilization*. New York, NY: Hyperion.