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PEOPLE RESPOND MORE TO ANECDOTES THAN TO DATA

In my book *Neuro Web Design: What Makes Them Click?*, I explain that most mental processing occurs unconsciously. People are unaware of this unconscious processing, and it's easy to give more weight to information that we're consciously aware of. It's easy to forget that information is coming in and being processed from many sources. It's easy to forget that people are processing emotions too.

Let's say you have to make a presentation to the department heads at work about your latest conversations with your customers. You interviewed 25 customers and surveyed another 100, and you have lots of important data to share. Your first thought might be to present a summary of the data in a numerical/statistical/data-driven format, for example:

- ★ 75 percent of the customers we interviewed...
- ★ Only 15 percent of the customers responding to the survey indicated...

But this data-driven approach will be less persuasive than anecdotes. You may want to include the data, but your presentation will be more powerful if you focus on one or more anecdotes; for example, "Mary M. from San Francisco shared the following story about how she uses our product..." and then go on to tell Mary's story.

Takeaways

- * Anecdotes are a way to sprinkle small stories throughout your presentation.
- * Use anecdotes in addition to, or in place of, factual data.

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STORIES ENGAGE PEOPLE EMOTIONALLY

One day many years ago, I found myself in front of a room full of people who did not want to be there. Their boss had told them they had to attend the seminar I was giving. I knew that many or most of them thought the seminar was a waste of time, and knowing that was making me nervous. I decided to be brave and forge ahead. Certainly my great content would grab their attention, right? I took a deep breath, smiled, and with a strong voice, I started the session with a big, "Hello, everyone. I'm certainly glad to be here." More than half the class wasn't even looking at me. They were reading their email and writing to-do lists. One guy was reading the morning newspaper. It was one of those moments where seconds seem like hours.

I thought to myself in a panic, "What am I going to do?" Then I had an idea. "Let me tell you a story," I said. At the word *story*, everyone's head jerked up and all eyes were on me. I told them a story (relevant to them and the subject matter of the seminar), and the rest of the seminar was a success.

When we hear a story, we give the storyteller all of our attention. A good story communicates information thoroughly and commits the information to memory.

WHAT IS A STORY?

If you search for "What is a story" in Google, you will get several sites with various definitions. Wikipedia says, "A narrative or story is a construct created in a suitable format (written, spoken, poetry, prose, images, song, theatre, or dance) that describes a sequence of fictional or non-fictional events."

In some definitions a narrative is always fictional, and in other definitions a narrative is just another word for a story. In this book, I use narrative and story as synonyms. The definition I'll use for a story is, "a description of a character or characters and a relating of what happens to the characters over time (past or future)." The character might be you or someone you know, or a fictitious person, or an animal. The character could be your car or your computer.

YOU ARE ALREADY A STORYTELLER

When you hear the word *storyteller*, you might think of some overly dramatic person telling a story to children using different voices. But everyone is a storyteller. Think about your communication with other people throughout a typical day. You wake up in the morning and tell your family about a dream you had (story). At work you tell a coworker

about what happened at the new product's design meeting the day before (story). At lunch you tell your friend about a family reunion you have coming up and your plans to take time off to go (story). After work you speak with your neighbor about the dog you encountered while you were on your evening walk (story). At dinner you describe to your family the odd sounds the car made repeatedly while you were driving home from work (story).

If you think about it, you will realize that most of the communication in your daily life is in the form of a story. Yet you rarely stop to think about stories and storytelling. Storytelling is so ubiquitous that you don't even realize you are doing it.

If someone at work suggested you attend a workshop on how to communicate clearly at work, you might be interested. But you might scoff if someone suggested that you attend a workshop on storytelling. It's interesting how unaware and unappreciative most people are of the major way they communicate.

According to Gershon

"A well-told story conveys great quantities of information in relatively few words in a format that is easily assimilated by the listener or viewer." —Nahum Gershon

I FEEL YOUR PAIN

Stories allow your audience to feel what the character in the story feels. When you tell a story, the brain reacts as though the individual is experiencing the events in the story.

Stories activate the brain

Tania Singer's research on empathy (2004) studied the parts of the brain that react to pain.

First, she used fMRI scans to see what parts of the brain were active when the participants experienced pain. She observed that some parts of the brain processed where the pain came from and how intense the pain really was; other parts of the brain separately processed how unpleasant the pain felt and how much the pain bothered the person feeling it.

Then she asked participants to read stories about people experiencing pain. When participants read stories about someone in pain, the parts of the brain that process where the pain comes from and how intense it is were not active, but the other areas that process how unpleasant the pain is were active.

