HOW TO USE DATA VISUALIZATION TO WIN OVER YOUR AUDIENCE

HubSpot + VISAGE
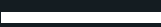
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HOW DATA
SUPPORTS
YOUR
MESSAGE

No matter your audience, no matter the story you are looking to tell, nothing supports your argument more than objective evidence in the form of cold, hard numbers. Data is one of the most powerful—and often overlooked—tools to communicate a message, whether in a company annual report or a thought leadership article on your blog. But those numbers alone won't necessarily make the desired impact if your audience can't interpret them. That's why data visualization is key. Find out how to use this technique to make your point and win over your audience.

BENEFITS OF DATA VISUALIZATION

Data is powerful ammunition, but it needs to be visualized to really hit the target: your audience. By presenting your data in a visually engaging way, you enhance your story and your audience's experience.

So, how exactly does data visualization help you get your point across? It ...

1) ADDS CREDIBILITY

When you use data to support your claims, you demonstrate that you've done your research. This is one of the best ways to build credibility, which encourages your audience to trust your content.
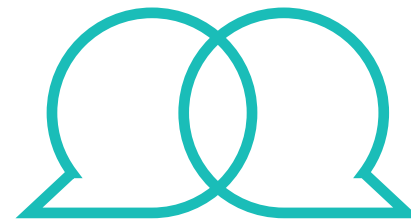
2) ENCOURAGES ENGAGEMENT

Clean, compelling, and credibly sourced visuals draw your audience into the content, encouraging them to explore the data. Both static and interactive data visualizations invite readers to examine the data and to derive the deeper meaning. This fosters a more personal, significant, and active interaction that enhances any type of content.
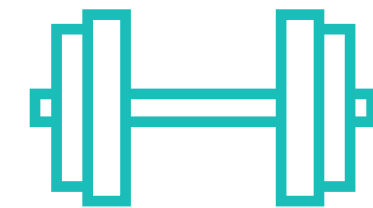
3) INCREASES IMPACT

Well-designed visualizations do the heavy lifting for your audience. A statistic might be relevant, but simply reading those numbers won't do the trick. Letting your audience really see the data—and what it means—increases comprehension and retention, making a more lasting impact on your audience.
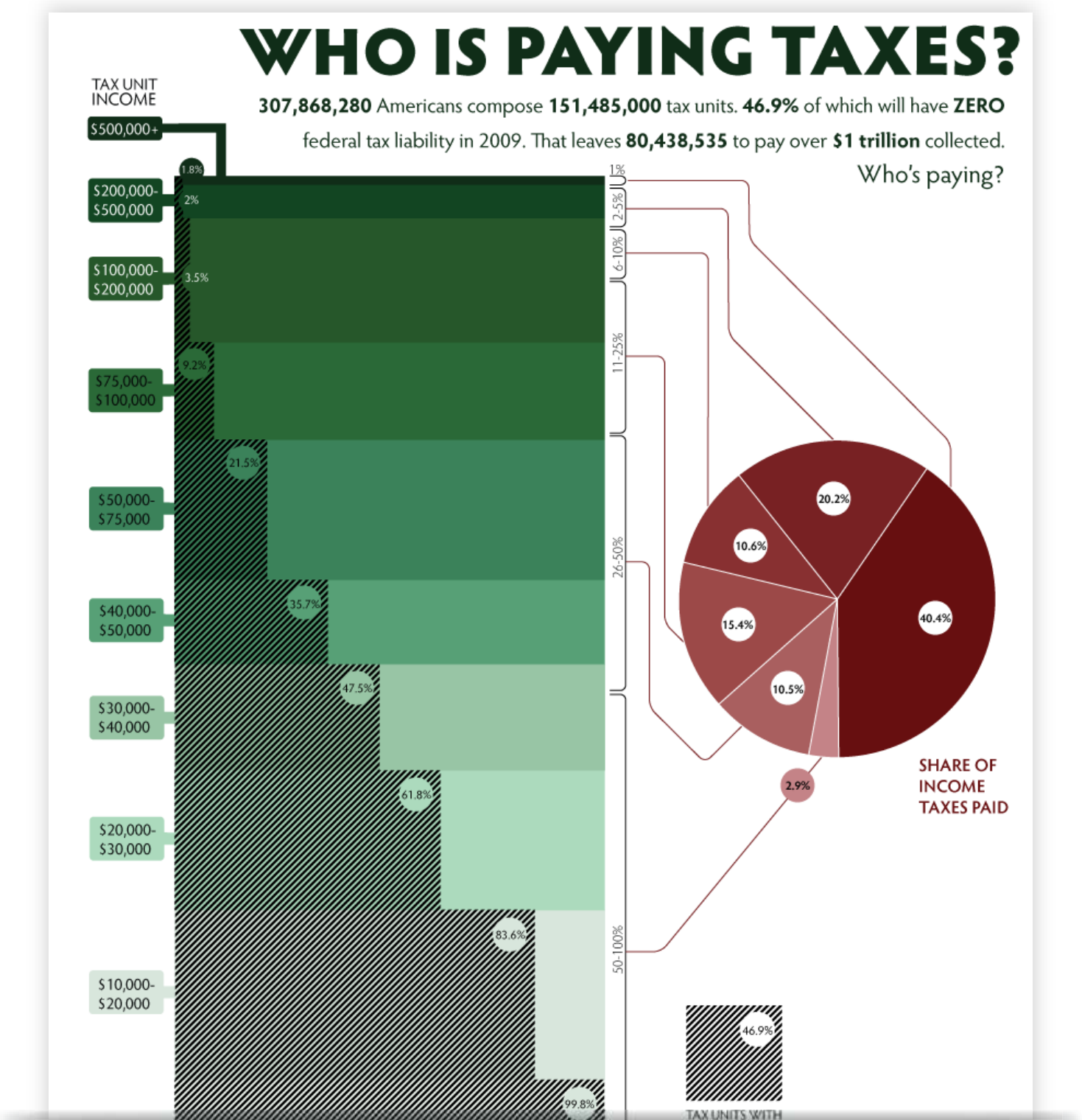
To really see what we mean, let's compare two attempts to visualize data.

