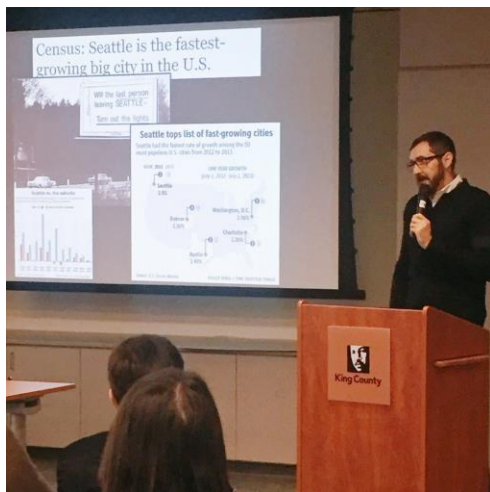


Talking Story with Data

By Vangie P. Garcia, PE, PMP

Category: Government Performance Consortium, data visualization, performance management

In Hawaii, an invitation to ‘talk story’ is about people engaging with each other, telling stories, without adhering to any structure or agenda. But what if you want to tell a story that takes an audience through complex analysis? In a world where most people do not want to dig through data, the demand is high to go straight to the point and provide the bottom line. Practitioners in performance management, communication, and data analysis gathered together at King Street Center talking story about data. In government, using data to tell the story about what is not apparent or visible can be the crucial link for elected officials and the communities they serve to understand the reasoning and conditions behind decision-making. Co-sponsored by the King County Performance Management Community of Practice and the Government Performance Consortium, “Drawing the Story Out of Numbers” was a forum to share insight and reflections about how graphics and data provide compelling visuals to government storytelling. A panel of local professionals shared how they use data in their daily work.



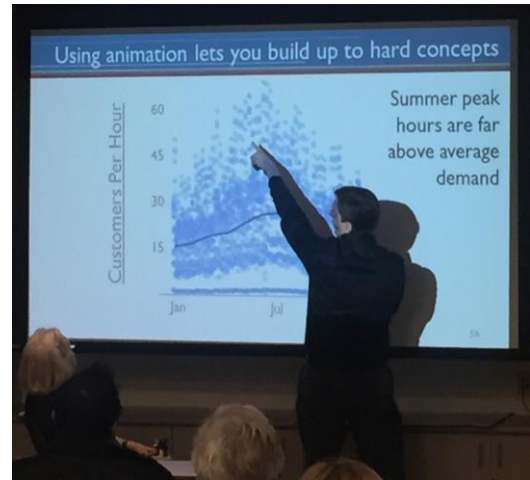
Gene Balk, the FYI Guy from The Seattle Times, uses census data and other government data to tell local news stories. Sharing the back stories behind a collection of his blog posts, the news librarian said that interesting story ideas come from good questions. At times, he has been surprised at how the story revealed itself as he started gathering and analyzing the data. From finding out that Seattle has the 2nd highest number of single women living alone with at least one cat in US to disseminating changing trends in the region’s neighborhoods, Balk connects with his readers by providing a platform to view civic life through a data lens.

Louise Carter spoke to the importance of the human factor in her work at Communities Count. Providing data to monitor the health and well-being of people in King County, Communities Count uses data to track and show community indicators in a clear and unbiased way. Carter provided a doable data storytelling practice with golden nuggets of

wisdom to remember what is important and stay on point, be consistent across modalities and to show compassion for people.

The Deputy King County Auditor, Ben Thompson, shared the five elements the agency uses in all their audit projects. Establishing the criteria or standards in an evaluation is the first step in filtering out the noise in a data-rich environment or lack of data. After presenting a neutral perspective of the relationship between the auditee and the standard criteria, the King County Auditor's Office recommends actions that would change the causative factors so that a favorable effect could be expected.

Peter Heineccius, a senior management auditor at the King County Auditor's Office, uses graphics to lead an audience through an analysis. Animation can help make the message of "think harder for the answer" easier to grasp by building on prior graphics. Heineccius relies on his proficiency in Excel and PowerPoint to build his compelling visuals although there are other, more sophisticated software that is available.



The Q&A segments revealed many questions asking guidance when or if the data didn't show positive results or how to get started. To create a story that brings the audience along a journey, one must ask "What is the most surprising or most interesting about the data?" The panelists' stories woven together create a unified voice reminding all to be curious to what the truth is, thus creating learning and opportunity from any situation. Having measurable data that is clear and is consistently tracked is a basic lean principle to demonstrate the need for change and can show the first sign of improvement as implementation begins. In the end, to truly draw a story out of numbers lies in the art of the storytelling by a team and their intent. This **Guide to Data Storytelling** was created combining talking points from all the panelists.