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Designing great products starts with humanized storytelling

Nobody wants a dashboard—they want a story. Why your next product demo that features AI should begin with a person, not a user interface.

Designing for people is the only way forward

Human-centered storytelling isn't just a design tactic. It's the most powerful way to pitch a new product vision. That's always been true, but now that AI is reshaping nearly every experience we touch, it's more essential than ever. Storytelling doesn't just clarify how a product will be helpful to a specific group of people—it also embeds human values into the pitch, not as an afterthought, but as part of the narrative itself. Any product vision that includes AI—especially Agentic AI—must keep humans firmly at the center. That means designing for oversight, transparency, and explainability. And the first step toward that? Telling a story that makes those values come to life. Whether you're a product leader, designer, consultant, or executive sponsor, we will walk you through how we use storytelling to help a complex, AI-powered product vision click—and offer some guidance for how to do the same in your own demos.

Here's an interesting backstory

A few weeks ago, at a pitch for a major regional grocery retailer, our team proposed a custom analytics platform powered by AI—one that the client's CPG brand partners could subscribe to, to gain insight into how their products were performing on shelves. Early in the pitch process, someone suggested that we should design a dashboard to show what the experience could look like (an idea that's been suggested many times before). Here's the thing:

| Nobody really wants a dashboard.

This is a default “solution” to a problem that none of us has studied long enough to learn anything of substance about. There is a reason we've heard this request time and again. We want to show something visual. However, nicely designed “AI-powered” data visualization mock-ups aren't what moves decision makers. A story does. And more specifically: a story about a person. With goals. Facing pressure. Making decisions. In the era of AI-powered digital products, it is more important than ever to lead with humans in the driver's seat. We knew this product pitch couldn't just showcase what we can do with AI. It had to demonstrate what it feels like to succeed because of it, in ways that reflect human values to shape a future that serves people first. The pace and pressure of consulting mean designers constantly have the chance to shape the product itself. There's rarely a detailed brief or roadmap—just a race to win new business. The only problem is that you need to learn as much as you can as quickly as possible to inform your product vision.

The cognitive problem with “screens-first” thinking

When the opportunity and pressure of a new pitch are on, the temptation to lead with static user interfaces (i.e., “show some screens”) can overtake. They are relatively easy to create or revise from past projects to plug into the current one. However, even the prettiest data visualizations and interface mock-ups ask too much of the audience. To interpret what's going on—to connect dots, map workflows, and imagine how it applies to users whose day-to-day reality they may not even understand well enough to determine if what they are looking at is “good.” This relates to the psychology concept of “System 1 and 2,” which author and professor Daniel Kahneman discusses in his book *Thinking Fast and Slow*. System 2 is slow, effortful, and analytical. System 1 is fast, emotional, and intuitive. Great storytelling speaks to System 1. It doesn't explain an idea; it immerses people in it.

Why storytelling matters (especially with AI)

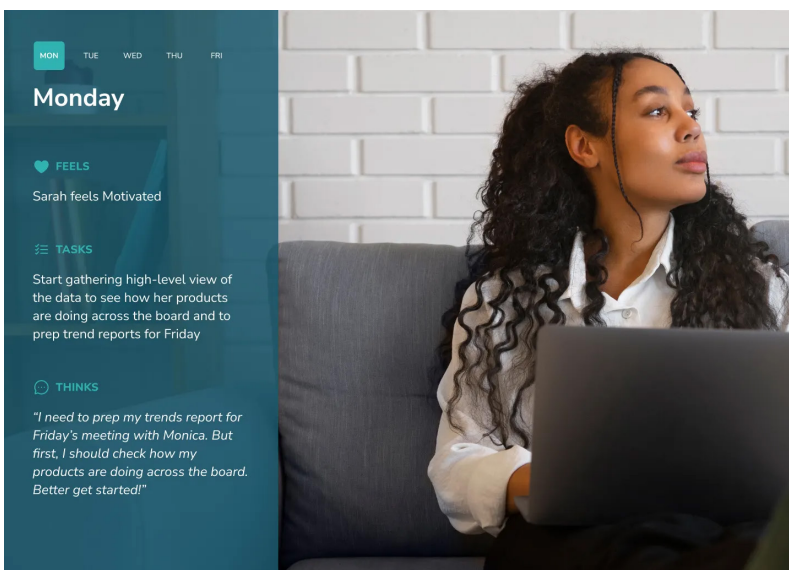
AI is part of almost every new product pitch these days. Clients want it in their products, and consultants need to be able to explain how we plan, design, and build for it. But AI can be abstract, technical, and a little slippery to demo. You can't just show a static screen and expect someone to get what it feels like to have AI anticipate user needs, reduce their cognitive load, or save them from a mistake. That's where storytelling comes in. It translates capability into experience. It puts the AI in context.