WHICH MESSAGE IS STRONGER?

Consider these infographics, which both address the amount of taxes paid by various income groups. Which infographic makes the data easier to understand? Which provides more context? Which appears more credible?


"The Complexity of the US Tax System"
(Quicksprout)

"Who Is Paying Taxes?"
(Mint)

This is not data visualization. The information is presented but not visualized, which weakens the impact of the data because it omits any points of comparison or reference. This isn't necessarily bad, but relying only on language misses an opportunity to give the viewer valuable context.

This graphic is an excellent example of how to present a complex data set in an easy-to-synthesize way. The data is visualized effectively to enable viewers to explore and compare the data, providing deeper insight into the larger story.
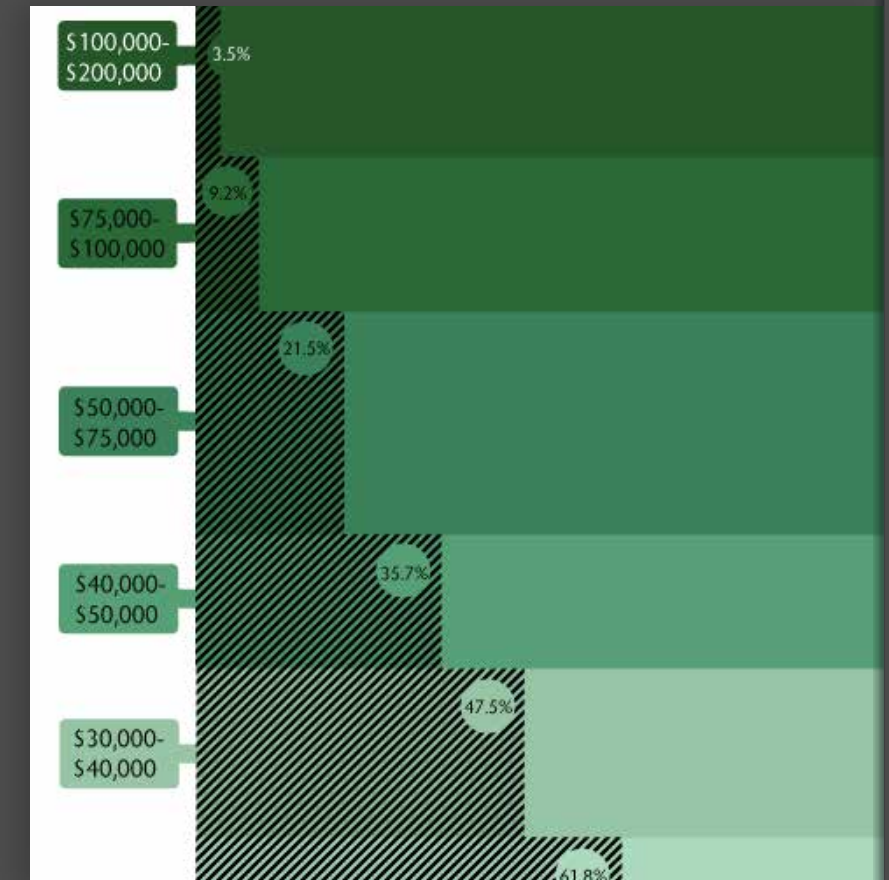
Now that you know data visualization can add credibility to your argument, boost audience engagement, and increase your message's impact on your audience, let's dig into when it makes sense to use it.

WHEN TO USE
DATA VISUALIZATION

Data visualization is a fantastic tool to enhance your communication. Whether providing more clarity or supporting your argument, it helps you effectively communicate at every level of your organization and helps your viewer make better-informed decisions.

Data visualization helps you:

ANSWER QUESTIONS

E.g., How many Web visitors did we have last month?

DISCOVER NEW INSIGHTS

E.g., The majority of visitors went straight to our blog.

COMMUNICATE QUICKLY AND EFFECTIVELY

E.g., Traffic to our website is up.

