

Is your strategy dotty? Ten lessons that graphs can teach US

 By Sid Peimer

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I like to keep things simple. What could be simpler than a dot? Put dots together and we get all sorts of shapes once we connect them - and we could say that, loosely speaking, strategy is just connecting the dots. There are four steps to a strategy - not necessarily in this order and you can return to any step at any time.

The four steps

Firstly there is extraction - essentially finding the dots. Then there is the analysis phase where we determine what the dots are all about. Then comes the construction phase where you find the relevant axes and plot the dots. Then finally you need to step back and determine what the story is (after all, strategies are just stories)

So, to summarise the process:

1. Extract: Find the dots
2. Analyse: Interpret the dots
3. Construct: Plot the dots

4. Communicate: Show the final graph with its heading (the latter of which summarises the complete story)

Good graphs are like good strategies

When dots are plotted on a graph, they are given meaning. So, working backwards, what makes a good graph - and hence, what makes a good strategy?

1. Firstly, the message is clear - the heading summarises what you want to say. There is no unnecessary puffery.
2. There is not too much information so that the core message is lost. If ever there was a prominent fault in presentation, it's this. For some reason people think that the more data they're sharing the more information they're conveying. Actually the opposite is true.
3. There is too little information. You can't leave people hanging - they can only assimilate information when it relates to something they already know. New information is just a variation of old information. Point B is always related to point A. There is space between the dots which we connect, but if the dots are too far apart, our story looks weak.

4. It is pleasing to look at. There is no excuse for a strategy not looking elegant. When you sit through those presentations with copious amounts of slides and extensive information on each slide, how much do you really remember?
5. Explain the colours and symbols with a simple key. Stay away from the jargon - it doesn't impress people. A clear and insightful story does.
6. You don't have to start at zero (for example, don't give me the demographic background of the country - it's not required to tell the story). It reminds me of the joke when the psychiatrist asks the patient to start at the beginning. The patient replies "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth".
7. Leave room for labels, axes etc. The client needs to be able to see the entire story and have perceptual room to interpret what you're saying. When you label the axes include the units. We need to know how much - we need to be able to see things in context.
8. Use an appropriate graph, which might not be dots at all. Scatter plots with best fit lines are best for two variables that show somewhat linear results. Line graphs to show how two variables change over time and bar charts when there are a number of categories, such as lemons, oranges, pears etc. You can't have one size fits all in a strategy - adapt the strategy to tell the story.
9. Don't introduce unnecessary complexity, such as irrelevant decoration and multiple effects. Do nothing that gets in the way of telling your story. This known as 'chartjunk'.
10. There is one rule you can break however, and that is to add perspective - actually as much as you can, because that's essentially what the client wants when they ask for a strategy: your perspective. The more you can give, the more value you provide.

And if the story is complex, your job is to make it simple. Just like a good graph.

Sid Peimer is a consultant and trainer in strategy. His next course is 29 October 2014 in Cape Town. [Click here for details](#)

ABOUT SID PEIMER

A seasoned and insightful executive with multisector experience in roles as diverse as senior management, strategic planning and copywriting. I am a qualified pharmacist with an MBA from UCT. I am also an accomplished keynote speaker and presenter.

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