And most importantly, it makes the user the hero, not the system. And once stakeholders are engaged, we stand a better chance of diving into the complex details with them. That's exactly what we did in our pitch.

A week in the life of Sarah: Bringing AI to life

Instead of just designing a dashboard, we built a narrative. Oh, we most definitely designed screens, and there was even a dashboard in our prototype. But in the context of an overall experience, the narrative of a user achieving her goals made all the difference in the way it landed with our audience. With the help of several subject matter experts close to this user group, we created “Sarah,” a beverage category manager at a hypothetical brand called Hawaii Springs. The structure of Sarah’s week, filled with her goals, motivations, and conflicts became the plot, and “Alltown AIRO” (fictional name for our product) became the setting where it all unfolded. Below is a week in the life of Sarah, along with some bits from the talk track as we delivered this demo. If you stick until Friday, you will learn how to achieve something like this for your next pitch or product strategy vision.

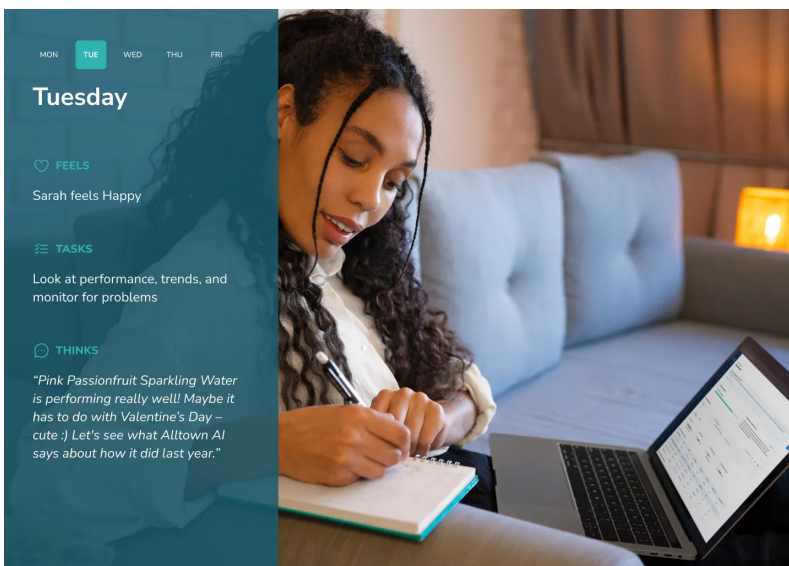
Monday: Automate the week



Sarah logs into AIRO from her home office—Mondays are for deep focus and weekly planning. She needs to get ahead of any out-of-stock trends before Friday’s check-in with her manager. The login screen includes an image of products from her brand, front and center. This gives her a feeling that the platform understands who she is, building confidence and trust. Her dashboard shows progress toward her quarterly goals, highlights key sales insights, and suggests actions. She scrolls through clean, dynamic visuals while

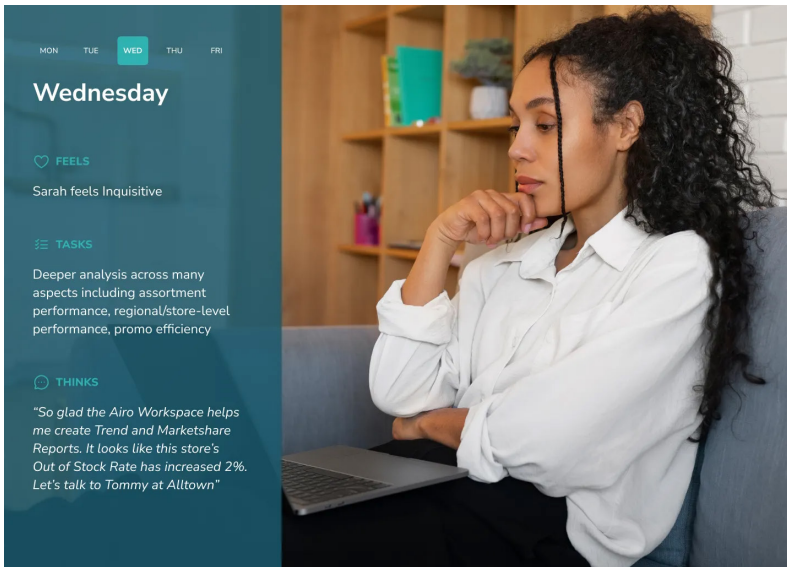
filtering by region, date, and store. One click activates her weekly automations. From this moment on, AIRO starts building her reports in the background and shows her a clear message that automation is happening.

