

# The Ultimate Guide: Data Visualization vs. Storytelling with Data

November 02, 2018



**We're addicted to data.** It helps us find golden revenue opportunities. It helps us slash project costs. Whatever path we seek or decision we are trying to make, we rely on data to get there. But sometimes instead of hastening decisions, data can actually hinder them. That's because those who spend time gathering data have a tendency to want to show off ALL of it. Even data visualization experts – with ability to render beautiful, colorful charts and tables – will struggle to give their data meaning unless they know how to tell a story.

## **Data without a story lacks impact for two reasons:**

- The data isn't distilled. We don't necessarily need more data to solve our problems or uncover opportunity, we need to identify and communicate value from the data we already have.
- The data doesn't support a BIG Idea. Data that is "fire-hosed" makes it difficult for our audience to quickly grasp the actionable "news" it brings.

So how can you combat this data crisis? First, you must distinguish between two important but distinct concepts that are often conflated -- *storytelling with data* and *data visualization*. Next, check out some

powerful techniques that will help you fold your ideas into a data-driven story. Here is a guide to get you started.

## What is data visualization?



Data visualization is simply the visual representation of data. This might be basic charts and tables that are generated from a spreadsheet. Or, it could go well beyond those modalities to include any use of shapes, color, and sizing to draw visual focus to data findings. Bottom line, data visualization is about communicating the substance of your metrics in a visual way.

Data visualization can certainly be used to tell a story at the slide level. It can:

- Provide context
- Elevate and draw attention to key insights (and visually subdue the others)
- Lead to action (AKA: the “ask”)

However, the real magic happens when data visualization is driven by storytelling at the slide level *and* story level.

## What is storytelling with data, and why is it important?



Storytelling with data differs from data visualization because it requires communicators to offer a larger, holistic, view of their message. You must focus first on your audience and structure a larger message before any visuals are rendered. You must identify from the start:

- What do I want my audience to *know* or *do* with the data I am presenting?
- How will I structure a narrative that leads to desired action?
- How is my data helping drive a decision?

There is no understating how important it is for all presented data to have a purpose. Every piece of data you include should further this purpose – or it should be left out.

## How do I get started storytelling with data?

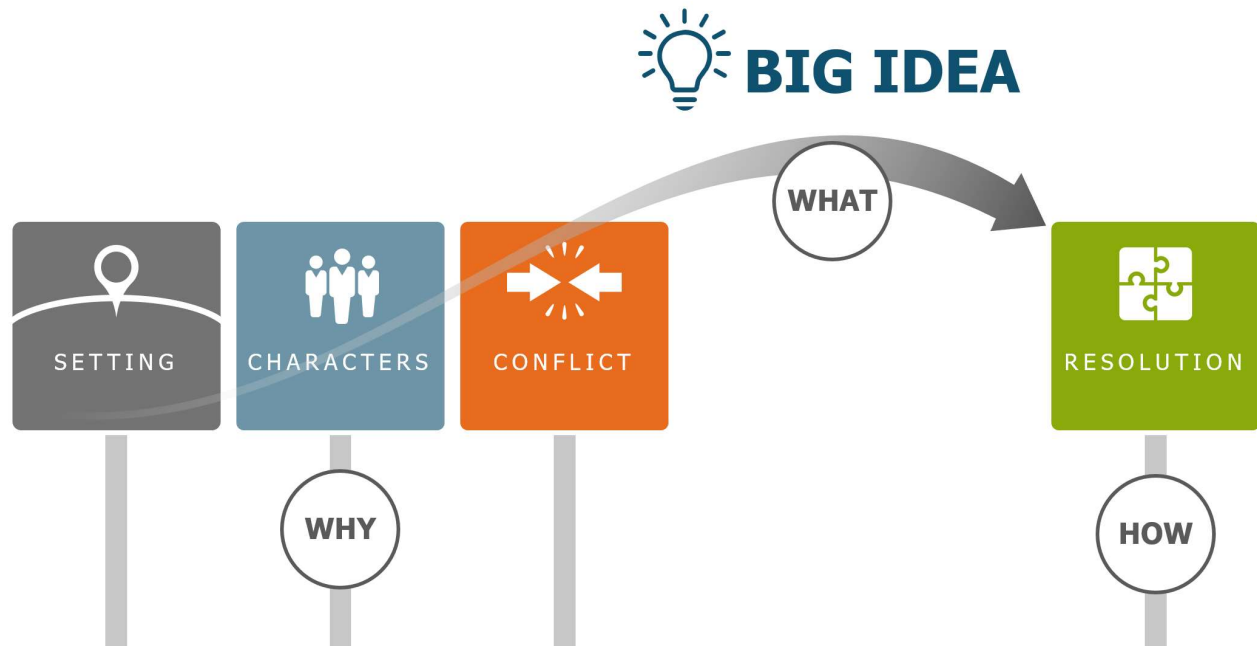
We all know that **telling a story with data** gives it meaning. But many of us wonder: How do we actually do this? Well, the work begins before you sit down at your computer to build that chart or table. A **good data storyteller** always begins with their audience and establishes their key message:

