

Chapter 11

Pitching Through Storytelling

Reece Steinberg

Introduction

Entrepreneurship students and experiential learners starting their own businesses are hungry for market research to support their pitch—the short, one-shot speaking opportunity they have to sell their idea and ability to potential investors. These students are also eager for information on how to hone their pitching skills. This chapter outlines a single interactive session aimed at students preparing for a pitching competition and highlights tools for building and telling a pitch as a story. It uses storytelling as a method of framing and organizing a pitch and highlights evidence on storytelling, storytelling with data, and related subjects. Storytelling helps speakers engage and connect with an audience as well as organize information and research. This workshop will help students consider what type of story they would like to tell, how to tweak their story for different audiences, and how to find and fill gaps in their story using library resources. Students participate in activities to build their own stories, highlight speaking techniques, and share thoughts about what aspects of data visualizations and market research reports could contribute to their pitches.

Note that I'll often use the terms “entrepreneurs,” “investors,” and other business terms when providing examples about pitching, but many people outside of business fields pitch—individuals in nonprofit organizations, for example.

Why storytelling?

Students beginning business research often find it challenging to understand the meaning behind the information they have been assigned or advised to look for. As well, students who are working to solve a particular business problem sometimes have difficulty understanding what types of resources or information would help them come up with a solution.

I meet students who are looking for specific data or analyses without fully understanding the context of the information or whether it is likely to exist. Focusing on why we are looking for certain pieces of information and how that information contributes to business planning and outcomes provides more meaning and context and encourages students to use creativity and critical-thinking skills, rather than memorizing technical steps.

I began experimenting with using storytelling in a business information literacy context in order to increase the appeal of introductory market research workshops. This idea

resonated with participants, so I expanded and built on this approach in response to interest in a pitching workshop and the subject’s natural fit with storytelling.

Planning

Number of participants

6–25

Audience

Students practicing for a pitching competition or planning to pitch to investors—primarily those who would benefit from a closer familiarity with library resources (not expert users)

Preparation and Resources

1. Padlet (<https://padlet.com/>) is a free online tool that allows users to collaboratively post or comment on chat threads on a screen. In advance of the sessions, create a Padlet for this class to use. Adjust the settings to allow anonymous users to comment on posts but not create posts. Enable the “like” feature as an additional interactive component. Add the following posts to the Padlet:

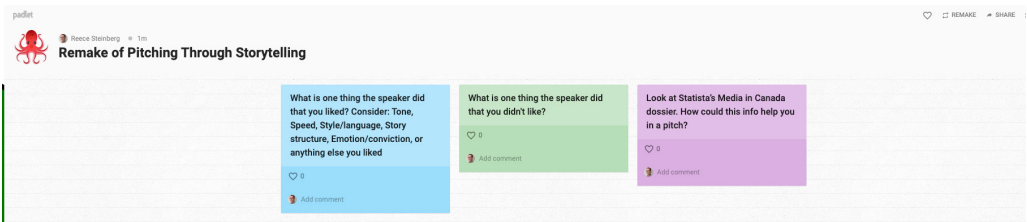


Figure 11.1
Padlet before the session.

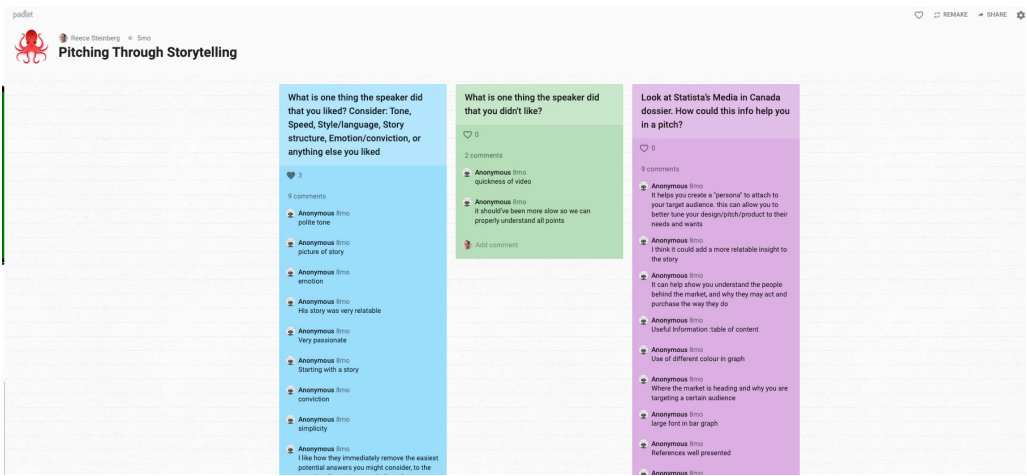


Figure 11.2
Padlet after a session.

