

research brief

researching the *best approach*
for *differentiating* your solutions

overview

No one wants to believe their company's solution is the same as their competitors'. Yet, in well-defined categories—from business services to technology—there are many companies who can solve the same problems with similar capabilities and pricing.

If buyers can't distinguish your solution from the rest, you will look like just one more choice among many viable options. You need to articulate value in your messaging, but if you use the wrong approach, you'll end up in side-by-side "bake-offs," competing on price.

The challenge to develop and deliver a differentiated story continues to frustrate even the best B2B marketers and sellers. How do you create the competitive separation you need? How do you position your solution in a way that persuades buyers to choose you?

To answer those questions, B2B DecisionLabs partnered with Dr. Nick Lee, behavioral scientist and Professor of Marketing at Warwick Business School, to conduct a research study with 400 B2B professionals.

research objectives

The goal of this behavioral research study was to determine whether you can alter your buyer's reaction and decision just by how you frame your capability descriptions in a go-to-market message.

In other words, can one version of your story consistently and materially defeat a different version of your story—even when both stories are based on the exact same capability set?

the study

The message test conditions in this study were all based on an anonymized version of an actual go-to-market message for a B2B company, which included a set of specific business challenges and the corresponding capabilities to resolve those challenges.

Then, we created four different versions of the story to reflect the typical kinds of capability descriptions and value statements. These were based on our experience working with more than 200 B2B marketing and sales organizations each year.

For the study, we positioned each test message as a unique competitor in a head-to-head presentation.

- The “Telling Details” test condition (described below) was called *OnRoad Logistics*.
- The other three approaches were all called *Highway Fleet Services*.

Here are the four test messages and sample excerpts. The bold text was added to emphasize the differences—it was not included in the original test messages.

- 1. Features** – This test condition focuses on describing a list of capabilities that help resolve the identified customer challenge. There are no benefit statements to show what value the buyer will receive. It represents a messaging approach that seems to imply value through the capability itself.

*When you work with Highway Fleet Services and source your drivers from us, you'll access our searchable and re-marketable **database of 80,000 drivers** known to Highway Fleet Services. We also provide a **fast and efficient onboarding process** designed specifically for truck drivers, powered by our **full-time recruiters who understand driver regulations**. Not only that, Highway Fleet Services has **long-tenured regional managers** overseeing driver services in **300+ locations across the country**. We have all the services that any fleet owner would want or need from a driver recruiting company.*

- 2. Benefits** – This test condition focuses on describing the benefits of each capability. These benefit statements are meant to help the buyer better understand what the feature will do for them and what that means in terms of business impact. This approach follows the “sell benefits, not features” advice that many companies follow today.

*When you source drivers from Highway Fleet Services, you can **fill empty seats while improving quality**. Thanks to our large driver database, your fleet will **get ahead on recruiting qualified drivers**. Once they're hired, you'll be able to **onboard new drivers in just days instead of weeks**. And Highway Fleet Services' large geographic footprint means you can **scale your business as demand fluctuates**.*

- 3. Superlatives** – This test condition adds common cliché adjectives to describe features, including typical superlatives such as: “all-in-one,” “one-stop-shop,” “streamlined,” “comprehensive,” etc. This is a common approach that companies use when trying to express the difference between otherwise similar capabilities.

*When you work with Highway Fleet Services, you get a **one-stop-shop for all your driver recruiting and onboarding needs**. We have an **all-in-one platform and driver database** to hire the highest quality drivers. With Highway Fleet Services’ **streamlined onboarding program**, you’ll be able to **bring drivers up to speed instantaneously**. And with a **comprehensive network of local offices**, you can scale your business as demand fluctuates.*

- 4. Telling Details** – This condition adds specific information and more detailed, emotional language to describe the business problem, the capabilities to solve that problem, and the value of those capabilities. This approach enhances the story with descriptive words, phrases, or images that help the buyer better “experience” what you’re describing.

