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Charting it Out

The Best Way To Use Charts and Graphs

By Lee Silber



I would say that nobody reads anymore, but then again you're reading this article, so instead I'll say, smart people read—which is factually true.

However, in general reading is on the decline. This is why charts and graphs have replaced words as a way of communicating information, making a point, and understanding what numbers mean. It's the new visual language.

If you have kids, you know they probably can't read cursive and likely don't wear a watch—and have a hard time reading an analog clock. It's just the way it is, and we have to adapt.

The saying, "Seeing is believing" and, "A picture is worth a thousand words" applies to everyone, of every age. Everyone is overwhelmed with information and extremely busy (even retirees) so making it quick and easy by showing what you mean with graphics works for just about everyone.

Charts and graphs are not new—*USA Today* pioneered a new way to convey facts and figures in Snapshots, small info-graphics featured on the front page of each section. What's new is how cool graphics can be, and the innovative ways in which we can use them effectively.

In this article we will explore all the ways we can have more *show* and less tell in our show and tell presentations of information—in any and all mediums. In fact, we will start with the basics (I can see your eyes rolling) but once you know the why, the how will become more clear.

The One Thing

For instance, with any design not everything can be big and bold. We have to have a focal point. Steve Jobs was an amazing presenter and his slides were revolutionary (obviously, I'm a big fan) and the reason why is he always had a main point, and then he backed that up with three sub points. (For those of you who know, Steve Jobs would always end with his famous, “And one more thing . . .” line. So technically, he had four sub-points.)

Jobs' charts and graphs were simple and focused. That's not easy to do, but we have to decide what is the one thing we want them to know and remember. Then we create a graphic around that main point, number, or fact. If everything is equal in importance, nothing is memorable. It's like ten people screaming at once. We want one person yelling and everyone else whispering, so to speak.

Ha, you thought I was done with simple and focused. It's so important that I want to double down on it. Going back to what we agreed on earlier, that everyone is overwhelmed and busy (you did agree to that, right?) what we want to do with our graphics is just tell people the one thing they need to know—and that we want them to know. This alone will help you clean up the clutter in your charts and graphs.

Facts Tell, Stories Sell

If we are trying to teach, tell, sell, or inform with information, the best way to make people pay attention is through stories—visual stories. I know, this seems contradictory, but stick with me. When faced with a lot of data, a visual story will hook the reader, pull them in, and tease them to want to get to the ending.

I can see you thinking, “How do I do that with a chart or graph?” I agree, good question. The first thing they will likely see is the headline above the visual. This needs to hook them. The best way to cast your line out and then reel in a reader is with a question. Why? Curiosity. Ask a question and people will be dying to know the answer. It’s a great way to state a problem. For example, if you were writing about noise pollution, you could ask: “Where is the world's quietest room?”

Now you have them on the line, reel them in with fascinating facts. Keeping with our thesis of less distractions and quiet, we would tell them that the quietest room in the world it’s located at Microsoft's headquarters in Washington state. See, I did not know that. We have already talked about focusing on the *one* thing that you thing that is most important to know. How about highlighting the one thing that will make people say, “Oh!” or “Aha!”

Like all good stories, there is a beginning that grabs the reader (the problem that needs to be solved), the middle (facts and figures that they find fascinating and back up your thesis), and the conclusion (what you want or need them to know and what you want them to do next).

Most importantly, lead with your best stuff. Give it the most visual weight and make it stand out.

Visualization is Actualization

Okay, the subhead sounds very Californian. The truth is, we should ask ourselves when faced with sharing information, “How can this be shown visually?” This means taking percentages and showing them in with creative pie charts. Numerical facts and figures can be turned into a unique bar charts. For numbers that are hard to understand, use a diagram to visualize them.

I’ll share what info-graphics are, but first let’s look at the old reliable forms of communicating facts and figures. The first is the pie chart. This is where we show the

relationship between numbers in a visual way. We do it in a way that looks like a pie—or pizza, or salad, or anything that comes in a round form. Historically, these are called pie charts, but only because we use a pie-shaped circle to start, and divided it by percentage into slices.

A bar chart is just like it sounds—numbers represented by bars rising up to show which one is the “winner” based on how high it rises. What makes this a cool way to show what you mean is the “bars” can be anything related to what you are comparing. For example, the bars that rise up can represent how tall (or short) the average NBA player is. The bars can be illustrated using different types of (or specific) players.

The graph illustrates the relationship in a visual form that is too complicated to do in text. (As such, if you can convey data succinctly in one sentence, then a graph isn’t necessary.) A graph that shows points of data with points of axis on the left and below help to show a trend (sales are rising) using horizontal and vertical columns.

We’ve talked about info-graphics without explaining exactly what they are. Simply stated, they combine all the forms of illustrating information , but do it by using cool clip art and graphics that help readers quickly understand what is being presented numerically in a way that is visual, creative, and cool.

In Closing

It’s nice to know that things from the past are still popular (bar and pie charts) and to also realize there are new and creative ways to show what we mean through info-graphics (which are simply souped-up charts). Be a student on the things that grabbed your attention and then adapt them to your needs. Look for templates of graphics to visually show what you mean. There are plenty to choose from—and all you have to do is find the one that works for you—and your “readers”.

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