ADD OBJECTIVITY TO AN ARGUMENT

E.g., This is why we should invest in our blog.

Consider areas in your organization that may benefit from data visualization, such as:

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Information delivered to higher ups (such as your boss or project stakeholders) that influences internal processes or decision-making. Think: presentations, reports, or financial statements.

CLIENT REPORTING

Data conveying results of your efforts to clients or customers. Think: results reporting, project debriefs, etc.

MARKETING CONTENT

Public-facing content for thought leadership or promotion. Think: blogs, white papers, infographics, ebooks, etc.

HOW TO FIND THE STORY IN YOUR DATA

IDENTIFYING YOUR QUESTION

Before you embark on your data journey, identify the question you want to answer. You may have a specific question in mind or a general area you'd like to explore. As you dig into your data, you may find an entirely new or unexpected story, but it helps to have a starting point.

WHAT QUESTION ARE YOU LOOKING TO ANSWER?
E.g., How to spend next year's marketing budget

WHAT DATA DO YOU NEED TO ANSWER THAT QUESTION?
E.g., Last year's budget and success metrics

WHERE IS THAT DATA MOST LIKELY TO BE FOUND?
E.g., Internal reports

SOURCING

Depending on the type of content you are creating, you may be gathering internal data—marketing metrics, sales numbers, etc.—or you may need to pull data from outside sources. No matter where your data comes from, focus on collecting a data set that will provide a solid framework to help answer your question.

5 GREAT SOURCES FOR DATA

"Big data" may be the latest business buzzword, but when you're faced with actually making sense of a large data set, it can be overwhelming and confusing, especially if you're looking at data sets from different sources. If using external data, select a few linked data sources that will give you a cohesive and consistent picture.

Google Scholar (Academic studies)

U.S. Census Bureau (Demographics)

Data.gov (Government data)

Google Public Data Explorer (Economic data)

**SocialMention** (Real-time social data)

ANALYZING

The most powerful communication happens when data shows—not just tells—the story. Of course, it's up to you to find that story. This relies on finding both the similarities and differences within your data set. As you begin to explore your data, certain elements will stand out, which will provide the template for your story. Here are some data relationships you can explore in your search for insights.
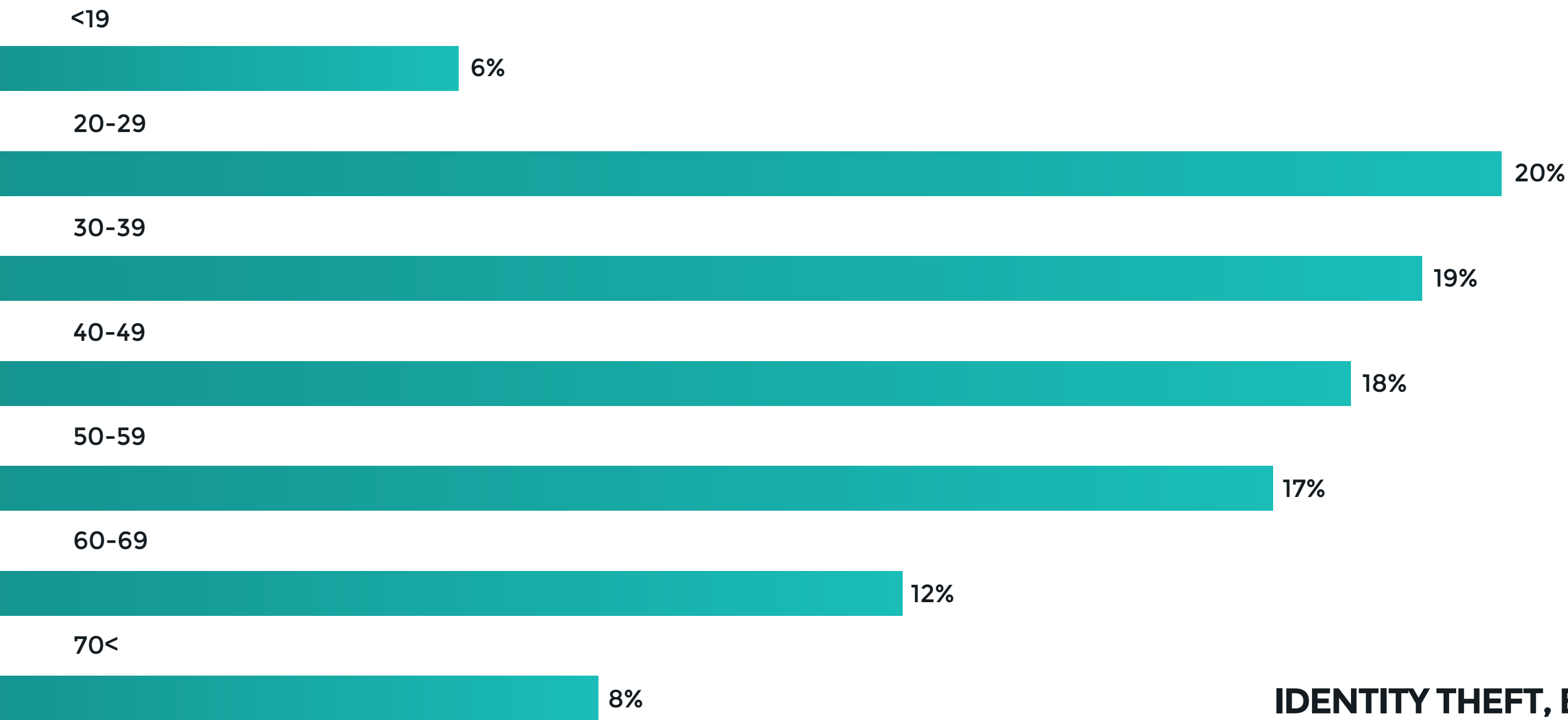
TRENDS

