

Numbers take on a (dysfunctional) life of their own

By Matt Baron

No number sprouts up out of nowhere.

Behind every number is one or more human beings. And, like human beings, numbers can be quite dysfunctional. It might represent money they spend, miles they have driven, a claim they profess, or an infinite variety of other items.

Properly gauge the integrity of that person or those persons, and how they arrived at the number, and you have done much to determine the integrity and relevance of the number itself.

More prolific than any computer virus, numbers are constantly giving birth to an array of other numbers, which repeat the cycle 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

And then they come prancing into your life, prodding and winking at you to use them in one way or another—maybe even to give birth to the next-generation number or numbers. That's when you need to slap yellow Caution tape around the figure and start asking questions.

Here are some standard queries to pose in such an integer interrogation:

**What family do you come from?*

Who or what gave birth to the number? Did they give birth to other numbers? Does this number have a reputation for causing trouble?

**Have you been adopted?*

Who else is using this number, and why?

**Do you have any character references?*

Is there an impartial, independent source that can vouch for the number's integrity? Has it been prone to misuse and abuse in the past?

In "Numbers in the Newsroom," a very handy guidebook on using math and statistics, Sarah Cohen provides a classic example of this process:

"In the early 1990s," Cohen writes, "a number was thrown around by the Clinton administration, labor experts and others who were lamenting the new lack of corporate loyalty."

"Each quoted the same figure—that workers were now expected to change careers six times in their working lives. Like others, I was assigned a story on the topic, and sought as part of it to find the source of the number. It turned out to be a weak study on a different subject. But the number had become part of the folklore."

Sometimes, numbers with a dubious lineage can have serious economic consequences. In 1998, Shane Tritsch, managing editor of Chicago magazine, unraveled the mistaken math that elevated the Beardstown Ladies Investment Club to investment sage status.

Based on flawed calculations, the group had claimed to have beaten the stock market with a 23.4 percent return from 1984 through 1993. On the wings of that boast, the group had sold 800,000 books and become media darlings.

Then Tritsch found a disclaimer in a paperback edition of their book that stated the group included its monthly dues in its rate of return. A Price Waterhouse audit showed the return rate was 9.1 percent, or significantly less than the 14.6 percent rate for the S& P 500 Index for that period.

In 1992, I wrote a profile on a real character by the name of Mike Figliulo. It was a follow-up to a feature that had run five years previously, when he garnered headlines for turning 100 years old. Nicknamed "Motorcycle Mike," his appeal stemmed largely from his salty sense of humor and his tales of adventure.

And, boy, did he have stories—about being a stuntman during Hollywood's infancy, of his interactions with Charlie Chaplin, and of chitchats he had with Al Capone.

My paper got a tip that he had fibbed about his age, and further research strongly suggested that he had exaggerated his age by a decade. Embarrassed by the discovery, I wrote a column striving to set the record straight. The defiant man refused to show me any proof of his date of birth, claimed that he was the victim of a family conspiracy to discredit him, and declared that his detractors could smooch his posterior.

Five years later, a Chicago Tribune reporter wrote a story on his “110th” birthday. The writer appeared to have some doubts of her own, stating that Figliulo “doesn’t look like he recently celebrated his 110th birthday” and that nursing home staff “also has trouble believing his age...But there are pictures and papers to prove it all.”

He died in October 2000. Mike was 103, or maybe 113. Well, only God knows.

There are more current examples, as well. But since this is a column, and not a book, I will simply leave you with two final words to drive home the point that numbers are only as good as the people behind them: Enron and WorldCom.

BARON BIT: Follow your instincts when you hear someone quote a figure that doesn’t sound quite right. Ask them to trace the number’s origin, and see how much they squirm.

Grappling with a numbers-related issue? Want to suggest a future “Go Figure” topic? E-mail Matt at Matt@InsideEdgePR.com or call him t 708.860.1380. A longtime journalist-turned-publicist, Matt delivers “Go Figure” seminars throughout the country for corporations and associations.