- What am I trying to achieve with the data I choose to display?
- Who is my audience? What do they care about? What level of data detail will they likely expect or appreciate?
- What is my BIG Idea -- the one thing I want my audience to know or do with my data?

Storytellers also determine: "Is the data I am choosing moving forward the story I want to tell?" If the answer is yes, it is probably safe to include it. At that point, you are ready to open your computer and begin to build your visuals.

## I don't have experience in graphic design *or* storytelling. Where do I start?

Whether you are using basic data visualization software that will quickly elevate and call out key points or sophisticated tools and apps, remember: the best way to get decision-makers to act is through storytelling. This requires you to develop a **basic story structure** that drives one, overarching BIG Idea forward. With this structure in place, you've got a roadmap to identify which data must be included and which can be obscured or left out entirely.



Once you've identified clear points to make, visuals should be kept simple and draw only your key points into focus.

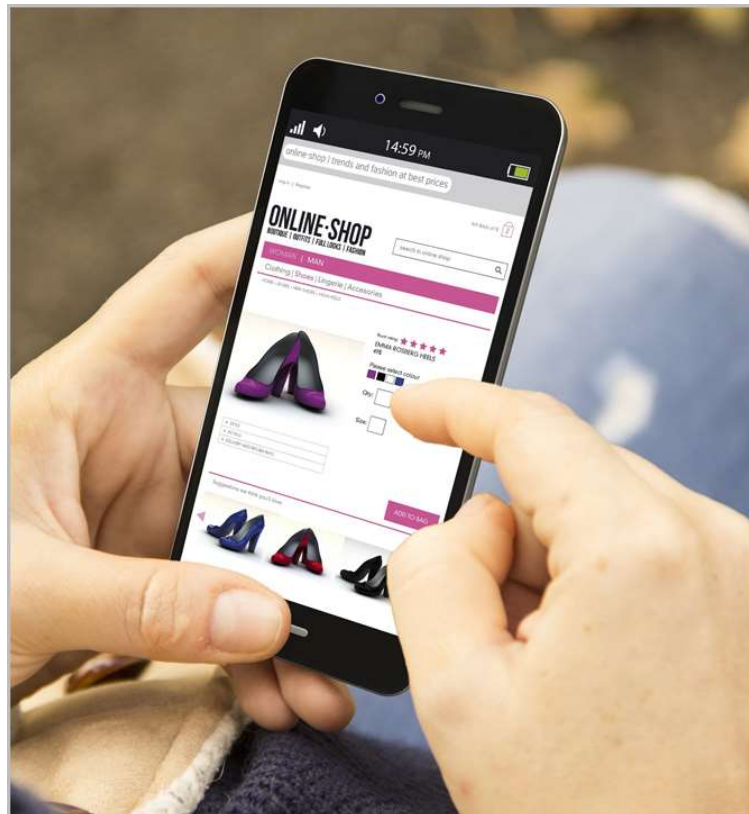
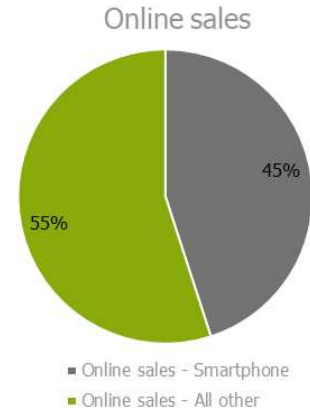
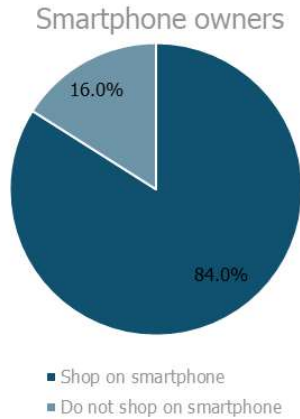
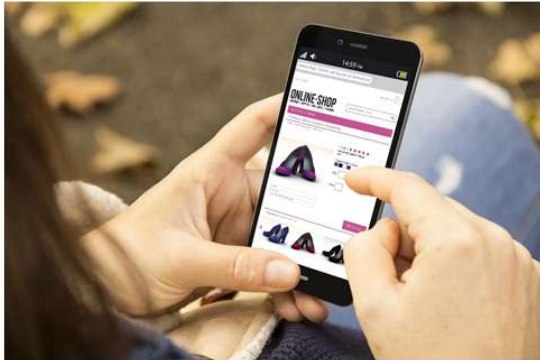
What are some simple data storytelling techniques that enhance my message?