Look for consistent patterns and relationships between data points or data sets.
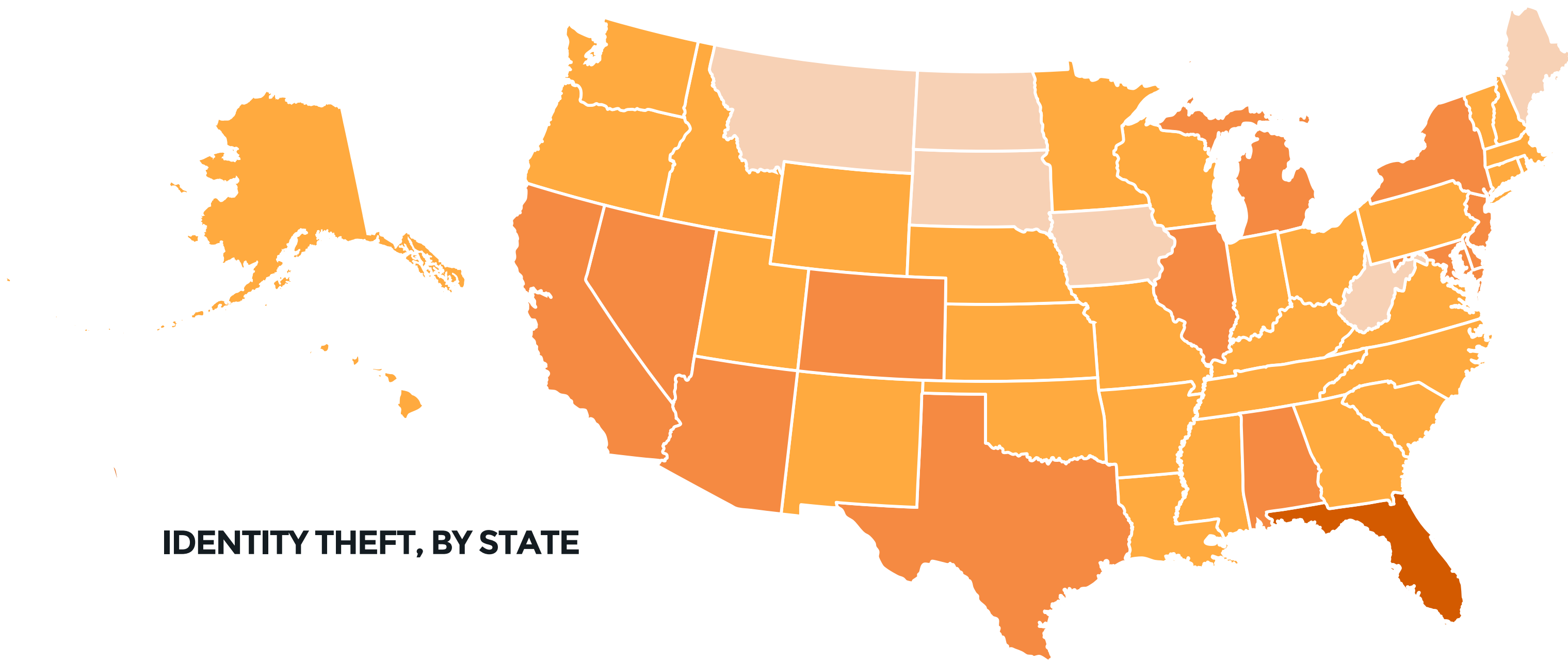
IDENTITY THEFT VICTIMS