Tuesday: Spot a signal



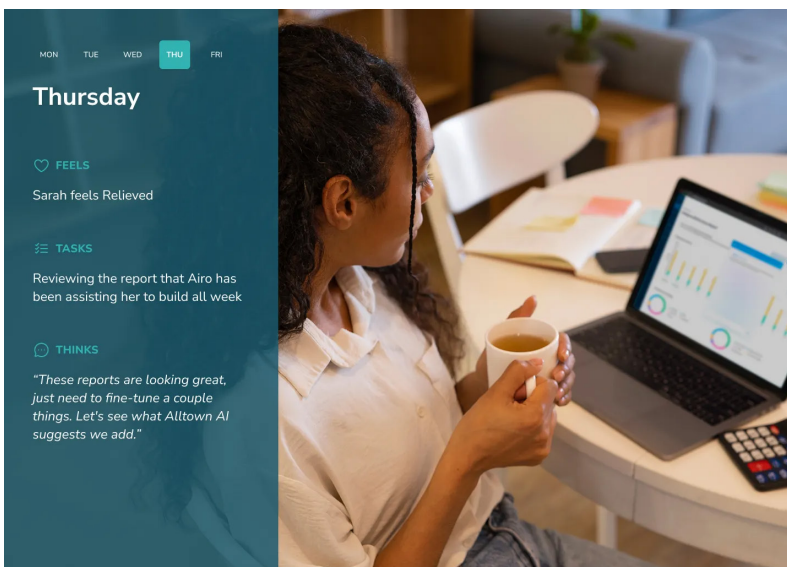
Sarah notices a spike in the Passionfruit Sparkling beverage. “Valentine’s Day?” she wonders. She asks the built-in AI for context, and gets back a comparison to last year’s trend, confirming the timing. Inventory looks solid, so she moves on, but the insight is automatically logged in her report.

Wednesday: Crisis and recovery



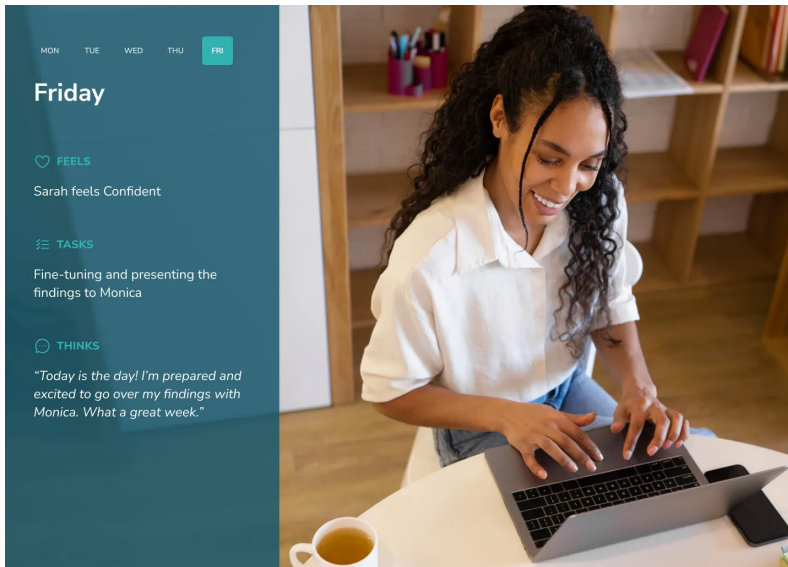
Today is for report cleanup—but Sarah spots a potential red flag. Hawaii Springs Lemon is selling well, but it's out of stock in Southern California. At the same time, the Cucumber flavor is underperforming. She digs into her Workspace—a hub for forecast and performance reports AIRO generates based on her past interactions. The out-of-stock issue provides drilldowns that show details about why. There was a supply chain disruption, some distribution misalignment, and marketing overreach. A little worried, she messages Tommy, her Alltown rep, through the platform. The system sends him the same report she's viewing for shared context. He confirms the issue and suggests a replenishment plan. That's when AIRO steps in with a suggestion: Run a BOGO campaign to drive velocity. Sarah agrees with that recommendation and decides to share it to the chat stream with Tommy. The message is tagged as "Recommended by AI" so both Sarah and Tommy remember this was the case for future reference. Sarah feels validated by the AI assistance and appreciates the control and transparency.

