

Strategies for Making Memorable Messages

The numbers in pollution science can be so big or so small, they're hard to imagine. Numbers are more powerful when people can picture seeing and touching them. Throughout the process, think about the audience for your message and what they care about most.

1. Choose a Strategy

Use familiar units. Convert to units that your audience might hear or see in everyday life.

Cubic meters
kilometers
kilograms

Gallon milk jugs, sugar packets, teaspoons, football fields, 50-gallon drums

Make it local. Use distances, areas, volumes, and heights based on things familiar to your audience.

245 miles
12.3 million gallons

...would reach from Bob's gas station to Dora's Deli.
...would fill Memorial Stadium.

Make it personal. Divide the amount up among the people who will be impacted. Divide it up per person, household, or town.

1,300 tons of trash per day

150 pounds of trash per person, every day

Use time to scale up or down.

800,000 tons of toxic waste per year

One and a half tons per minute.
Fifty pounds per second.

Use the problem to your advantage. Include negative images from the problem that are likely to trouble your audience.

40 truckloads of coal per day

A year's worth of trucks, lined end to end, would fill Route 7 from the Sandy River to the county line.

Show the trade-offs with money.

Incinerator provides \$24,000 in tax revenue

...sounds like a lot, but it's only \$32 per resident. You can barely buy a cake for that!

More Strategies for Making Memorable Messages

2. Check for Common Pitfalls

Make sure it makes sense. Use an example that makes sense for your situation. So if you're talking about a part per million in water...

NO: One pancake in a stack a mile high

YES: One drop in an Olympic swimming pool

Compare to things with a standard size.

NO: Trees, city blocks, houses, lakes

YES: Football fields, gallons, pounds

Focus on understanding. A bigger number doesn't mean bigger impact.

NO: 136,800 minutes

YES: Over three months

Be careful with length, area, and volume. A ratio between lengths changes when you switch to area or volume

NO: 100 cm in a m so 100 cm³ in a m³

YES: 100 cm in a m, but 1,000,000 cm³ in a m³

3. Polish Your Message

Use friendly numbers. When possible, round off your final number.

NO: 197 tons, 2,480,000 people

YES: 200 tons, two and a half million people

Use familiar fractions, ratios and percents instead of decimals or numbers that are hard to picture.

NO: 12.4% of town residents

YES: About one in eight town residents