### Create a Headline for Every Slide

One of the best visualization techniques is actually **all about text**. Imagine each slide as a news article. What is the most significant data finding you want to share? Write that headline at the top of your slide. In fact, write a headline on *every* slide. This powerful practice forces you to visually articulate your key insights and connect your slides in an easily recognizable pattern.



# Mobile trends in shopping



# Mobile is changing the way people shop and buy

84% of smartphone users shop on their phones

45% of all online shopping purchases happen on a smartphone

Source: Emarketer, [Region, Year]

## Consider photography

Slapping a spreadsheet or loads of bullets on a slide is the *opposite* of good data visualization. The information will simply wash over us, causing squints and confusion. A good alternative is to break up text

with photography or simple icons. Not only is it more visually pleasing, it is actually **proven to help get your story across**. Neuroscience tells us, pictures are infinitely more memorable than text.

BEFORE

## Millennials are mobile

- Young adults, 18 to 24, send 2,022 texts per month on average — 67 texts on a daily basis
- Millennials are not using traditional computing devices, 58% only access social media on their smartphones
- Millennials complete many practical activities on their smartphones – 71% of millennials report reading news on their smartphones



AFTER

## Your new consumers are mobile natives



### 58%

of millennials access social media on mobile only

### 2K/mo

average number of texts sent by 18- to 24-year-olds

### 71%

of millennials read news via smartphone

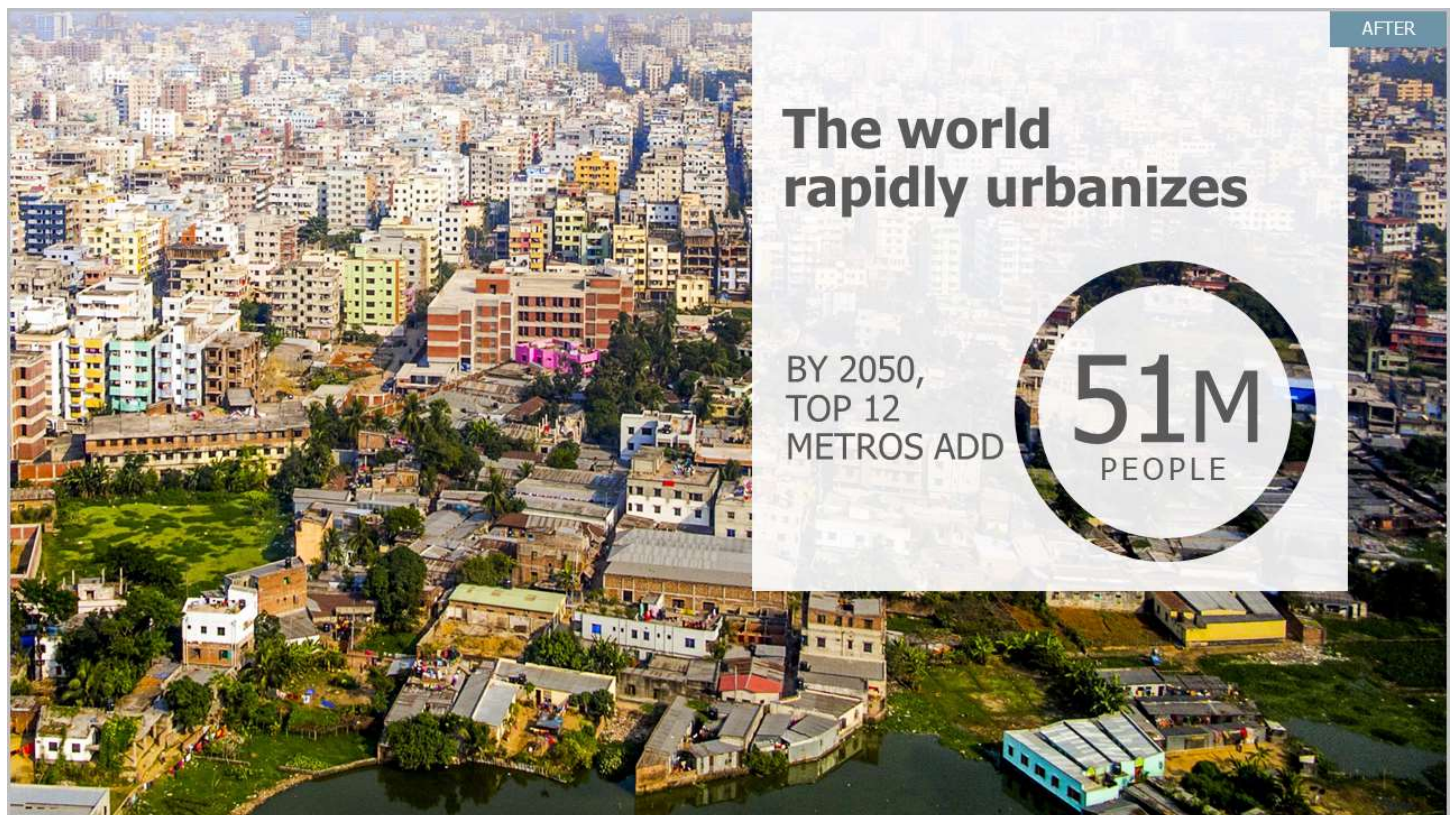
Source: Facebook

**Don't supply any extraneous data**



Be scrupulous. Be selective. Only use data that directly supplies information to the concluding point of your argument or pitch.

