

Harvard Business Review

WEBINAR SUMMARY

Using Data for Better Online Presentations

Featuring Alexandra Samuel

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Using Data for Better Online Presentations

PRESENTER:

Alexandra Samuel, Speaker, Researcher, and Author of *Work Smarter with Social Media*

MODERATOR:

Ania Wieckowski, Senior Editor, *Harvard Business Review*

Overview

Delivering online data-driven presentations has become a crucial skill for business professionals. However, as important as this skill now is, presenters often fail to use data effectively to tell their story.

This doesn't have to be the case. By understanding and using data visualization best practices, presenters can deliver more effective presentations that result in the target audience digesting the key messages. Key steps are planning, creating, and then delivering the presentation. When data-driven presentations are done right, audience members will recall key data points and messages. However, data itself is not the story. Data is an important tool that provides support for a narrative and helps tell a story.

Context

Presentation expert Alexandra Samuel shared insights, best practices, and examples for creating and delivering more effective data-driven presentations.

Key Takeaways

Data is often not used effectively to tell a compelling story.

Most people have seen an amazing presentation where data is used extremely well in telling an amazing story. Well-known examples are [TED talks by Hans Rosling](#) and a [remarkable video](#) of Rosling that uses visualization to present data on life expectancy and income in an extraordinary way.

However, such uses of data visualization in presentations are rare. Even when charts and graphs are used in presentations, the data isn't used as well as it could be to help tell the story. Often when data is used in a presentation it is overwhelming, misunderstood, and distracting.

WHEN CHARTS FAIL...

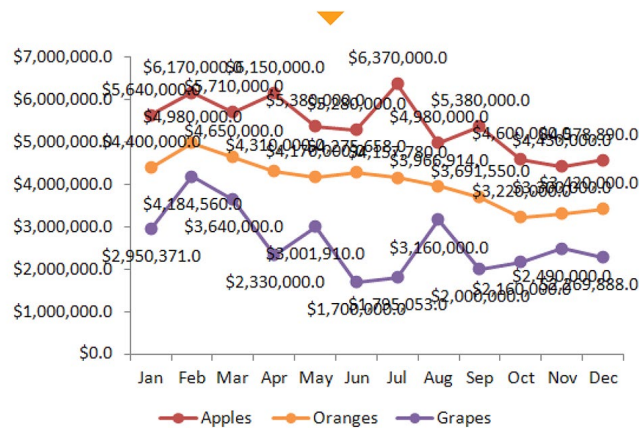


FIGURE 1: EXAMPLE OF A POOR DATA VISUALIZATION

“Effective data use [in presentations] is really the exception rather than the rule.”

—Alexandra Samuel

It is important to work effectively with data at all phases of the presentation process.

Incorporating data effectively is important throughout the presentation process, which includes preparing a presentation, creating a presentation, and delivering a presentation.

PREPARING

Important considerations in preparing a presentation include:

- **Know your audience.** Who is the audience? What do they really need to know? What parts of your presentation are they likely to challenge?
- **Determine the key message.** Decide on the one central message of the presentation that you want people to remember, as well as a secondary message. Then, think about how to use data to help deliver that message and how you want to visualize this data.

“What is the primary message that I want everyone to take away? . . . What are the words and numbers you really want people to walk away with?”

—Alexandra Samuel

- **Make presentation decisions.** Decide on colors, icons, legends, and other key visual elements, and keep these elements consistent throughout the presentation. Also, decide how many slides the presentation will be (fewer is better) and how to allocate slides to make the key points.

- **Establish a presentation cadence.** Don't just have slide after slide with data. Have groups of slides. For example, in each group, the first slide could present one piece of data, the next slide would have some text with bullets, the next slide would have an image, and the final slide in the group would have a conclusion. A presentation might have a few groupings of slides, each with a clear conclusion. By having such a cadence and only presenting data once every four or five slides, the audience gets a mental break and is not overwhelmed by data.

CREATING

After preparing a presentation and making decisions about key messages and data, it is time to create the presentation. Important considerations include:

- **Tools.** It isn't necessary to create every presentation from scratch, and using Excel will not yield the best results. A few tools to be aware of:
 - **Tableau:** This is an enterprise-class tool for data analysis and presentation. It uses data to produce nice, clean, sophisticated visuals.



FIGURE 2: TABLEAU EXAMPLE

- **Infogram:** This is a simple, inexpensive, easy-to-use visualization tool for creating charts and infographics.
- **Creative Market:** This is a marketplace where it is possible to purchase presentation templates, illustrations, icons, fonts, and other design elements, at low cost. (Alexandra Samuel purchased the template for this webinar presentation from Creative Market.)
- **Designers.** People often think that a graphic designer is an expensive luxury they can't afford. But designers are not necessarily that expensive and great charts can be reused for multiple presentations. Organizations should definitely consider a designer for some purposes.