USE SHORT STORIES WITH A POINT

Now that you are convinced that you should be using more stories, make sure you use good ones. A good story:

- Is short
- Has a point
- Has a character the audience will care about
- Is relevant to the topic of that section of your presentation

Takeaways

- * Use stories throughout your presentation to keep and hold attention and to make an emotional connection.
- * Write down or record interesting stories from your work or personal life. You will then be able to figure out how to use these stories in various ways.
- * You can recycle stories. The same story can be used for different presentations and audiences. Every story has many different "morals" or conclusions that can be drawn from it.
- * Focus on making stories vivid and real to maximize their potential for emotional engagement.
- * Make your stories, relevant, short and with a point.

In *Neuro Web Design: What Makes Them Click?*, I talk about the role of the “old brain” in scanning the environment for anything that could be dangerous. This also means that the old brain is looking for anything new or novel.

CRAVING THE UNEXPECTED

Research by Gregory Berns (2001) shows that the human brain not only looks for the unexpected but actually craves the unexpected.

Berns used a computer-controlled device to squirt either water or fruit juice into people’s mouths while their brains were being scanned by an fMRI device. Sometimes the participants could predict when they were going to get a squirt, but other times it was unpredictable. The researchers thought that they would see activity based on what people liked. For example, if a participant liked juice, then there would be activity in the nucleus accumbens, the part of the brain that is active when people experience pleasurable events.

However, that’s not what happened. The nucleus accumbens was most active when the squirt was unexpected. It was the surprise that showed activity, not the preferred liquid.



Nice surprises vs. unpleasant surprises

Not all surprises are equal. If your friends yell “Surprise!” when you come home and turn on the light because it’s your surprise birthday party, that’s a very different kind of surprise than finding a burglar in your home.

Marina Belova (2007) and her team researched whether the brain processes these two different kinds of surprises in different locations.

The researchers worked with monkeys and the amygdala, a part of the brain where emotions are processed. In their research, they recorded the electrical activity of neurons in the amygdala. They used a drink of water (pleasant) versus a puff of air to the face (which the monkeys do not like).

They found that some neurons responded to the water and others to the puff of air, but that a specific neuron did not respond to both.

BUILD IN SMALL SURPRISES

To keep your audience interested in your presentation, build in small surprises. Examples include the following:

- ★ Demonstrations (of a product, a Web site, or a principle you are discussing)
- ★ New media. If you’ve been using slides, turn off the slides and show a video clip, play an audio clip, or just talk to your audience.
- ★ Activities. Stop talking and have the group do an exercise (individually, together, or in small groups).
- ★ Don’t put everything on your outline. Don’t tell your audience everything you are going to do and when it will occur. Instead of showing a detailed outline that shows exactly when an activity is going to occur, use a high-level outline that doesn’t reveal every aspect of your presentation. This way, they can be surprised by what happens and when it happens.

Takeaways

- ★ Things that are new and novel capture attention.
- ★ Providing something unexpected not only gets attention, but also is actually pleasurable.
- ★ Build in small surprises throughout your presentation.

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PEOPLE FEEL SAFE WHEN THINGS ARE PREDICTABLE

In the previous section, I said that people like surprises, but you need to balance surprise with predictability. When things are predictable, people feel comfortable and safe. Your job as the presenter is to balance surprise with predictability. When people know what to expect, and they know what comes next, they will feel calmer and they will trust you. If they don't know what is going on or what happens next, they might get nervous and become emotionally uncomfortable.

CONFIDENCE AND PREDICTABILITY

The more confidence you project to your audience, the higher their tolerance for unpredictability. If you are an inexperienced presenter or if you are giving a presentation that you've never given before, you should build-in plenty of predictability cues for your audience. As you get more experienced in general—and with that talk in particular—you can lessen those cues. Predictability cues include:

- ★ Providing a high-level overview in writing (or verbally) at the beginning of your presentation, describing what you are going to do (or what you are going to talk about) and in what order.
- ★ Returning to the high-level overview and various points in your talk so people get a “you are here” experience.
- ★ Telling people what will happen next (“Next I will talk about XYZ, then we'll have a discussion about ABC before we take a break.”)

Takeaways

- * You must balance surprise with predictability.
- * If people don't know what to expect, they can get nervous.
- * If you are new to presenting, or if you are giving a new presentation, build in more predictability.
- * The more confident you are, the more unpredictable you can be.