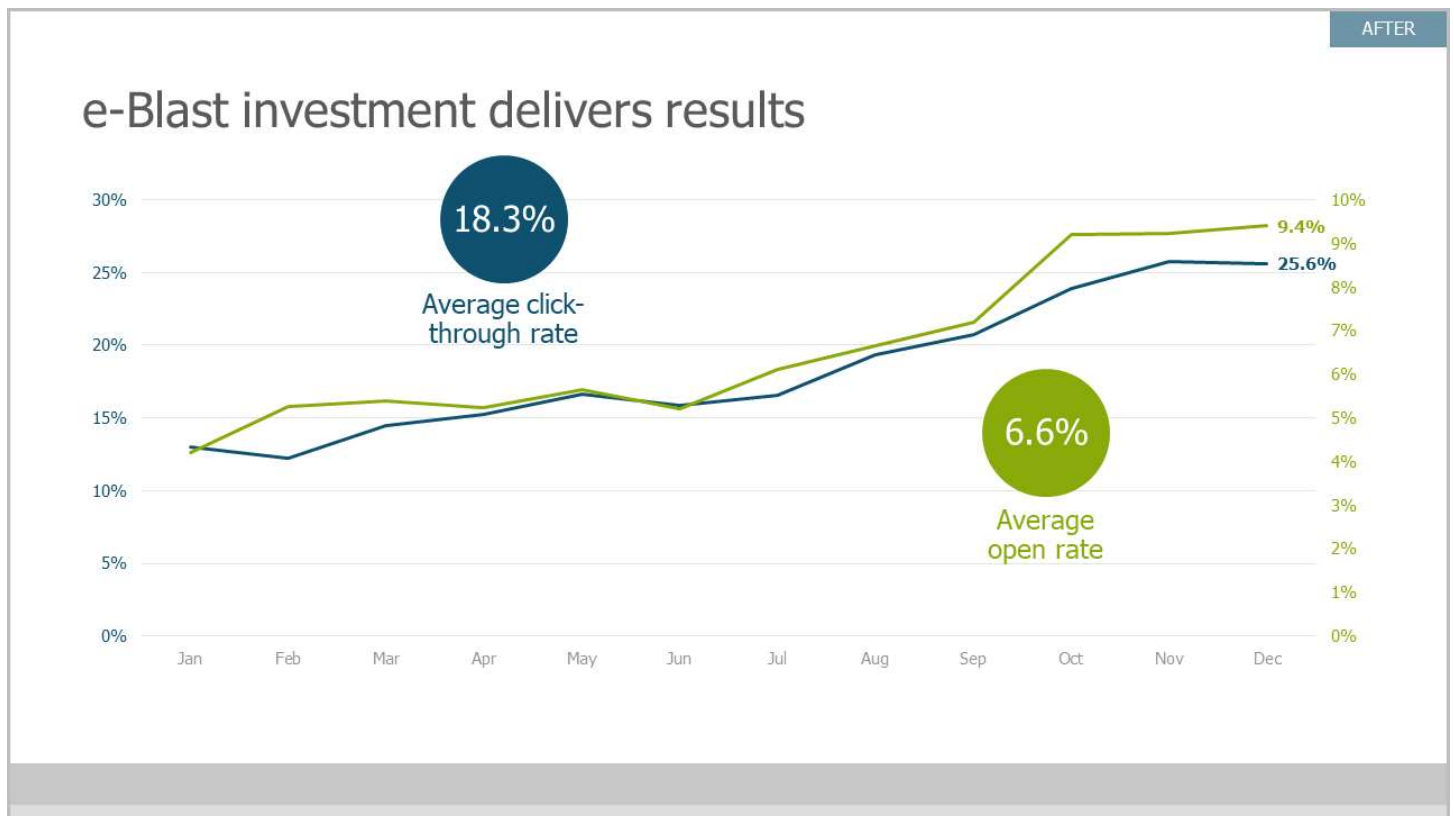
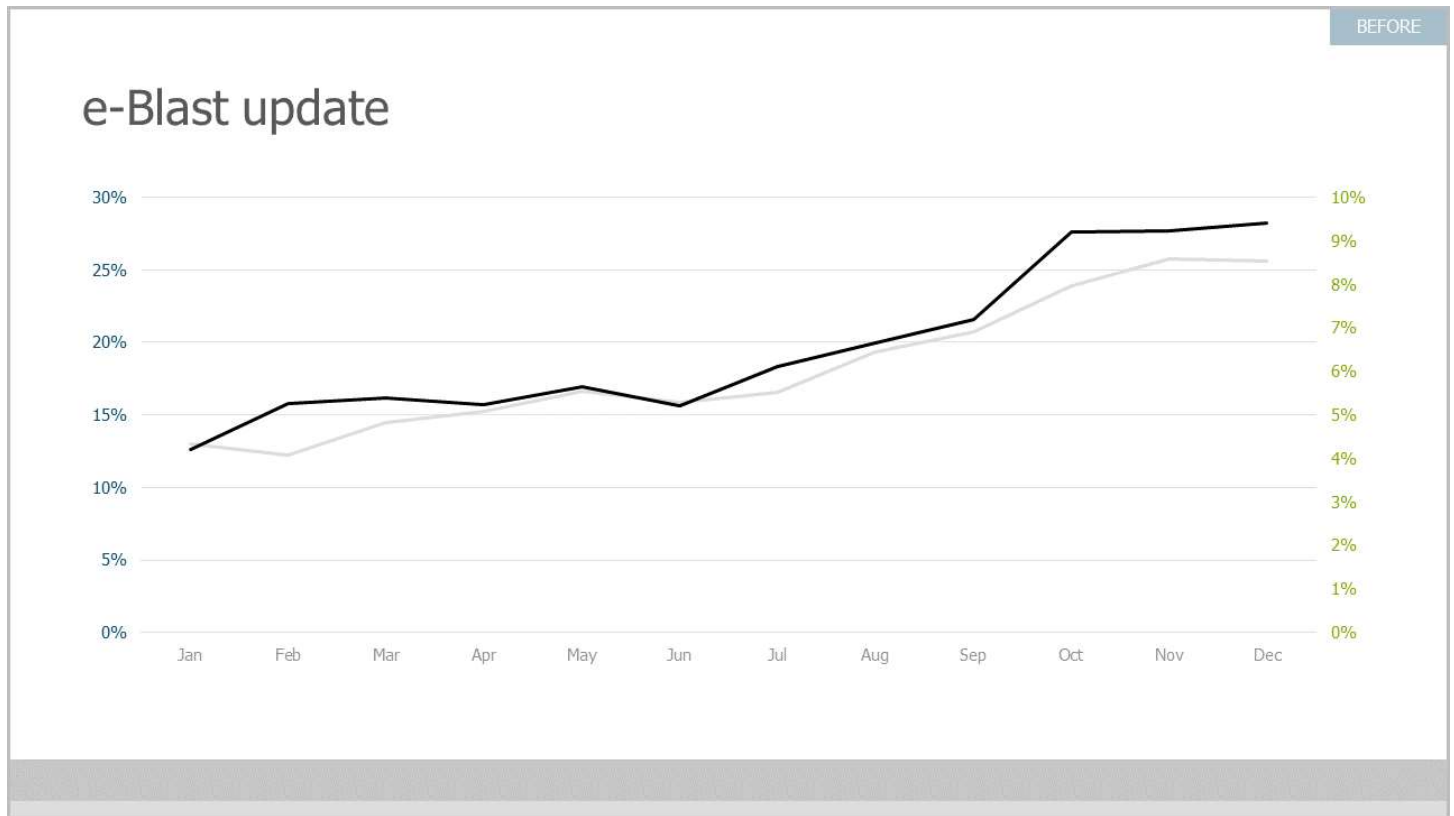
							BEFORE
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	Population (thousands)						2015-2050 Growth
2	City	Country	2015	2020	2025	2050	
3	Tokyo	Japan	36,090	36,370	36,400	36,400	0.9%
4	Mumbai	India	20,070	21,950	24,050	26,385	31.5%
5	Delhi	India	17,020	18,670	20,480	22,498	32.2%
6	Dhaka	Bangladesh	14,800	17,020	19,420	22,015	48.8%
7	São Paulo	Brasil	19,580	20,540	21,120	21,428	9.4%
8	Ciudad de México	México	19,480	20,190	20,700	21,009	7.8%
9	New York-Newark	US	19,440	19,970	20,370	20,628	6.1%
10	Kolkata	India	15,580	17,040	18,710	20,560	32.0%
11	Shanghai	China	15,790	17,210	18,470	19,412	22.9%
12	Karachi	Pakistan	13,050	14,860	16,920	19,095	46.3%
13	Kinshasa	D.R. Congo	9,050	11,310	13,880	16,762	85.2%
14	Lagos	Nigeria	10,570	12,400	14,130	15,796	49.4%
15	Total top 12		210,520	227,530	244,650	261,988	24.4%
16	Source: Nordpil World Database of Large Cities, 2016						