- What is one thing the speaker did that you liked? Consider tone, speed, style/ language, story structure, emotion/conviction, or anything else you liked.
 - What is one thing the speaker did that you didn't like?
 - Look at Statista's Media in Canada dossier.¹ It's an example of one type of report available through the library. What do you think it could add to a story or pitch? What information could it fill in?
2. Adapt the slides I have made available or create your own (<http://tiny.cc/pitchstory>).
 3. Select sample data visualizations from two to three databases listed below. Add the visualizations to this section of your slide deck.
 4. For the Mintel activity, select a Mintel infographic overview that you can share with the students via a link.
 5. For the market research activity, select an industry report or dossier that you can share with the students via a link.
 6. List tools/databases used, whether paid or free, and provide access links.

Multiple activities

- Timers on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/UIrLyE7iz50>). YouTube has timers that can be embedded in slide presentations to keep track of time during activities.
- Tiny.cc (<https://tiny.cc/>) or another URL-shortener for sharing links and slides

TED Talk activity

- TED Talks on YouTube (e.g., "What Causes Traffic Jams?," <https://youtu.be/TNok-BgtSUvQ>). I use TEDtalks because they are free stories that have been carefully crafted and persuasive.

Data visualization demonstration

Select sample data visualizations from two to three databases; for example:

- Mintel (<https://www.mintel.com/>)
- Statista (<https://www.statista.com/>)
- IBISWorld (<https://www.ibisworld.com/>)

Add the visualizations to this section of your slide deck.

Mintel activity

- Mintel

Market research activity

One of the following:

- Statista
- Passport Euromonitor (<https://go.euromonitor.com/passport.html>)
- IBISWorld

Description of Lesson/Activity

Goals/learning outcomes

1. Demonstrate knowledge on how and why to effectively pitch using storytelling techniques.
2. Write pitch stories and string multiple stories together to develop a full pitch.
3. Utilize library resources to access reports and data visuals.
4. Incorporate data visuals and information from library resources into pitches.

Time required

60 minutes

Teaching Outline

Introduction (5 minutes)

My introduction begins with who I am, my contact info, how to get more help, and a summary of the workshop.

To answer the question “Why storytelling?,” librarians can start the workshop by introducing a couple of main evidence-based reasons why entrepreneurs may choose to use stories when they pitch.

Stories are memorable.

- They are persuasive because they are easy to understand and recall in connection with a product or service—very important since entrepreneurs often have only a short time to capture the attention of investors or other stakeholders during their pitch.
- In contrast to stories, numbers and specific data are more difficult to understand and less convincing, though it’s important to be able to provide them. Stories can help pitchers get to the point where potential investors are willing to look at specific data and figures.

Stories are relatable.

- Stories can evoke empathy in listeners and can help open investors to hear what entrepreneurs have to say.

Starting a story: quick independent activity (5 minutes)

Give students the following prompts on a slide.

Starting points for successful stories:

- The founding of the company
- A crisis and how it was overcome
- An unusual success
- Unusual or surprising facts about products (how they were created, the origin of their name, etc.)
- How you supported your company’s values even in a challenging situation
- Endearing weaknesses or mistakes
- Or think of your own

In addition to the prompts, the slide should include the following questions, which provide the structure for the beginning, middle, and end of the story.:

1. How did it start?
2. What was the challenge/peak?
3. How did it end?

Tell students you are going to give them three minutes to individually think of a story relating to their venture or the field they are interested in and answer the three questions above in order to briefly tell the story. They can choose one of the prompts above, including thinking of their own. Assure them that they do not need to spend a lot of time deciding but just to think of an example quickly that they will be able to use for an exercise later. Clarify to make sure they understand the exercise and then set a countdown timer so that students are able to manage their time.

Give the students three minutes to jot down three sentences about their story. Here is an example of a completed story.