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PEOPLE NEED TO FEEL SAFE IN ORDER TO PARTICIPATE

The best event I've ever been to was a performance by Bobby McFerrin. His performances involve music and extensive audience interaction. I saw him in a 1,500-seat theater in a small city in Wisconsin. The theater was full and the audience was appreciative but reserved. By the end of his 1.5-hour performance, he had the entire audience on the edge of their seats ready to do anything he asked of them, including coming up on stage. He is a masterful performer, and he is a master at getting people to participate. He does this by slow commitment and by using the group. You are sitting in a theater with a lot of strangers, and you don't want to look silly, but he gets you to make one small noise, a single simple note. Everyone around you is doing it, so you do it, too. He then builds on that one participation and asks for a little more and more, until everyone is freely participating.



A master of audience participation

If you've never seen Bobby McFerrin engage audiences, watch the video at http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/bobby_mcferrin_hacks_your_brain_with_music.html

What Bobby McFerrin is a master at is making people feel safe. He never ridicules or makes fun of anyone. His body language and comments make everyone feel that they are doing great—doing exactly what he expects and knows they can do. It feels safe to participate.

Takeaways

- * If you're going to ask people to interact or do exercises or group activities, start slow. Have people do one small activity before asking them to do an activity that is longer or more complicated.
- * Make sure that people feel safe. Don't ask them to do anything they are not comfortable doing.
- * Humor is good for making people relax, but don't make fun of people as a form of humor or the entire audience will start to feel unsafe.

Consider this scenario: You've just landed at an airport and have to walk to the baggage claim to pick up your luggage. It takes you 12 minutes to walk there. When you arrive, your luggage is coming onto the carousel. How impatient do you feel?

Contrast that with this scenario: You've just landed at an airport, and the walk to the luggage carousel takes 2 minutes. But then you stand around waiting 10 minutes for your luggage to appear. How impatient do you feel now?

In both cases it took you 12 minutes to pick up your luggage, but chances are you are much more impatient, and much unhappier, in the second scenario where you have to stand around and wait.

PEOPLE WANT TO ENGAGE

Research by Christopher Hsee (2010) and his colleagues shows that people are happier when they're busy. Doing nothing makes people impatient and unhappy.

Hsee's team gave participants a choice between delivering a completed questionnaire to a location that was a 15-minute roundtrip walk, or delivering it just outside the room and then waiting 15 minutes. Some participants were offered the same snack bar regardless of which activity they chose, and others were offered a different type of snack bar for each of the two options. (Hsee had previously determined that both snack bars were considered equally desirable.)

When the same snack bar was offered at both locations, then most (68 percent) of the participants chose to deliver the questionnaire just outside the room (the "idle" condition). The students' first reaction was to do less work, but when they were given an excuse for walking farther, most of them took the busy option. After the experiment, the students who'd taken the walk reported feeling significantly happier than the idle students. In a second version of the study, the students were assigned to either the "busy" or the "idle" option (in other words, they did not choose). The busier students, again, reported higher happiness scores.

In the next round of research, Hsee asked students to study a bracelet. Then he gave them the option of either spending 15 minutes waiting with nothing to do (they thought they were waiting for the next part of the experiment) or spending the same time taking the bracelet apart and rebuilding it while waiting. Some of the participants were given the option of rebuilding it into its original configuration, and others were given the option to reassemble the bracelet into a different design.

Participants who had the option of rebuilding the bracelet into its original configuration preferred to just sit idly. But the participants who were told they could reassemble the bracelet into a new design preferred to work on the bracelet rather than sit idle. As before, those who spent the 15 minutes busy with the bracelet reported feeling happier than those who sat idle.

DON'T BE THE ONLY BUSY ONE

When you are the presenter, you feel very busy and it's easy to forget that the experience of your audience is very different. You are talking excitedly about your topic and moving around in the front of the room. They are most likely sitting still and listening. It's not exactly doing nothing, but it's dangerously close to doing nothing. The likelihood of boredom is high, even if they like the topic and think you are a good presenter. You have to engage the audience in interaction if you want them to feel happy and busy. The following are some ideas that you can build into almost any presentation.

- ★ Ask the audience a question. Even if all they have to do is think about the answer and raise their hands, that's better than just sitting and listening.
- ★ Divide the group into small teams and give them a question to answer together or a topic to discuss. Make sure they know that they will be asked to bring their answers or the results of their discussions to the rest of the group. That way they will feel that the discussion has purpose and that the discussion and their conclusions matter.
- ★ Divide the group into teams and have them do an activity (for example, solve a problem, make something, or compete with each other). Friendly competition with other teams always energizes the room.

Takeaways

- * People don't like to be idle.
- * People will do a task rather than be idle, but the task has to be seen as worthwhile. If people perceive it to be busywork, then they prefer to stay idle.
- * People who are busy are happier.