How else can I bring my data story to life visually?

### Use call-outs to highlight important data

Call-outs allow you to **create a focal point** for your key metric on your slide. They are created using color, size, and shapes, attracting focus to a specific area on your slide.





## Don't use a chart if you don't need one

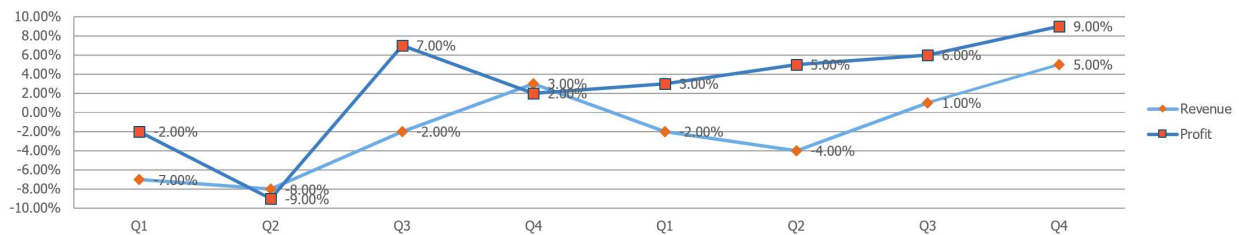
Your audience is much more likely to come to a decision based on one simple, conclusive data point. If you don't *need* to visually display your data in a traditional bar/pie/line chart, then don't. Clean lines, over-sized text, or a few simple shapes are often all you need to visualize the data story.