*When you source drivers from OnRoad Logistics, **you can fill empty seats while improving quality**. With our **80,000+ known driver database**, you can **recruit non-stop to shorten or eliminate empty seat time**. OnRoad Logistics’ **full-time recruiters are in constant contact with these database drivers**, establishing qualifications and preferences even when no jobs are open. That means you can **quickly apply your job criteria to qualified and interested drivers** who are known entities.*

*Once hired, you’ll **onboard drivers in days instead of weeks because our recruiters will lead the heavily regulated onboarding process**. This reduces your risk, as **every OnRoad Logistics driver has a five-year criminal background check and ten-year employment verification**. And our **unmatched geographic footprint—with 300+ locations led by tenured regional managers with deep ties to local driver pools**—means you can match your hiring to demand.*

In every test scenario, participants received the “Telling Details” presentation from *OnRoad Logistics* and one of the three *Highway Fleet Services* presentations. We randomized the order in which each participant reviewed the messages to eliminate any potential order effect bias.

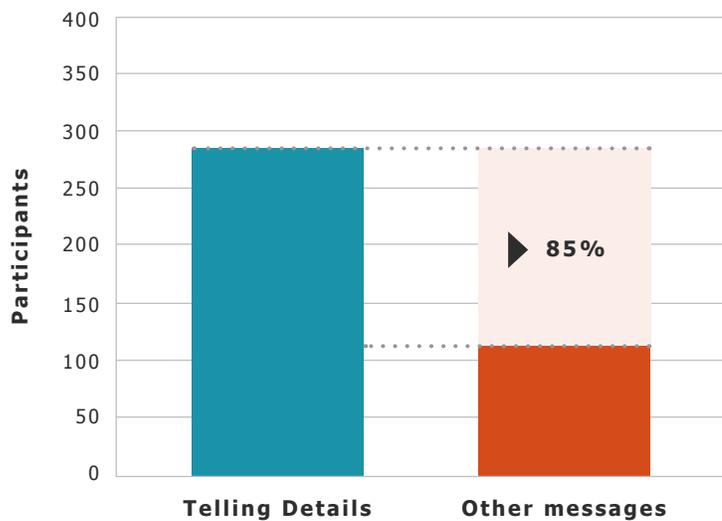
the results

The test results were simple and powerful: **The Telling Details condition (OnRoad Logistics) beat each of the other three messages (Highway Fleet Services) individually and in the aggregate, across every variable that was tested.**

In particular, when participants were asked which pitch they preferred, **85 percent more participants preferred the Telling Details message.** Remember, the order in which participants heard each pitch was random. In the context of a competitive selling scenario, *the better story wins regardless of when a buyer hears it.*

Which pitch did you prefer?

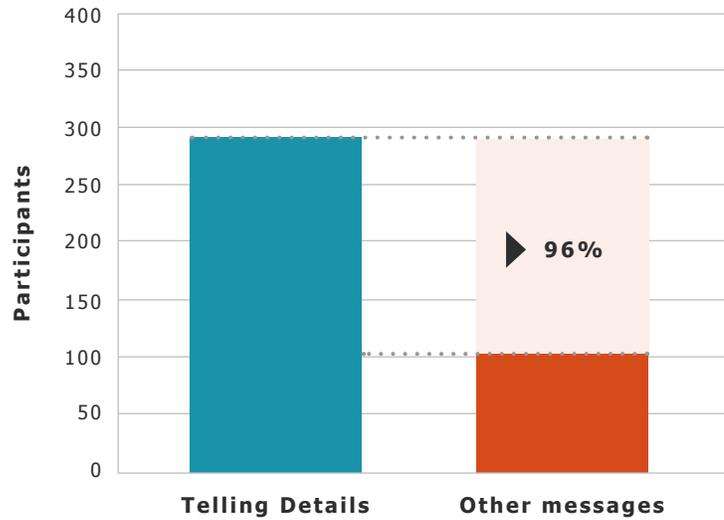
85 percent difference in buyers who preferred the Telling Details pitch vs. other messages in the study.



These results held across other comparative questions as well.