2009	2010	2011	2012
10.2M	11.6M	12.6M	13.1M
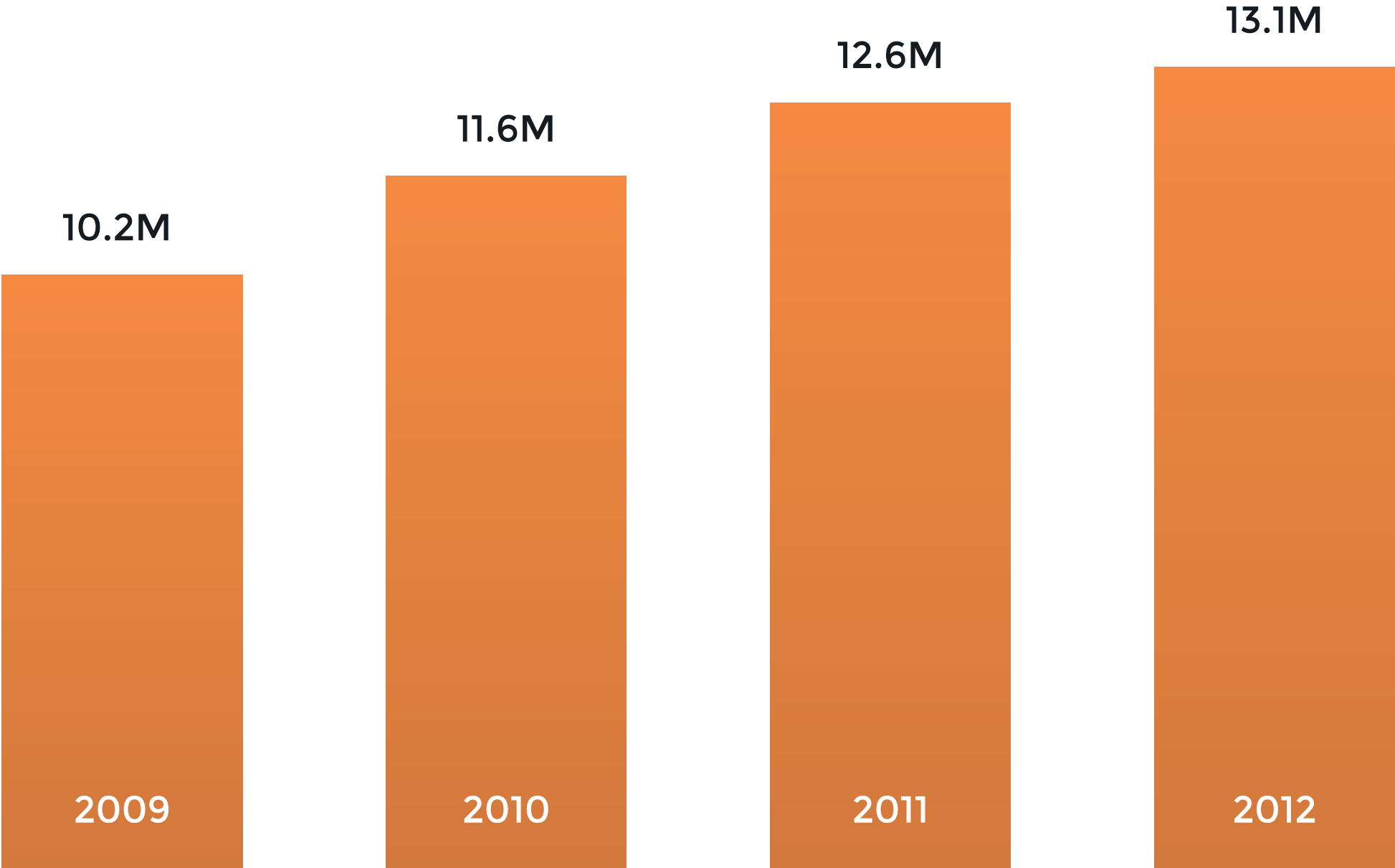
CORRELATIONS

Some elements may have an obvious relationship, which was previously overlooked.

<19
6%

20-29
20%

30-39
19%

40-49
18%

50-59
17%

60-69
12%

70<
8%

IDENTITY THEFT, BY AGE

11

OUTLIERS

Unusual or irregular occurrences often have an intriguing story.

1-40   41-80   81-120   121-160   161-200

IDENTITY THEFT, BY STATE

Sorting or filtering data in various ways (geographical, over time, etc.)
can give you a fresh perspective on what you're looking at.

CRAFTING
YOUR STORY

There is a certain level of subjectivity involved in the selection of how much and which content to include, but your data analysis will inform the story you want to tell. Your main goal is to shape a concise and coherent narrative around the data to compel your audience to take some sort of desired action. Here's how to do that.

1. CREATE AN OUTLINE

Identify the beats of your narrative to guide the story, then map your data to support each point. Consider your audience as you align your data with your narrative.

WHAT ISSUE DOES THIS ADDRESS/ WHY SHOULD THEY CARE?

Make sure you are engaging readers from the get-go, making it clear that the information you're presenting is relevant.

E.g., Identity theft is on the rise; consumers could be affected.

HOW DOES THE DATA SUPPORT THE ARGUMENT?

Is it shown in the right context? Is it lending deeper insight to the topic?

