

# Telling stories with data: discovering and communicating real insights

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“Actionable insights” are market research’s Holy Grail, but they don’t just happen and aren’t automatically generated. Research is both art and science. Think back to a research study or two that really nailed it – really delivered insight you could act on. Now consider those that missed it by a mile. Looking across a spectrum of studies we found that there are four key ingredients which differentiate truly actionable research from data dumps. Three of these take place behind the scenes and involve researcher and client working together in a meaningful way to lead to new findings. The final element, the announcement of the insights, has evolved tremendously from statistical reports into entertaining and engaging communications which draw upon a variety of creative devices.

## The four ingredients

### 1. Context

Insights evolve from discovering relevant patterns or relationships in data. Context enables researchers to connect the dots, to tie those patterns together into a story rather than separate bullet points. Understanding how the research fits into client’s sector, category and business model has to be the foundation of any project to deliver actionable insights.

### 2. Planning

The single best opportunity to ensure you get insights is in the design phase. Most insightful research has clients who welcomed the “real” discussions and open exchanges of information early in the process. These are often built into the budget and timeline as formal, early-stage discovery sessions.

### 3. Discovering the story

Even with context and good design insights don’t come easy. They have to be discovered. The discovery process combines art and science. Many researchers are steeped in the science component, so the “art” side doesn’t get as much attention. This constant interplay between art and science, between intuition and hard facts, is an ingredient we see time and time again in those studies that ended

up being described as “insightful research.” The art component includes logical reasoning, non-linear thinking, using data visualization techniques to aid us in recognizing patterns, healthy doses of scepticism and curiosity, with a pinch of optimism.

The best teams use non-linear thinking in the discovery process, since the world is not linear and neither are the problems we address. These teams mix things up and look at the data from all angles. They don’t communicate findings survey question by survey question. They bring in information from other sources and triangulate across studies to increase confidence in findings.

### 4. Communicating the story

Once the dots have been connected there should be a story, and it needs to be told in a persuasive narrative, with numbers as evidence rather than the main subject.

The storytelling of the findings is rarely given the attention it deserves, but if the insights are not communicated to the right audience in a credible and approachable way, the research has failed.

We need to make research as engaging as possible. A recent success story in this area is HP which recently used creative storytelling to reposition itself and to build a closer connection with customers. Michael Mendenhall, senior vice-president and chief marketing officer at HP, who joined the company from Walt Disney Parks and Resorts, has spoken about how story telling has helped transformed the company which was traditionally strong in the commercial market into a consumer oriented brand. “My objective was to transform HP from being conceived as a dull professional’s service brand into a company that could be seen as a world-class global citizen.” And, “storytelling and the ideas of co-creation are at the core of what we do now as a brand.” (Marketing Week, August 13 2009). Researchers are now looking at how to borrow from fields such as writing, presenting, visual arts, film, theatre, music, and information visualisation to create powerful and impactful insights.