Thursday: Refine and finalize



Sarah notices a spike in the Passionfruit Sparkling beverage. "Valentine's Day?" she wonders. She asks the built-in AI for context, and gets back a comparison to last year's trend, confirming the timing. Inventory looks solid, so she moves on, but the insight is automatically logged in her report.

Friday: The payoff



Today is the day—Sarah presents her weekly summary to her manager. Out of stock issues? Flagged early and addressed. Declining product? Recovering with a new promo. Top performers? Getting smarter, more personalized attention. She's confident, in control—with a little help from a super smart assistant.

Why it worked

We could've shown only a few static dashboards. We showed Sarah instead. Through her, we demonstrated:

- How AI offers predictions, keeping the user on top of issues and in the driver's seat of taking action
- How automation frees up the user from busy work
- How insight becomes action—fast

And most importantly, we showed a story the client could relate to. Because it wasn't abstract. It was plausible. The story wasn't about AI. It was about a person succeeding, with AI in her corner.

So how did it land? The Product Manager and VP of Data on the client side leaned-in, paid attention, and asked great questions. They thanked our team for doing our homework and coming to the table with a clear vision—a win in our book. That led into a discussion on how their data is currently structured, and the steep challenges that would need to be overcome to bring a concept like this to life.

How to tell a human-centered product story

If you're a designer being asked to "just show a few screens," take a beat and try this instead:

1. Start with a persona or proto-persona: Personas aren't perfect, but when grounded in good research, they perform a very important job which is to build empathy. In a product demonstration, they serve an essential role which is to become the star character of an easy-to-follow story—an essential component to capturing your audience's attention. Quality is important. Check out [A 5-Step Framework for Building Better Personas](#) for some great advice.

2. Don't. Skip. The. Research: Even in a fast-moving pitch scenario, a small investment in user or SME interviews can yield outsized returns. In our case, one conversation with an industry expert unlocked the entire structure of the story — the rhythm, the language, the stakes. Without it, the demo would've stayed abstract. Research doesn't have to be perfect or exhaustive. But if you skip it, you risk building fiction.

3. Build your narrative around one or more key insights learned in the research: Once you've done your homework, turn your findings into insights and build your narrative around that. Great bit-size advice for how to do it can be found in this post [How to Turn Insights into Action with Storytelling](#).

4. Let AI support, not star: The user is the hero. AI is the trusted sidekick. User is in the driver seat. AI is recommending the direction. Often the sidekick is a strong influence, guiding the direction of the main character. But ultimately, she makes her own decisions.

5. Strive for plausible, not perfect: Rarely do we have the luxury of a ton of time when building a pitch. Unless you are working in an ultra-regulated domain or in the context of life and death—it's ok to make a few assumptions and keep moving forward. Once you win the work, you will go deeper, and it might pivot or change completely—and that is ok.

6. Use AI to assist: For Sarah's story, the core structure came from a solid understanding of this user, but there were several aspects along the way that were co-created with the help of generative AI tools. For example, we used Chat GPT to help synthesize research findings, frame our understanding of the competitive context and business goals. It also helped us with product naming, UX theme framing, and feature refinement. Our visual designer used Adobe Firefly for the high-fidelity login screen hero image.

Final thought: **Design is how we make it human**

In an age of complex data and fast-moving AI capabilities, storytelling isn't fluff—it's strategy. It's how we shift the conversation from features and aesthetics to value. If you want stakeholders to believe in your vision, stop showing them how it works. Show them who it works for. And make the user the hero of the story.

About the **author**



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As Product Design Director at Brillio, Kara leads multidisciplinary teams to craft human-centered digital experiences and map complex service design journeys. Her career spans national-scale exhibits and events for Shedd Aquarium, and immersive AI, quantum, and emerging tech experiences for IBM. With design experience across hospitality, healthcare, and retail, she brings a systems-minded approach that blends creativity, strategy, and impact.

About Brillio

Brillio is a digital technology services company that drives AI-first engineering and design-led experiences for global enterprises. Born digital in 2014, its consulting-led services span Customer Experience, Data & AI, Product Engineering, and Digital Infrastructure. With an industry-leading NPS of 71, Brillio accelerates time to market through its proprietary BrillioOne.ai platform, powered by AI-ready talent with deep domain expertise.

Brillio is the official Digital Transformation Partner and the official Data and AI Services Provider of Atlassian Williams Racing. Brillio partners with leading technology providers including Microsoft, AWS, Google Cloud, Salesforce, Adobe, Databricks, and Snowflake and operates with 6,000+ “Brillians” across 15 global delivery centers. Consistently recognized as a Great Place to Work® since 2021, Brillio blends innovation, talent, and purpose to deliver measurable outcomes for clients and fulfilling careers for employees.



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