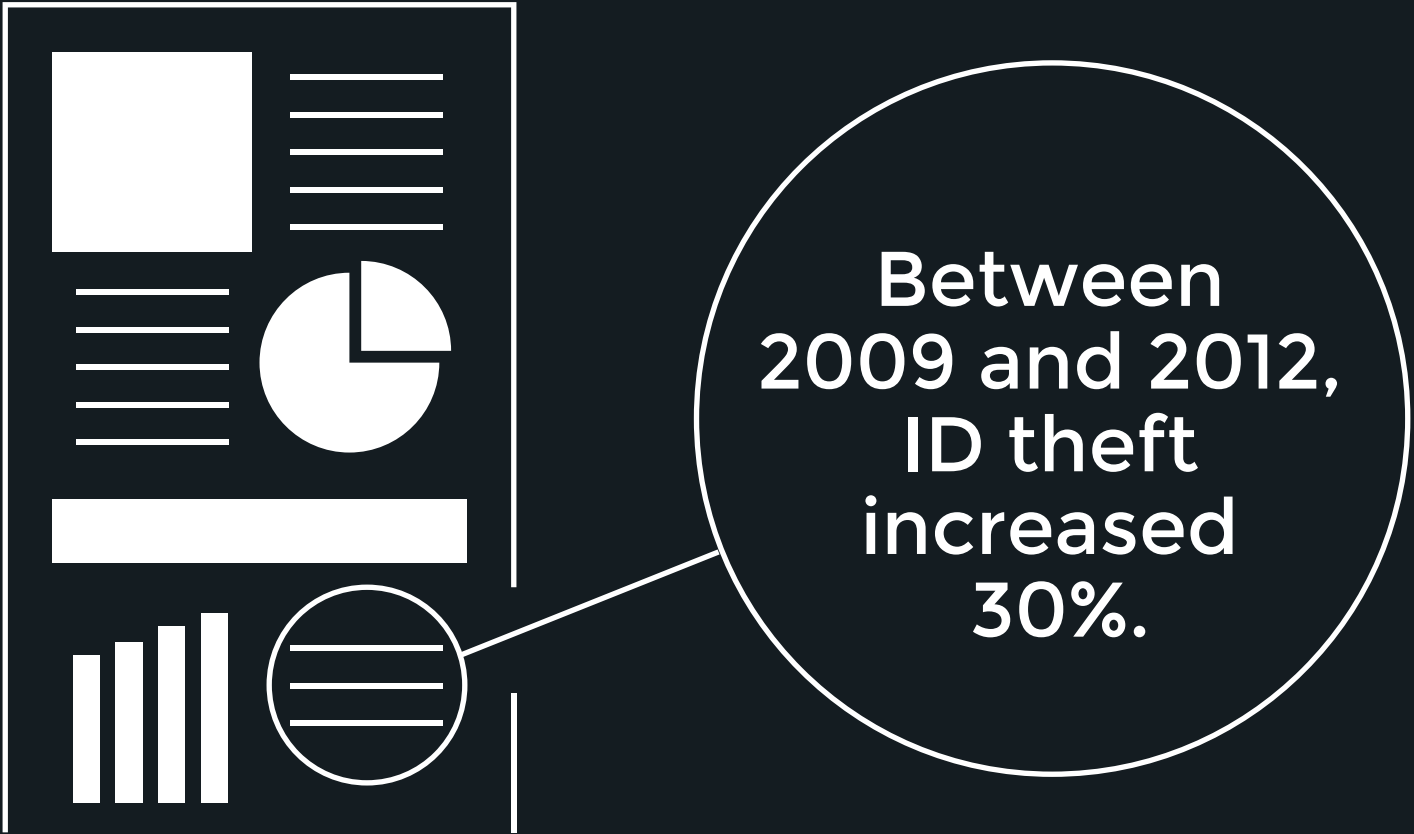*E.g., Data proves that consumers are directly affected by identity theft.*

WHAT SHOULD THEY TAKE AWAY FROM THIS?

Define what the conclusion should be. This doesn't necessarily have to be direct or prescriptive ("buy our identity theft protection"), but it should make a point.

E.g., Identity theft is on the rise; protection is a good idea.

2. ARRANGE CONTENT IN THE MOST LOGICAL ORDER

Guide the reader through the data in a logical flow. Each data visualization should help build your narrative as you go.

ID THEFT IS A PROBLEM
DATA: Rise of identity theft

WHO IS AT RISK?
DATA: Identity theft vs. age group

WHERE ARE THEY AT RISK?
DATA: Identity theft, by state

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO CONSUMERS?
DATA: Lost time, energy, money

HOW CAN THEY PROTECT THEMSELVES?
Identity theft prevention tips

Between 2009 and 2012, ID theft increased 30%.

3. PROVIDE CONTEXT FOR THE DATA

Data visualization is meant to clarify, never confuse or muddle. If there is a risk of misinterpretation, provide context to fill in the gaps for your reader.

4. HIGHLIGHT NOTABLE INSIGHTS

Although viewers can follow the data, key points may need more attention.

