

Art of the Sale: Recommendations for Sharing Research With Mainstream Media and Senior Leaders

Don C. Zhang

Louisiana State University

Research collaborations are two-way streets. To obtain support from organizations, academics must communicate the value of their research projects to the stakeholders. In their focal article, Lapierre et al., (2018) described this process as the academic “sales pitch”, one that must be “short yet attention grabbing” (p.20). Academic research in industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology, however, is rooted in esoteric jargon (e.g., validity and reliability) and unconvincing evidence (e.g., r and r^2) (Highhouse, Brooks, Nesnidol, & Sim, 2017; Rynes, 2009). These concepts are difficult for non-academics to understand and may even *undermine* the value of our work (Brooks, Dalal, & Nolan, 2014; Kuncel & Rigdon, 2012; Mattern, Kobrin, Patterson, Shaw, & Camara, 2009). CEOs and other senior leaders often have limited time, attention, and expertise to process your pitch: A bad one could effectively derail the collaboration before it even began.

In this commentary, I discuss three methods (analogies, stories, and alternative validity statistics) for communicating the value of research to nonacademics and provide suggestions for best practices. These methods may be used in print (e.g., media coverage), presentations (e.g., oral presentation to stakeholders), or informal conversations (e.g., you have 30 seconds to deliver the colloquial “elevator pitch” to the CEO). I hope to provide academics with a flexible toolkit for sharing their research with popular media, organizational stakeholders, and the public.

Analogies

An analogy compares relations in a novel domain to relations in a familiar domain (Holyoak, Gentner, & Kokinov, 2001). For example, the analogy “memory operates like a library” relates a novel concept (memory) to a familiar concept (library). When presented with this analogy, learners use their knowledge about the properties of libraries to make inferences about how memory operates (Donnelly & McDaniel, 1993). In education, teachers

Don C. Zhang, Department of Psychology, Louisiana State University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Don C. Zhang, Department of Psychology, Louisiana State University, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, 236 Audubon Hall, Baton Rouge, LA 70803. E-mail: zhang1@lsu.edu

Table 1. Example Analogies for Reliability and Validity

<p><i>Reliability</i> of a selection instrument is concerned with accurately and consistently capturing a person's psychological characteristics.</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Think of this selection procedure as using a bathroom scale to measure a person's weight. It improves the accuracy of the measurement. 2. Think of this selection procedure as wearing prescription glasses. It allows a person to see the world more clearly and accurately. 3. Think of this selection procedure as adding a scope to a firearm. It improves the likelihood that the gun will hit the intended target every time.
<p><i>Validity</i> of a selection instrument is concerned with the relevance and completeness of the content being measured.</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Think of this selection procedure as taking a shopping list to the grocery store. It ensures that all the necessary grocery is being purchased. 2. Think of this selection procedure as using a lesson plan to teach a class. It ensures that all the relevant material is covered. 3. Think of this selection procedure as using a study guide to prepare for an exam. It ensures all the important information is being studied.

often use analogies to describe unfamiliar or difficult concepts by comparing them to familiar topics (Newby, Ertmer, & Stepich, 1995).

Analogies can be useful for communicating technical concepts such as reliability and validity, both of which are cornerstones of employee assessment and selection. However, reliability and validity may be difficult for a nonexpert to understand. As a result, the value of reliable and valid selection system may be underappreciated by organizations (Colbert, Rynes, & Brown, 2005). Table 1 contains a list of analogies that researchers can use to describe – in 30 seconds or less – the enhanced reliability or validity of an evidence-based selection procedure.¹ The purpose of these analogies is to communicate the concepts of reliability and validity to someone quickly and efficiently. These analogies can be plug and play in a variety of situations such as a press release or the 30-seconds sales pitch.