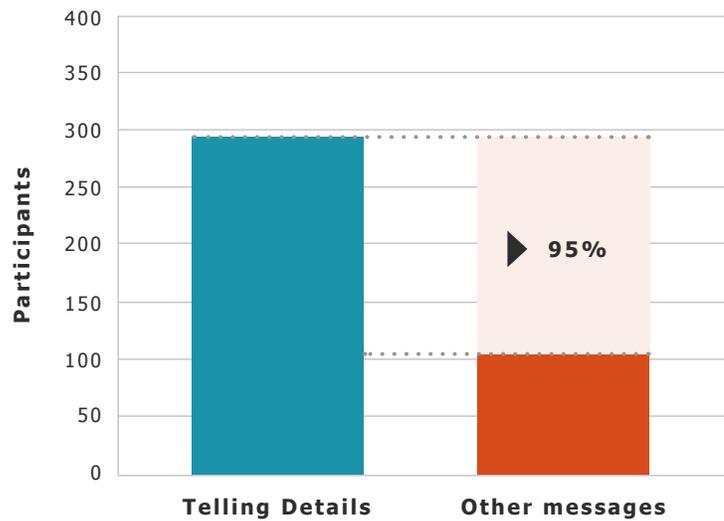
Which pitch was more credible?

96 percent difference in buyers who said the Telling Details pitch was more credible vs. other messages in the study.



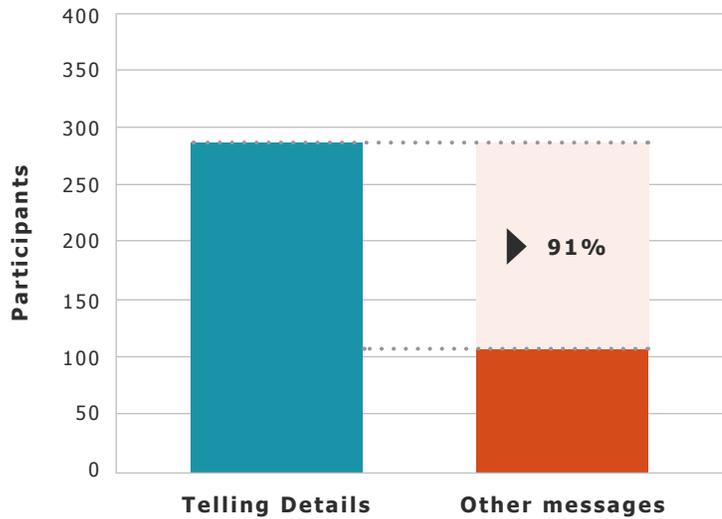
Which pitch was more convincing?

95 percent difference in buyers who said the Telling Details pitch was more convincing than other messages in the study.



Which vendor offers the most value?

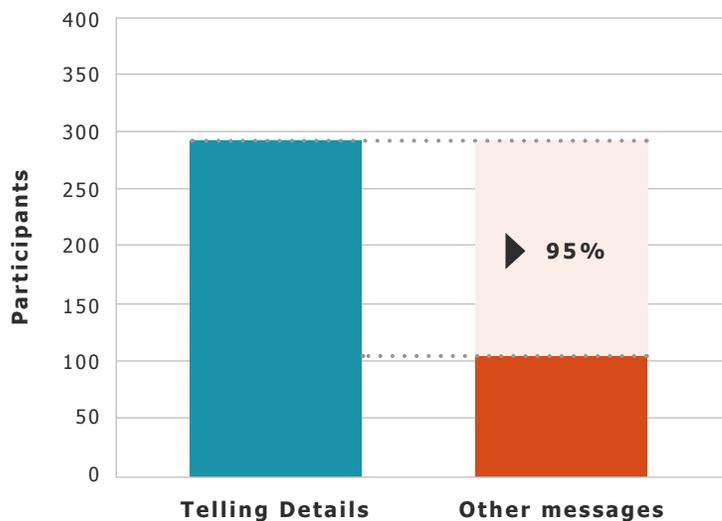
91 percent difference in buyers who said the Telling Details pitch promised more value than other messages in the study.