BEFORE

### Quarterly business review

#### Results

- Revenue 5% above target
- Profit 9% above target
- Profit and revenue performance driven by growth in the direct channel
- EMEA profits (-4% v target/-2%YoY) trend needs to be monitored



AFTER

Q4 delivers excellent financial results,  
Forecast suggests challenges ahead

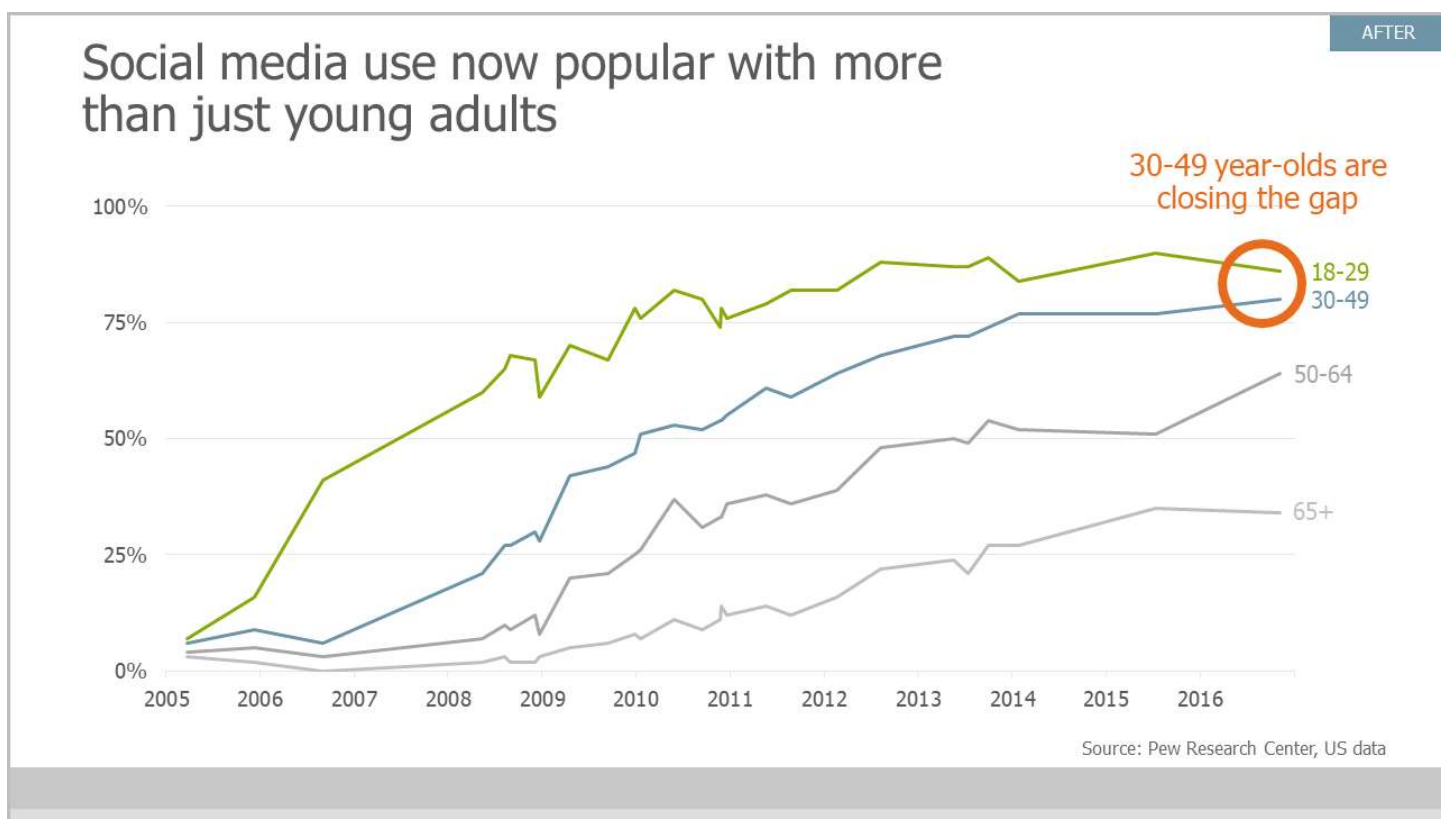
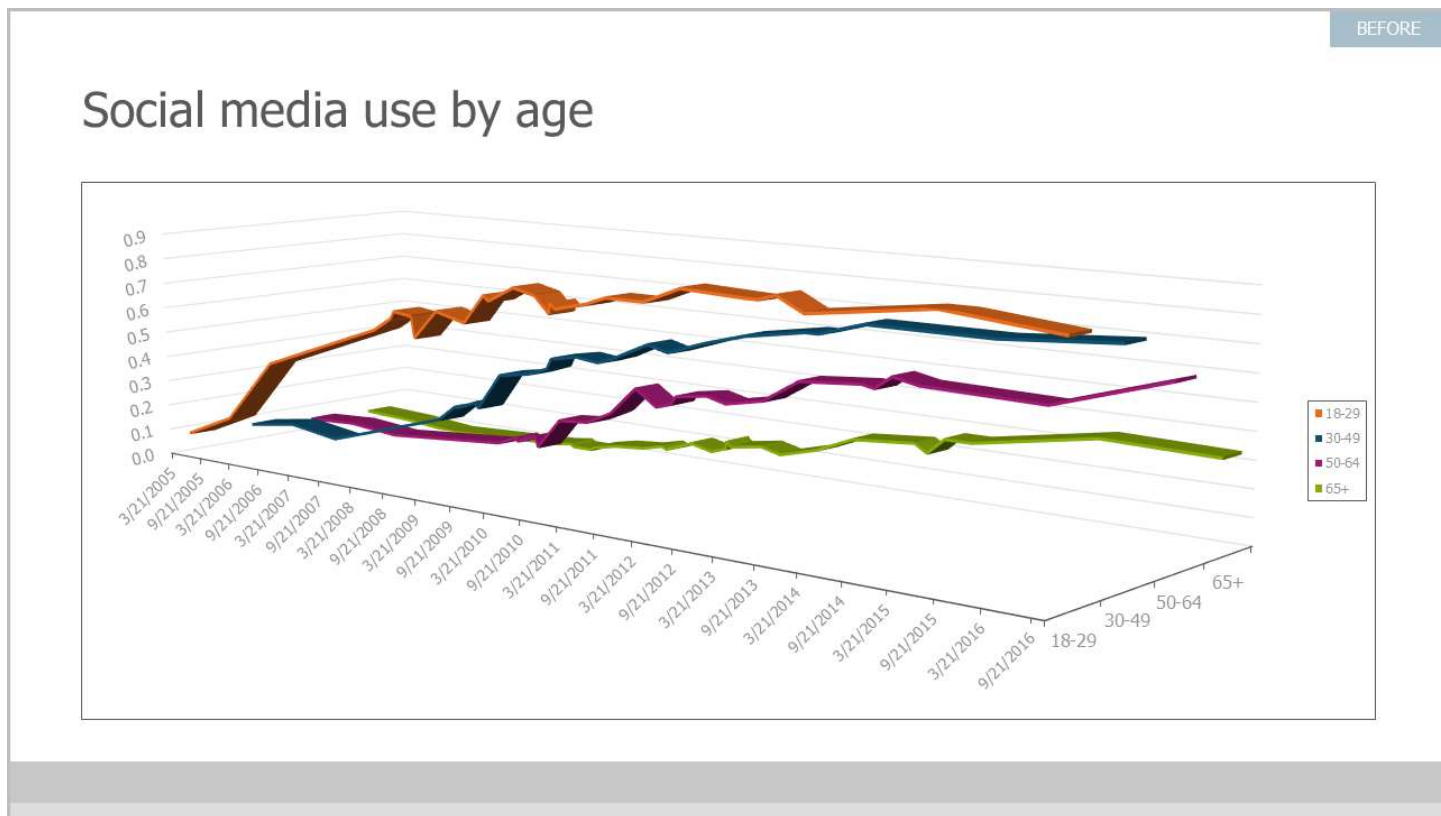
Revenue and profits exceed target

Economic indicators lag in 3 of 4 regions

Mixed performance on IT initiatives

## Minimize the Noise

The opposite of calling out your critical data is figuring out what data to minimize or delete. To minimize clutter, start with your axis labels: Are they as informative, accurate, and concise as possible? Is your data easy to read?



## Where can I learn more about data visualization techniques?

Check out our [blog](#) for more of our favorite storytelling with data tips. Have an hour to spare? Watch our [webinar](#), *Using Data Visualization to Tell Your Story*, for an in-depth look at some of the same data storytelling strategies we teach at some of the world's top brands.

Interested in learning more?

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