Story Telling

Stories are, at the core, retellings of real-life experiences (Schank & Berman, 2002). Relatedly, Lapierre et al. (2018) suggested that should “refer to any previous experience in implementing valuable change” (p. 560) as a way to indicate one's credentials and expertise. Stories are particularly useful from a sales perspective. In a study of professional sales professionals, Gilliam and Flaherty (2015) found that stories can be used for a variety of purposes such as to persuade, inform, and build bonds with the customer. Many

¹ Examples of analogies are adapted from Zhang, Highhouse, Petersen, and Rada (2014).

salespeople also use personal stories as ice breakers when meeting with a client for the first time. Stories can also be useful for communicating—vividly—the value of organizational interventions. Zhang and Ritter (2018), for instance, found that managers were more likely to endorse the use of a structured interview when they were presented with a story about its success rather than factual advice. A more broad example can be found in Hollywood: The popular book and motion picture *Moneyball* (Lewis, 2004) told the story of the Oakland Athletics baseball manager Billy Beane, who pioneered data-driven methods and transformed the selection and assessment of professional baseball players—a field previously dominated by intuition and subjectivity (Lewis, 2004). Indeed, stories can be valuable tools for communicating the value of evidence-based organizational practices to nonacademic stakeholders.

However, one should consider the timing and nature of the story. Although personal stories are effective for breaking the ice in some business-to-business interactions, they are much less useful in the later stages of the discussion. Similarly, one might also not want to begin a collaborative relationship with business stories. As one veteran buyer in the study noted: “If they come in for a first meeting and start sharing their successful stories with what they have done with company xyz, I’m not with them” (Gilliam & Flaherty, 2015). Still, success stories can be more effective than facts and evidence for the purpose of persuasion (Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004), and is a valuable tool for sharing the value of your research to organizational stakeholders (Sinar & Grubb, 2018).

Alternative Validity Statistics

Research evidence typically takes the form of a correlation or coefficient of determination. Although explaining 10% of the variance in counterproductivity or turnover might be impressive for the savvy academic audience, it is more likely to *undersell* the value of your services. In a recent conversation with a human resource professional at a large corporation, he lamented, while referring to the seminal meta-analysis by Schmidt and Hunter (1998), that best employee selection methods have *only* a 50% accuracy (referring to the meta-analytic validity of General Mental Ability tests [GMAs]): a statement that reflected a poor grasp of “validity” and complete misunderstanding of the evidence.

When sharing research evidence with the mainstream media or organizational stakeholders, academics should use avoid correlations, and instead use alternative validity statistics such as the binomial effect size display, expectancy chart, or common language effect size statistics. Brooks et al. (2014) found that lay people were willing to pay more money for a training program when its effectiveness information was presented as an

alternative statistic (e.g., binomial effect size display) rather than a correlation coefficient. In another study, people judged a consulting company's selection services more favorably when its marketing brochure contained expectancy charts (Zhang, Highhouse, Brooks, & Zhang, [in press](#)). Individual differences in graph literacy and numeracy, however, could affect the interpretability of alternative validity displays (Okan, Garcia-Retamero, Cokely, & Maldonado, 2012). To facilitate the generation of alternative validity statistics, I have developed a free-to-use web app (Zhang, 2018). This app allows researchers to upload their own data and generate a variety of traditional and alternative validity statistics. These displays of validity information are particularly useful in presentation decks or other print material (e.g., one-sheet).

Conclusion

Academic psychologists are not salespeople. Nonetheless, giving a successful sales pitch is a necessary step in getting your feet in the door with respect to organizational collaboration. An effective sales pitch should be efficient, understandable, and persuasive. In this article, I described several methods to improve the effectiveness of the sales pitch, and in turn, increase the odds of forging a fruitful collaboration.