IDENTITY THEFT COMPLAINTS

Florida took the lead, with a total of **193,000** complaints.
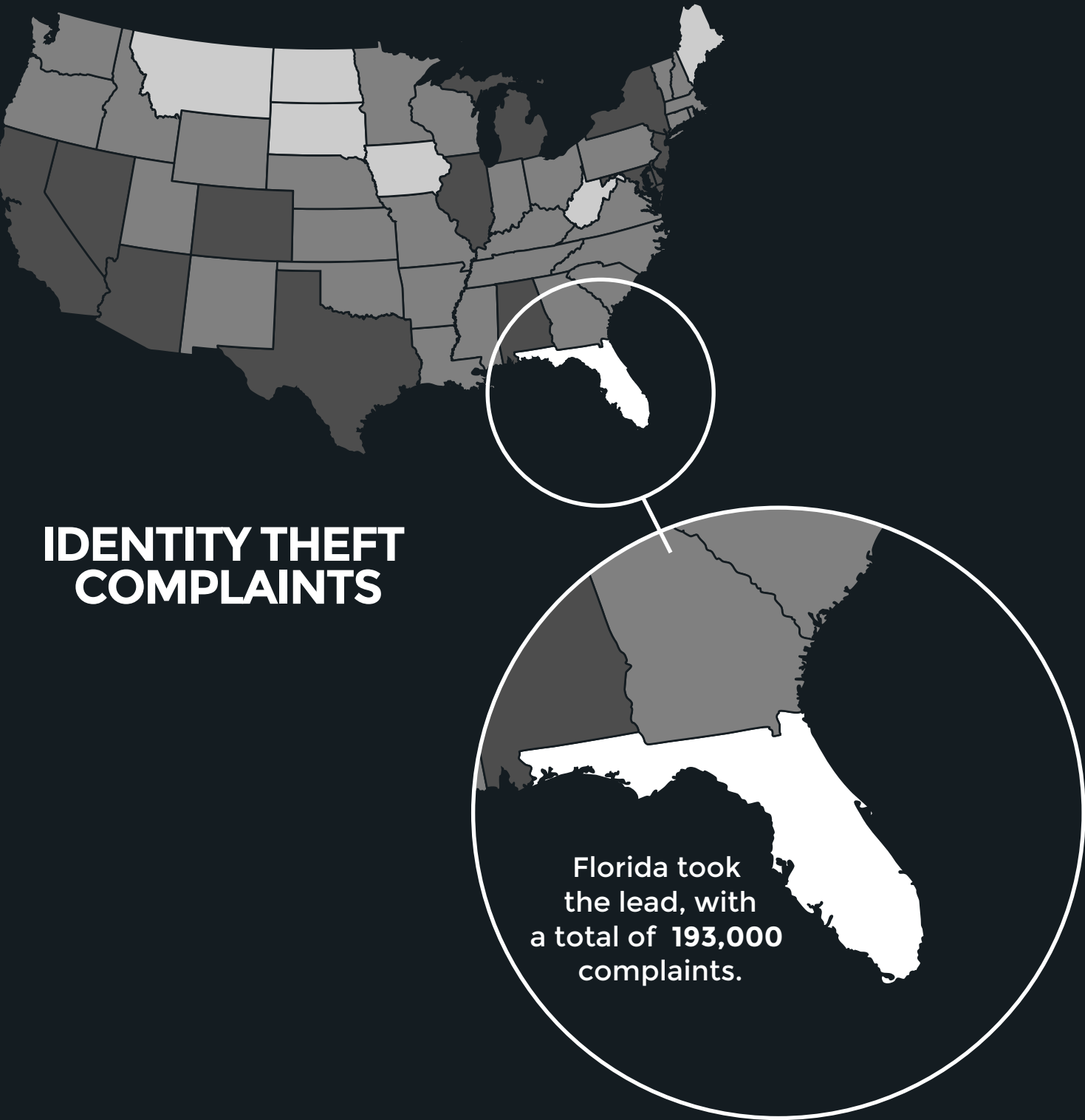
5. TRIM WHERE NECESSARY

Don't overwhelm the viewer with data. Only include what is necessary and relevant to draw your audience toward the desired conclusion.
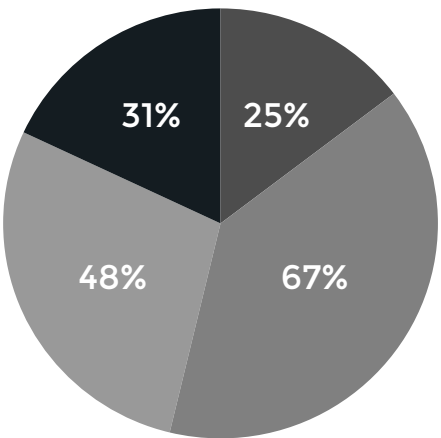
VISUALIZING

Well-designed data visualizations enhance your story by making data beautiful and easy to understand.

Conversely, poorly visualized data can be misinterpreted, hurting your message and your credibility.

Here are six tips to improve your data visualization.

WHEN GOOD DATA GOES BAD
Just because data is visualized doesn't mean it's good data visualization. Can you spot the mistakes?