There has actually been research on the idea of beauty and aesthetics. It seems like a hard topic to do research on, but it's possible.

PASTORAL SCENES MAKE PEOPLE HAPPY

Walk into any hotel, house, office building, museum, art gallery, or other place where there are paintings or photographs hanging on the wall, and chances are that you'll see a picture that looks something like **Figure 68.1**.



FIGURE 68.1 Pastoral scenes are part of our evolution. (*Evening at the River* by Stanislav Pobytov)

According to Denis Dutton, a philosopher and the author of *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution*, this is because of evolution and the Pleistocene era. (See Dutton's TED talk at <http://bit.ly/clj9uo>.) Dutton notes that typical landscape scenes include hills, water, trees (good for hiding in if a predator comes by), birds, animals, and

a path moving through the scene. This is an ideal landscape for humans, containing protection, water, and food. Dutton's theory about beauty is that we have evolved to feel a need for certain types of beauty in our life, and that this pull toward things such as these landscapes has helped us to survive as a species. He notes that all cultures value artwork that has these scenes, even people who have never lived in a geographical location that looks like this.

PASTORAL SCENES PROVIDE "ATTENTION RESTORATION"

Mark Berman (2008) and a team of researchers had participants perform the *backward digit-span task*, which measures a person's capacity to focus attention. Next, participants were asked to do a task that would wear out their voluntary attention. After that, some walked through downtown Ann Arbor, Michigan, and some walked through the city's arboretum. The arboretum has trees and wide lawns (that is, it is a pastoral environment). Following the walk, the participants did the backward digit-span task again. Scores were higher for the people who had walked through the arboretum. Stephen Kaplan (one of the researchers) calls this attention restoration therapy.

Roger Ulrich (1984) found that patients whose hospital windows overlooked scenes of nature had shorter stays in the hospital and needed less pain medication than patients whose rooms looked onto a brick wall.

Peter Kahn and his team (Kahn, Severson, and Ruckert, 2009) tested nature scenes in the workplace. One group of participants worked in an office where they sat near a window that overlooked a nature scene. A second group saw a similar scene, but not out the window; instead, they watched a video feed from a nature area outside. A third group sat near an empty wall. The researchers kept measurements of the participants' heart rates to monitor their stress levels.

People who saw the video scene said that they felt better, but their heart rates were actually no different from those who sat next to the wall. People in front of the window actually had healthier heart-rate measurements and were better able to recover from stress.

PEOPLE REACT TO THE AESTHETICS OF SLIDES

The concept of beauty applies to screens and slides as well. Lavie and Tractins (2004) studied the factors that make people feel that a Web site is aesthetically pleasing. Although they were studying Web sites, much of their work applies to any screen. They found that there were two broad clusters of factors that made people feel that a particular screen was aesthetically pleasing: the amount of order and clarity, and the amount of originality.

★ Learn more about designing aesthetically pleasing slides

If you want to learn more about aesthetic design, check out these two great books: *Presentation Zen* by Garr Reynolds (New Riders, 2008), and *The Principles of Beautiful Web Design* by Jason Beard (SitePoint, 2007). Even though the latter has Web design in its title, much of the book has to do with the layout of a single screen, which applies to the design of slides.

Takeaways

- * People react to the aesthetics of a screen or slide.
- * Using pictures of pastoral scenes on your slides will make people feel good.
- * If you use slides, use an orderly and consistent layout.
- * If you use slides, don't be afraid to use color and original design within the orderly layout.

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LISTENING TO MUSIC RELEASES DOPAMINE IN THE BRAIN

Have you ever listened to a piece of music and experienced intense pleasure, even chills? Valorie Salimpoor (2011) and her team conducted research that shows that listening to, or even anticipating, music can release the neurotransmitter dopamine.

The researchers used positron emission tomography (PET) scans, fMRI, and psychophysiological measures such as heart rate to measure reactions while people listened to music. The participants provided music that they said gave them intense pleasure and chills. The range of music included classical, folk, jazz, electronica, rock, pop, tango, and more.

PLEASURE VS. ANTICIPATED PLEASURE

Salimpoor's team saw the same pattern of brain and body activity when people were listening to their music as they saw when people feel euphoria and craving when they get a reward. The experience of pleasure corresponded with dopamine release in one part of the brain (the striatal dopaminergic system). When people were anticipating a pleasurable part of the music, there was a dopamine release in a different part of the brain (the nucleus accumbens).

Takeaways

- * Music can be intensely pleasurable.
- * Consider using music before your presentation and during breaks to get and keep people in a good mood.