References

- Brooks, M. E., Dalal, D. K., & Nolan, K. P. (2014). Are common language effect sizes easier to understand than traditional effect sizes? *Journal of Applied Psychology, 99*(2), 332–40. doi:[10.1037/a0034745](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0034745)
- Colbert, A. E., Rynes, S. L., & Brown, K. G. (2005). Who believes us? Understanding managers' agreement with human resource research findings. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 41*(3), 304–325.
- Dal Cin, S., Zanna, M. P., & Fong, G. T. (2004). Narrative persuasion and overcoming resistance. In E. S. Knowles & J. A. Linn (Eds.), *Resistance and persuasion* (pp. 175–191). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Donnelly, C. M., & McDaniel, M. A. (1993). Use of analogy in learning scientific concepts. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition, 19*(4), 975.
- Gilliam, D. A., & Flaherty, K. E. (2015). Storytelling by the sales force and its effect on buyer–seller exchange. *Industrial Marketing Management, 46*, 132–142. doi:[10.1016/j.indmarman.2015.01.013](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2015.01.013)
- Highhouse, S., Brooks, M. E., Nesnidol, S., & Sim, S. (2017). Is a .51 validity coefficient good? Value sensitivity for interview validity. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment, 25*(4), 383–389. doi:[10.1111/ijsa.12192](https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsa.12192)
- Holyoak, K. J., Gentner, D., & Kokinov, B. N. (2001). Introduction: The place of analogy in cognition. In D. Centner, K. J. Holyoak, & B. N. Kokinov (Eds.), *The Analogical Mind: Perspectives from Cognitive Science* (pp. 1–19). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Kuncel, N., & Rigdon, J. (2012). Communicating research findings. In I. B. Weiner, N. H. Schmitt, & S. Highhouse, (Eds.), *Handbook of psychology: Industrial and organizational psychology* (Vol. 12, pp. 43–58). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Lapierre, L., Matthews, R. A., Eby, L. T., Truxillo, D. M., Johnson, R. E., & Major, D. (2018). Recommended practices for academics to initiate and manage research partnerships. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice, 11*(4), 543–581.

- Lewis, M. (2004). *Moneyball: The art of winning an unfair game*. New York, NY: WW Norton & Company.
- Mattern, K., Kobrin, J., Patterson, B., Shaw, E., & Camara, W. (2009). Validity is in the eye of the beholder: Conveying SAT research findings to the general public. In R. W. Lissitz (Ed.), *The concept of validity: Revisions, new directions, and applications* (pp. 213–240). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Newby, T. J., Ertmer, P. A., & Stepich, D. A. (1995). Instructional analogies and the learning of concepts. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 43(1), 5–18.
- Okan, Y., Garcia-Retamero, R., Cokely, E. T., & Maldonado, A. (2012). Individual differences in graph literacy: Overcoming denominator neglect in risk comprehension. *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, 25(4), 390–401.
- Rynes, S. (2009). The research-practice gap in industrial-organizational psychology and related fields: Challenges and potential solutions. In Steve Kozlowski, (Ed.), *Oxford handbook of industrial-organizational psychology*, (pp. 409–454). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Schank, R. C., & Berman, T. R. (2002). The pervasive role of stories in knowledge and action. In M. C. Green, J. J. Strange, & T. C. Brock (Eds.), *Narrative impact: Social and cognitive foundations* (pp. 287–313). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Schmidt, F., & Hunter, J. (1998). The validity and utility of selection methods in personnel psychology: Practical and theoretical implications of 85 years of research findings. *Psychological Bulletin*, 124(2), 262–274.
- Sinar, E. F., & Grubb, A. G. (2018, April). *Storytelling with impact: Mastering the practical science of influential communication*. Workshop presented at the Annual Conference of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Chicago, IL.
- Zhang, D. C. (In press). Utility of alternative effect size statistics and the development of a web-based calculator: Shiny-AESC. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01221
- Zhang, D. C., Highhouse, S., Brooks, M. E., & Zhang, Y. (In press). Communicating the validity of structured job interviews with graphical visual aids. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*.
- Zhang, D. C., Highhouse, S., Petersen, N., & Rada, T. B. (2014, November). *The use of analogies to communicate advantages of structured interviews*. Poster presented at the 35th Annual Conference for the Society for Judgment and Decision Making, Long Island, CA.
- Zhang, D. C., & Ritter, K. J. (2018, April). *Are stories more persuasive than advice? Overcoming resistance against the structured interview with story-telling*. Presented at the Annual Conference for the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Chicago, IL.

Maintain a Web Presence So Practitioners Can Find You

Matthew J. Borneman
career.place

In addition to the suggestions made by the authors of the focal article (Lapierre et al., 2018), it is also important for academics to market themselves and keep their information up to date. As a practitioner, I sometimes end up

Matthew J. Borneman, Research and Development, *career.place*.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Matthew J. Borneman.
E-mail: mborneman82@yahoo.com, mborneman@career.place