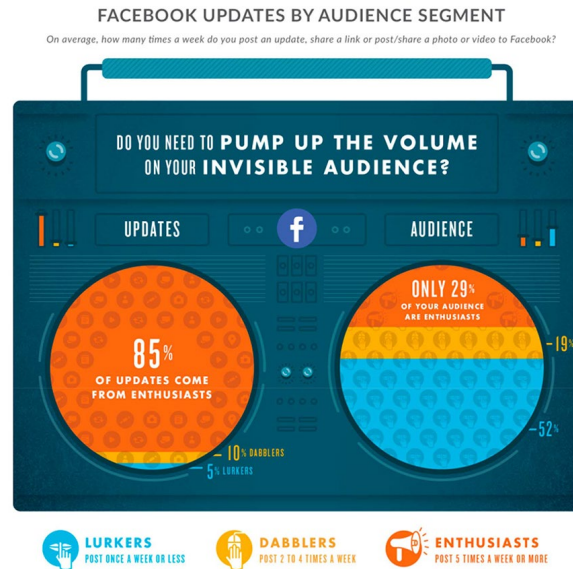


FIGURE 3: EXAMPLE OF A VISUALIZATION PREPARED BY A DESIGNER

After deciding on the tools and possibly a designer, it is necessary to decide what kind of chart to create and to determine the key point of a particular graphic. An excellent resource is the book *Good Charts* by HBR’s Scott Berinato.



FIGURE 4: GOOD CHARTS

In creating a presentation, it is suggested to boil it down to a few categories, use few slides, and emphasize just one data point per slide. Legends should be clear and repeated on all slides showing data so it is apparent to the audience what they are seeing. The title of a slide tells the audience what the slide is all about, but is not necessarily the key takeaway from the slide.

DELIVERING

Once a presentation is prepared and created, it is time to actually deliver the presentation. Suggestions include:

- **Provide an introduction.** At the beginning of the presentation it is necessary to briefly walk the audience through unique elements of the presentation, such as terminology, what different colors stand for, icon schemes, and chart legends.
- **Walk the audience through a slide.** Spend a few minutes talking the audience through how to read a particular slide in some detail. Explain what each axis is, identify and highlight a particular data point, and explain to the audience what they are seeing. This will guide the audience in viewing and understanding subsequent data visualizations.

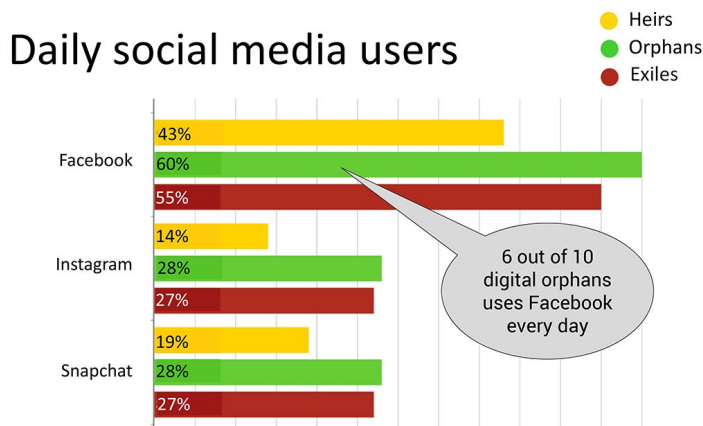


FIGURE 5: EXAMPLE OF A CLEAR VISUAL THAT EMPHASIZES KEY POINT

“Take them through the slide in some detail . . . repeat the [key] number. Tell people how to interpret it. And then after you’ve let them soak it in, give them a bit of a breather.”

— Alexandra Samuel

- **Provide periodic recaps.** Don’t just plow ahead. After presenting important data and a key point, deliver the key takeaway, recap all takeaways thus far, and then proceed. At the end of the presentation, recap the primary message and all key points. Also, offer an overall conclusion and summation of the entire presentation. And, never end with a chart.

**DIGITAL ORPHANS ARE
50% MORE LIKELY
TO TALK TO STRANGERS
ONLINE**
compared to digital heirs

FIGURE 6: EXAMPLE OF HOW TO STATE A MAJOR CONCLUSION

Also, as important as data visualization is, data alone rarely tells the entire story. Data provides support for a narrative and can help tell a story, but data—combined with visuals and words—is only part of the story.

PRESENTATION BEST PRACTICES

- **Know the audience.** Who are you speaking to? What is their level of sophistication and knowledge of a particular subject?
- **Define your key message.** What is the key message that you want people to recall? What is the key piece of data to help drive home this message?
- **Highlight a single number.** When preparing a presentation, identify a single number that you want the audience to take away and highlight this number—simply, clearly, repeatedly.
- **Use legends on every slide.** Explain to the audience what the legends are.
- **Quality over quantity.** A few outstanding slides and data visualizations are far more important than having tons of slides.
- **Give the audience a break.** Don't present data, more data, and even more data. After sharing some data on one slide, provide a visual, some bullets, and some conclusions before sharing additional data.



Alexandra Samuel is a digital explorer, researcher, and writer. She is the former Vice-President of Social Media for Vision Critical, and was the co-founder of Social Signal, one of the world's first social media agencies.

She blogs for the *Harvard Business Review* (<http://bit.ly/awshbr>), and her writing on technology issues has appeared in media outlets like the *Wall Street Journal*, *Macworld*, *TheAtlantic.com* and *Oprah.com*. A frequent speaker on the business and social impact of the Internet, she is represented by the Lavin Agency.

Alex holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from Harvard University and a B.A. in Politics from Oberlin College.



Ania Wieckowski is an editor at *Harvard Business Review*, where she develops and product manages many of HBR Press's skills-improvement book series, such as the HBR Guides and the HBR 20-Minute Managers. She is interested in the future of long-form reading and idea consumption in the digital age. In previous incarnations at HBR she worked in the Press's production department, the product development team, and as an acquisitions editor. Prior to joining HBR, Ania received her MA in Victorian Literature from the University of Virginia, and a BA from Amherst College.