When participants were asked which vendor they were more likely to purchase from, again, **95 percent more chose the Telling Details condition over the others.**

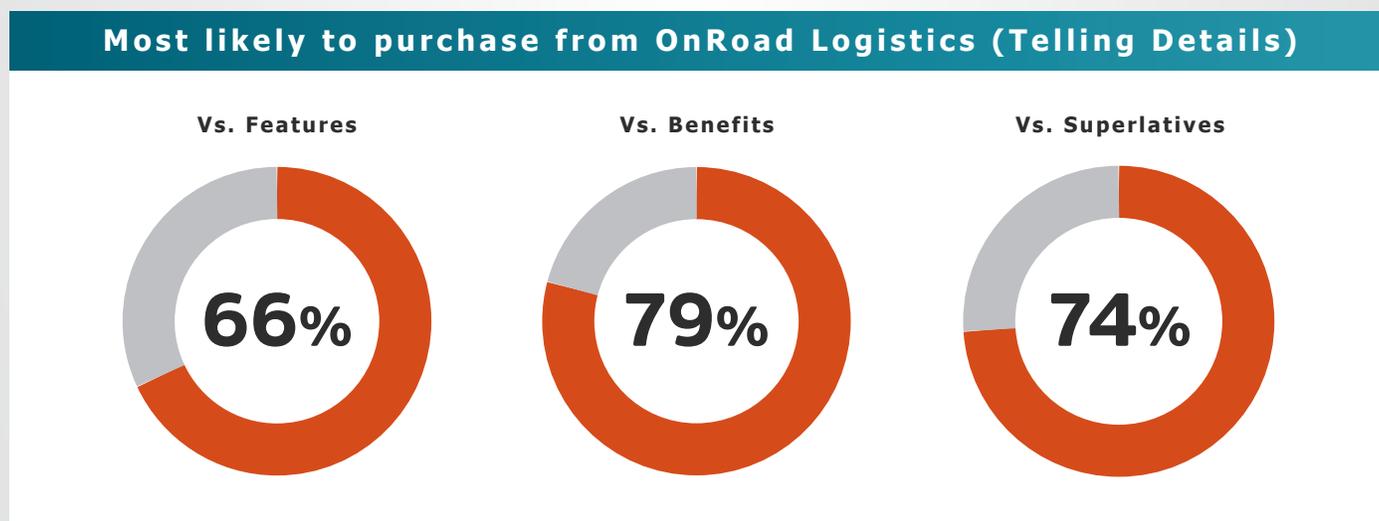
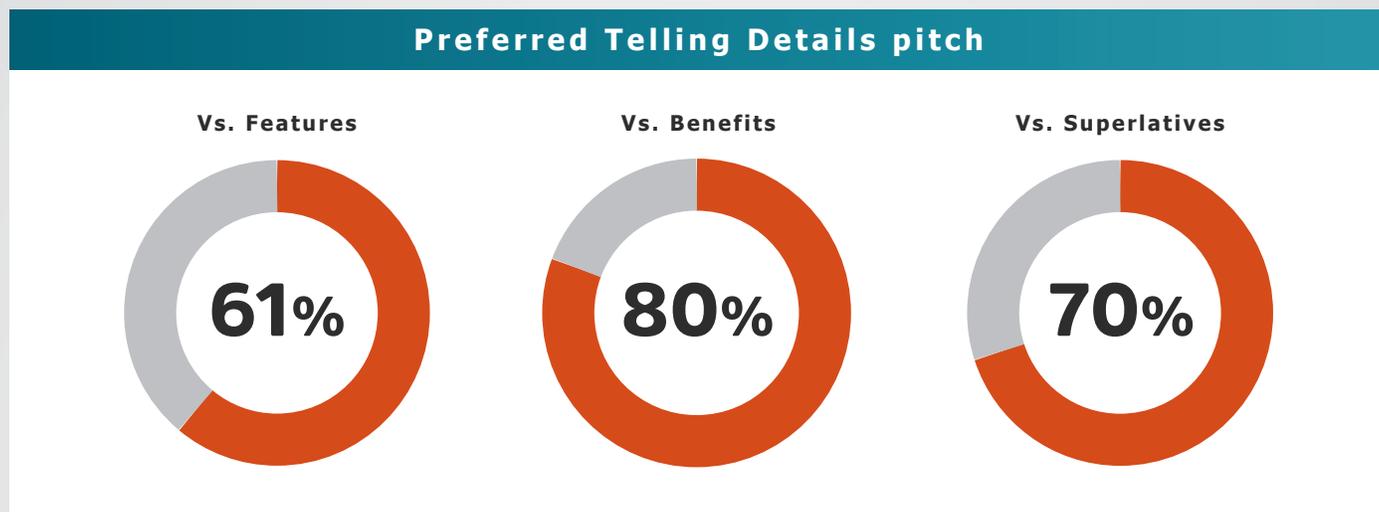
Who are you most likely to purchase from?