Prompt: A crisis and how it was overcome

1. How did it start?
I was all set to launch my new business making canopy beds and other accessories for pet rabbits.
2. What was the challenge/peak?
A month before my launch, a large competitor launched a new product that was just like mine and less expensive.
3. How did it end?
I saw my nephew playing with a prototype and realized that the canopy bed I made was even better as a children's toy. Then I began making a line of hand-crafted children's toy furniture, much to the delight of my young nieces and nephews.

TED Talk activity (5 minutes)

Let the students know that they will be able to use the brief story they came up with in the next exercise. Assure them that it doesn't need to be perfect and to keep it handy. Let students know you are going to be playing a very short clip of a story, and you would like them to think about what they like about the speaker's storytelling. Then play the first twenty seconds of your selected TED Talk.

After playing the TED Talk, remind students of the question you asked them to consider: "What is one thing the speaker did that they liked?" Let them know that the next activity will be a group one where they create a list of characteristics from this story that they liked and would like to incorporate into their pitch.

You can provide them with the following attributes to consider:

- tone
- speed
- style/language
- story structure
- emotion/conviction
- or anything else you liked

At this point, you can play the twenty-second clip a second time or continue with the exercise, depending on the feel of the room.

Direct students to the Padlet you created for the class and present the Padlet on your screen as well. Have students answer the first two questions on the Padlet, noting that you will return to the third one later in the session.

1. What is one thing the speaker did that you liked? Consider tone, speed, style/language, story structure, emotion/conviction, or anything else you liked.
2. What is one thing the speaker did that you didn't like?

When I have done this exercise, students have been quick to write down their thoughts and I have read aloud what they have written and elaborated on some of the comments as they were being written down.

Stringing stories together and story hooks (2 minutes)

Return to the slides, leaving the Padlet for the time being. Now share with students that to create a full pitch, students can start with a series of very short, related stories and string them together. Each story can start with a hook—some interesting point, surprise, or minor conflict in order to help listeners understand and care about the pitcher's story. I share the following with students:

Stringing stories together

- Pitches can be a series of very short, related stories.
- Each story should start with a hook.
- Stories will often benefit from including appropriate research, visuals, and data, which we are talking about next.

Story hooks

- Start with a hook: a contrast, conflict, or contradiction.
- Add a hook for each new concept.
- These help listeners understand, remember, and relate to you and your venture.

Encourage students after the workshop to use the same techniques to build many interrelated stories that they can use while pitching.

Data and visuals: Do your visuals tell (or support) your story? Demonstration and Mintel activity (20 minutes)

Introduce students to the next section of the workshop by saying you are going to show them some visuals and that you want them to think about whether each tells a story or could help tell a story.

Briefly show the three visualizations you selected in Preparation step 3 and let students know how to access these types of resources through the library.

Show them the images and share with them:

- Data visuals context for your audience
 - Know your information well and what you want to communicate to your specific audience.
- Consider your visuals
 - Do they help tell your story?
- Consider your story
 - Will it benefit from visuals?
 - Can you demonstrate something instead of saying it?

Activity: Provide access to the Mintel infographic overview you selected in Preparation step 4. Put students in groups or break-out rooms for five minutes to discuss which visual tells a story most effectively/least effectively and why. Regroup and ask participants to share their thoughts on what made specific visuals more or less effective.

Ideally, they will have come up with some ideas that lead to the recommendations below for effective visual storytelling. I display these on a slide after asking for student input, noting how the groups were able to come up with many of them.

What visual tells a story?

- Accurate and on topic
- Focus is on one key message
- Data is visual: make the complex easy to understand
- Minimal text
- Legend not necessary
- Data is transparent: Where does it come from? Is it a quality source? Can the viewer find it?

Market research: What story do you want to tell?

Demonstration and activity (15 minutes)

Provide a brief overview of market research, framing it as a tool to back up a story. Let students know that market research helps answer questions about consumer demographics and behavior, related companies, and industries.

Activity: Provide students with access to the market research report you chose in Preparation step 5. Students should all use the same report. Let them know this is just a sample of one kind of report they can find at the library. Explain to students that they will be using this report for this last activity in the workshop.

Give them four minutes (timed) to scan the report and comment in the Padlet one piece of information the market research report could help add to a story or pitch.

After reading out and commenting on what students have added to the Padlet, provide the general points below, pointing out how they related to the specific points students listed.

What can market research add to the story?

