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Golden Commentary: A wealth of data...but is it all real?

By MARK J. GOLDEN, FASAE, CAE | 02/14/2013



Recently, I had the opportunity to facilitate a session on "Seven Measures – Seven Years Later," revisiting the best-selling study first published by ASAE Foundation in 2006.

One of the items that came up in a lively discussion was how much easier it is to be a "data-driven" association then when Seven Measures of Success was first published. At that time, the cost, systems and infrastructure need-ed to do what the remarkable nine asso- ciations did with data was a major challenge. I vividly remember conducting workshops when the study was first released and how frequently this one feature represented a major stumbling block for associations seeking to learn from remarkable associations, and improve. Associations got it; they just couldn't do it. And they weren't just rationalizing. Being data-driven posed a great challenge for associations.

Less than a decade later, those obstacles don't loom nearly so large. Even the smallest association is probably collecting and tracking far more data just by executing their day-to-day operations than they will ever fully leverage. Even if they aren't aware, the software they are using is doing it. Data and analytic tools are available for free from sources like Google. Klout lets you score your online presence across multiple platforms. And I know not only that someone viewed my LinkedIn profile at 1:38 this morning, I know who it was, who they work for and where they live.

Yes, it really has gotten much easier to be a data-driven association.

But along with the increased ease of access and the volume of data now readily available, there has been a dramatic increase in the vulnerability to the illusion of data.

The 47th annual release of the Higher Education Research Foundation's American Freshman Study found that college students are increasingly likely to consider themselves superior students, even though academic performance is down; and to categorize themselves as driven to succeed, even though the amount of time spent studying is decreasing.

One analyst, Dr. Keith Ablow, attributes this to Web-driven data that create a false impression. "On Facebook, young people can fool themselves into thinking they have hundreds or thousands of 'friends'... Using Twitter, young people can pretend they are worth 'following,' as though they have real-life fans." All because that's exactly what the data suggests. (www.foxnews.com/opinion/2013/01/08/are-raising-generation-deluded-narcis...).

Although I take the American Freshman Study and Dr. Ablow's analysis seriously, there is another trend readily apparent in all this: the seemingly irresistible urge to add heat to any discussion by using provocative and extreme language. I mean, does an extended rant painting an entire generation as "deluded narcissists" really advance the dialogue about a significant trend or distract from it?

So maybe the real change since Seven Measures is that, in a world awash in data, the only way to get anyone to pay attention to any of it is through provocative hyperbole. If that is the case, it is a tragedy.

Golden is executive director of the National Society of Professional Engineers, Alexandria, Va., and a past chairman of the ASAE Foundation. This is the last installment of his column "Golden Commentary," but you are able to contact him at mjgolden@cox.net.

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