95 percent difference in buyers who said they would purchase from OnRoad Logistics (Telling Details) vs. Highway Fleet Services (other messages).



Considering how often marketing and sales teams fall short of the Telling Details ideal in their value propositions and capability messaging, the study also demonstrated just how similar your buyers perceive *any* feature-based capability pitch.

Here's how the Telling Details pitch performed head-to-head with other messages in the study:



Notice that on almost every variable tested, the Features condition scored better than the Benefits and Superlatives conditions. Although it still lost to Telling Details, this data suggests that **unless you can add more detailed, emotional language, you're better off simply listing your solution's distinct features.**

conclusions

Even when your message is based on the exact same capability set, how you tell the story dramatically changes your odds of winning.

The results clearly show that messages that include “Telling Details” decidedly outperform other common forms of capabilities messages across every measure. If your message doesn’t include rich, detailed language about the specifics of your capabilities, it won’t be nearly as effective.

Another key takeaway is that brevity isn’t better. Despite the popular belief that “less is more,” whittling down your message can ultimately cause you to carve away some of the important, meaty details that matter to buyers. And when you’re forced to choose between describing the features vs. selling the benefits of your solution (instead of including both), you lose.

If you *are* forced to choose between your solution’s features or benefits, focus on the features. Although the Features message still lost to Telling Details, the data suggests that buyers are more interested in specifically what your solution offers—not how you think it might benefit them.

Finally, adding flashy and fluffy superlatives like “all-in-one” doesn’t work. The Telling Details message offered buyers more specific details about the solution, as did the Features approach (albeit to a lesser degree). Superlatives, on the other hand, tell your buyer next to nothing about what your solution actually does or how it applies to their situation.

When building your capabilities messages, don’t just talk about features or benefits. Don’t use empty language to try and spice up your pitch. Instead, use specific, telling details and descriptive, emotional language to make your message more concrete, increase your impact, and create the differentiation you need to stand out.

meet our research team



Tim Riesterer

Chief Visionary, B2B DecisionLabs

Tim Riesterer, Chief Visionary at B2B DecisionLabs, is dedicated to helping companies harness the power of Decision Science to win more business with prospects and customers. He is a recognized thought leader, keynote speaker, and practitioner with more than 20 years of experience in marketing and sales management. Riesterer is co-author of four books, including *Customer Message Management*, *Conversations that Win the Complex Sale*, *The Three Value Conversations*, and *The Expansion Sale*.



Doug Hutton

SVP Products, B2B DecisionLabs

Doug Hutton leads all product development and management activities at B2B DecisionLabs. He works with our scientists and research partners to create a scientific foundation for solutions that help sales, marketing, and customer success teams have more successful customer conversations. Doug is co-author of *The Expansion Sale: Four Must-Win Conversations to Keep and Grow Your Customers*.



Dr. Nick Lee

Professor, Warwick Business School

Nick Lee is a professor of marketing at the Warwick Business School in Coventry, UK. His work connects theories from social psychology, cognitive neuroscience, economics and philosophy.

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