- Who are our consumers? How many of them are there? Where are they? What do they want? Are there other potential markets?
- Who are our competitors? What are they doing?
- What are our (potential) investors' beliefs and values? What messaging is likely to resonate?
- Predict changes
- Areas to grow into/pivot
- Proves this is a viable venture/business/product/solution, etc.

Share links to research guides, tutorials, or other help for getting started with market research resources.

Revisiting your story, questions, and close (8 minutes)

Leave students with some questions they could use to add to the story they started, following the session.

- What market research would help support it?
- What visual data would add to the story?

- What characteristics would you like to bring to your storytelling?
- What is your hook?
- What other stories can you add to it?

In addition to providing the market research resources above, provide information on accessing reference and other library help. Invite students to ask any last questions they might have.

Transferability

Substitute databases

Mintel. I chose this database because it has easy-to-share documents with several infographics that students can use to compare and contrast. Passport, IBISWorld, and many other databases have similar visuals that would work.

A free alternative for libraries without access to these databases is to take a few visuals from different sites, such as:

- The Data Visualization Gallery from the US Census²
- The USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service³
- Data visualization blogs mentioned by Tableau⁴
- Statistics Canada Data Visualization⁵

Statista, IBISWorld, or Passport Euromonitor. I chose these databases as examples of databases with market research reports. Alternatives include industry reports found within Business Source databases (e.g., Marketline industry reports) and Proquest Business Premium database (e.g., First Research or BMI Research industry reports). Other business databases such as Factiva and Mergent have industry reports as well and would work for the market research exercise.

Some free resources are available below, though they are less comprehensive.

- IBISWorld (<https://www.ibisworld.com/>), free limited access to reports
- Deloitte (<https://www2.deloitte.com/>), free access to limited information online; go to the menu at the top of the page and hover over industries to access
- Governments, such as the Government of Canada⁶

TED Talk. I chose a TED Talk because they are pitches for ideas, and highlight talented, coached speakers. Many other options exist, including free online pitches, pitches on Dragon's Den and similar programs, pitch examples from library databases, etc.

Ability to transfer to online or to in-person

This workshop was created for the online environment. It could easily be adapted to in-person, though all participants would require a computer and internet access.

To different class sizes or audiences

For groups of more than 25, discussion of the activities, or the ability of the librarian to visit groups or breakout rooms would be diminished, but few adaptations would be needed.

For very small groups, all activities could be done as a group, potentially in a conversational format.

For audiences very familiar with library research resources, particularly market research, parts of the workshop focusing on the importance of reports, or library availability of

them, might focus on finer points of some of the databases (e.g., adjusting demographics in Mintel Interactive Databooks) or more advanced research.

Endnotes

1. Use any industry report or dossier of your choice from Statista, Passport, IBISWorld, or another database with industry reports.
2. Data Visualization Gallery, U. S. Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/dataviz/>.
3. Data Visualization, USDA, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Data_Visualization/Commodity/index.php.
4. “The 10 Best Data Visualization Blogs to Follow,” Tableau, <https://www.tableau.com/learn/articles/best-data-visualization-blogs>.
5. Data Visualization, Statistics Canada, <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/eng/interact/datavis>.
6. “Information by industry category,” Government of Canada, <http://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/ic-ic.nsf/eng/home>.

Bibliography

- Choy, Esther K. *Let the Story Do the Work: The Art of Storytelling for Business Success*. Amacom, 2017. ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Government of Canada. “Information by industry category.” <http://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/ic-ic.nsf/eng/home>.
- Krum, Randy. *Cool Infographics: Effective Communication with Data Visualization and Design*. 1st ed. Somerset: Wiley, 2014.
- Mucundorfeanu, Meda. “The Key Role of Storytelling in the Branding Process.” *Journal of Media Research* 11, no. 1 (2018): 42–54. <https://doi.org/10.24193/jmr.30.3>.
- Statistics Canada. Data Visualization. <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/eng/interact/datavis>.
- Tableau. “The 10 Best Data Visualization Blogs to Follow.” <https://www.tableau.com/learn/articles/best-data-visualization-blogs>.
- U. S. Census Bureau. Data Visualization Gallery. <https://www.census.gov/dataviz/>.
- USDA. Data Visualization. https://www.nass.usda.gov/Data_Visualization/Commodity/index.php.

