

How to involve your editor in a data-driven story

When you are pitching the story....

- Clearly explain the question(s) you are hoping the data will answer and why data is the best/only way to get these answers.
- Show your editor or cc them on the data request letter (if applicable)
- Explain what you are expecting the data will look like (i.e. what each row will represent and what characteristics/values will be included for each thing, what the universe of data is and the timeframe of the data.)
- Make sure your editor is aware of the timeframe you are expecting. Will you have to wait for a data request to be fulfilled? Will the data require cleanup or more than just a few hours of work to do the analysis?

After the data arrives....

- Ask for some time cleared from your daily responsibilities to do any necessary data cleanup and to get started on the analysis.
- Make sure your editor knows that even after you complete the analysis, it's possible you'll need to return to do more analysis after talking to human sources and getting their feedback.
- When you have at least some of the analysis completed, ask your editor to sit with you for a few minutes and show him/her what you're finding. If you can, try to walk them through how you found a key point – run the Pivot Table, do the formula calculation again, etc. Showing them how you got the answer, instead of just showing them the answer, might help them understand.

When you're ready to write the story, but haven't started writing....

Talk with your editor about your key findings. Ask him/her to help you figure out the star number and what graphics might be most helpful. Your editor could help you figure out which numbers are necessary in the story and which are extraneous. Try to do this before you actually start writing.

At this point your editor should ask some key questions, which will vary depending on the data. Talking through your findings will often elicit these questions naturally. But here are some big ones that often come up that should be considered:

- Is the source of this data reliable?
- Is the data as complete as possible? In your analysis did you do anything to exclude some records?
- For comparisons, are you making fair, apples-to-apples comparisons?
- If you are looking at data over a period time, were there any significant changes to this dataset during that time frame? For example, did the agency change the way it measures something? Or what it included in the dataset?
- Do you have the right context to help explain your key findings? For example, perhaps your key number is 4%. How can you show readers that it's a "big" or significant number?
- Are there any external factors that you didn't take into account that could be factors in causing the change your data shows?

- Were there questions you wanted to ask that you either couldn't or that ended up with answers that were inconclusive or didn't make sense or didn't match other findings?
- Are there are key findings that seem too good to be true? Or that sources have questioned?
- Is there anybody who might dispute these findings? If so, in what way?
- Do you have any reports, documents, or other sources that support your findings?

Editing the story:

Your editor should carefully review the phrasing of your findings in the narrative. It's a little too easy to give readers the wrong impression by simply having the wrong wording. Example that actually got published: "Every year since 1950, the number of children gunned down has doubled." This implies that a doubling is occurring every year. So if you started with 2 children killed by gunfire in 1950, it would be more than 32,000 by 1965 and 1 billion by 1980 (which is 4 times the U.S. population that year). Instead the sentence should have read: "The number of children killed each year by guns has doubled since 1950."

Your editor should help you avoid decimal places and paragraphs with too many numbers.

Make sure your editor gets a proof of any graphics and also gets a link to digital graphic proofs. He/she should help you edit the headline and chatter and also give you feedback on whether the graphic gets your key point across in a quick, clear manner. If it takes a long time for him/her to understand what it's trying to show, then something is wrong.