



Social Math

Few of us think in numbers. Numbers may not seem tangible or real, and often don't stick in our memories. Numbers may be too small or large to be truly understood. When we try to use numbers or statistics in our work, we may be inadvertently confusing people, or they may fail to grasp the severity of the problem because they don't truly comprehend or remember the numbers we're using.

There are strategies we can use to help ourselves and others better understand both the scale and impact of numbers, and make them easier to remember. Social math helps our brains by simplifying numbers and providing comparisons to something familiar. If you use numbers and statistics regularly in your work, this tool will help you make them more understandable and carry greater impact.

Background

Very few of us are numerate — we don't think in or really understand numbers well. We have very little sense of scale — large numbers don't hold a lot of meaning if we don't have anything to compare them to. Numbers also don't stick in our memories the way stories, images, or narratives do. We know numbers are something we often use to make our case as policy advocates, so how can we help our audience better understand the numbers we use?

By using a strategy called social math, we can do a few things we can make numbers easier to understand and remember by simplifying them, and we can provide comparisons to something familiar or ironic to help people comprehend the numbers we use.

There are lots of ways to incorporate social math in your work. It is as easy as starting with a simplification. For example, use "one in five" rather than "twenty percent;" from there, try comparing large numbers to the familiar, or comparing your number to something ironic. Social math can take some practice to really incorporate into your work.

Exercises

For this exercise, pick two to three numbers or statistics you use regularly in your work.

- › First, let's simplify your numbers. If you're using percentages or fractions, simplify them to read "One in ____."
- › Second, try to find a comparison to help people understand a large number – is your large number the same as a city or town in your state? Or is it the number that will fill a local stadium or space that everyone recognizes?
- › Try breaking your number down by time. If your number is something that happens, like phone calls to a hotline or requests for rent assistance, how many times in a given period does it happen?
- › Lastly, try to make a comparison. Can you compare your number to another number to help it stick in people's mind? Try to find something ironic or relevant to compare it to.

Hint: Comparisons don't need to be exact. Words like "nearly" or "more than" can help bridge the difference between your number and the number you're comparing it to. Remember, we're trying to help people understand, not be perfectly precise. Your precise number or statistic can be in a footnote or on a factsheet.

Questions to Ask Yourself:

What are some numbers you use routinely in your work? Are they easy to understand or remember? If the numbers you use are very large, ask a friend who doesn't work with you if she or he understands the numbers you use.

Examples:

Simplifications: "About one homeless person dies each week in the county including many from overdose or accidents, according to a first of its kind tally of records from the Medical Examiner's office....The report showing 47 homeless deaths last year is titled Domicile Unknown-- the label given to homeless fatalities examined by the County Medical Examiner's office."

"A worker making the minimum wage in Virginia would have to work seven days a week, sixteen hours a day to be able to afford a two-bedroom apartment."

Comparison to the familiar: "Volunteers spent more than 2,376 hours on the phone [doing get-out-the-vote calls]. That's like starting a conversation with a voter on Halloween, and not hanging up until Valentine's day."

Other familiar comparisons: The size of cities and towns in your state, a local college football stadium, or professional sports team stadium.

Ironic comparisons: "In San Francisco, there is one police officer for every 18 young people, but only one school counselor for every 500 kids."

"For the cost of incarcerating one prisoner for one year, California could send two students to the University of California, three students to a California state university or seven students to a community college."

Next Steps

- › Try it out on a friend or relative. How does it sound? Do they remember it the next day? Does it give them a better understanding of the scale of the problem? Or your work?
- › Try using your social math in something you've written for your organization – a newsletter article, legislative testimony, or a one-pager. How does it work? Does it make a difference? Does it help people understand the issue?

More Resources

Read: Sightline Institute., "Social Math: Making Numbers Count" <http://daily.sightline.org/2007/12/04/flashcard-no-5-making-numbers-count/>

Read: Frameworks Institute, "Doing Social Math" http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/eZines/doing_social_math_ezine.pdf