

## Having your cake

The French mathematician Blaise Pascal once apologised for making a letter too long with the memorable phrase “I have not had the time to make it shorter”<sup>1</sup>. This sentiment has proved so useful that many others have paraphrased it (and been wrongly credited with originating the phrase). A pithy focused description of something is almost always going to be much more memorable than a longer less honed one, so investing extra effort to refine an explanation is usually justified. I said “almost always”, because there is one obvious exception, coherent narrative is more appealing than a less structured presentation (especially if the truth is messy), that’s why Marie Antoinette is best remembered for something she certainly never said (in any language).

Data managers need to always be ready to deliver their “elevator pitch”, to reel off a terse yet compelling account that explains what impact their proposed pet project will have on the whole company’s future performance, or why their current foremost concern is already holding back the organisation’s results. In most oil companies opportunities to present data related topics to senior budget holders occur infrequently and at the most unexpected moments. So having a practiced, succinct summary is always good.



But, Albert Einstein claimed that everything should be made as simple as possible, but not one bit simpler. Many aspects of data handling cannot be condensed into a simple “sound bite” without over-simplifying. Having abridged accounts is good but anyone responsible for the actual delivery of projects better be aware that these are what the author Terry Pratchett has labelled “Lies for Children”, that is minimal versions glossing over important (but tricky) details. As data managers we have to know when to present deliberately overly simplified pictures and when to expose the complexity of a realistic view. Most CEOs want to understand the business implications without (necessarily) needing to know the details of implementation. They do, however, want confidence that their “implementation team” are aware of all the weird connections, unexpected consequences and unanticipated limitations. We, as the acknowledged experts, need to balance out a cautious view of potential risks with an achievable optimism for our ability to overcome them. What you might call “Having you cake and eating it too”.

The irony of going on at this length about brevity is not lost on me. But there are two advantages that come from constraining myself to fit my discussions into this single page form, firstly it forces me to apply the necessary effort to condense my ramblings, but, more importantly, it ensures that however misguided, unstructured or plain wrong headed my thoughts are you, the reader, know that the end will never be too far away.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course he actually said it in French writing “je n’ai pas eu le loisir de la faire plus courte” in 1657 according to the “Oxford Dictionary of Quotations”