Notice that this pie chart totals more than 100%.
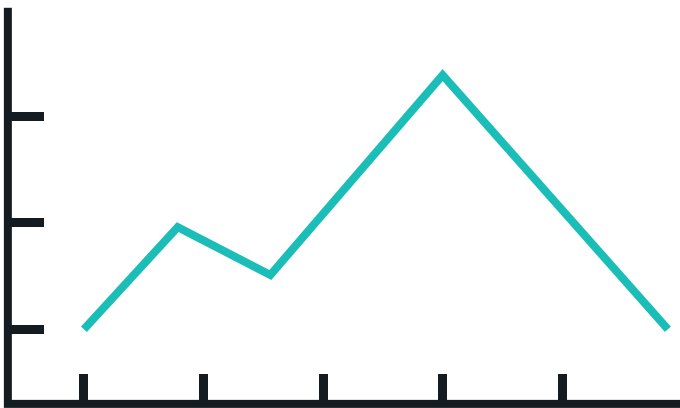
You can't learn much from an unlabeled line chart.

See that impressive growth on the left? It's actually misleading. When visualized with a zero baseline on the right, that growth isn't quite so impressive.

1. SELECT THE CORRECT VISUALIZATION FOR YOUR DATA

Choose the best chart type for your data, and make sure you are following best practices.
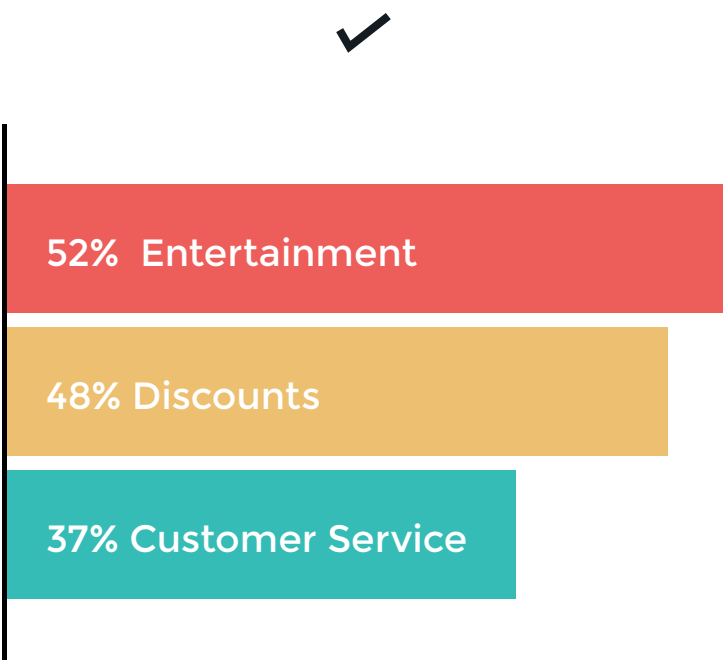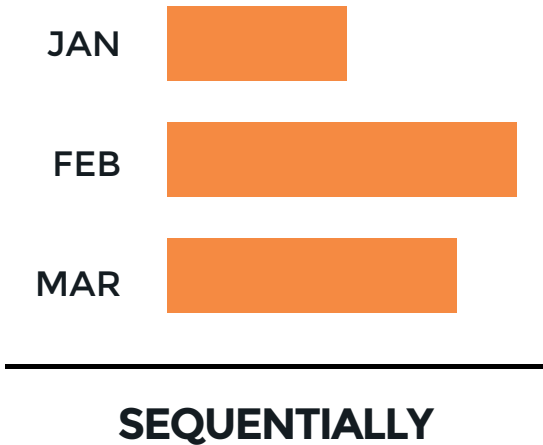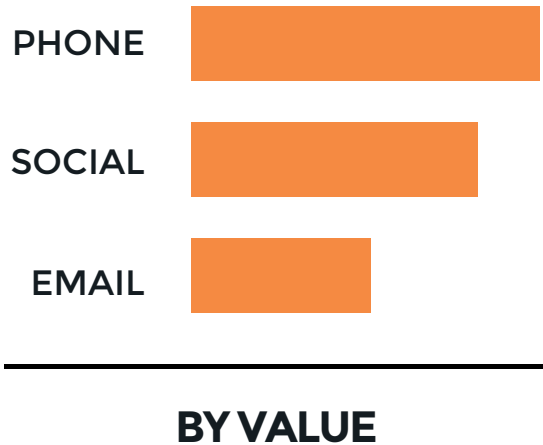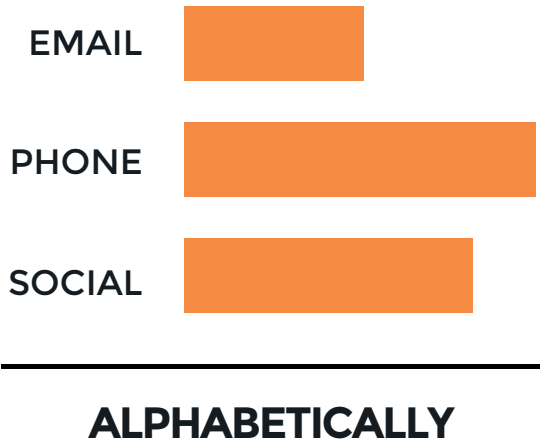
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✔

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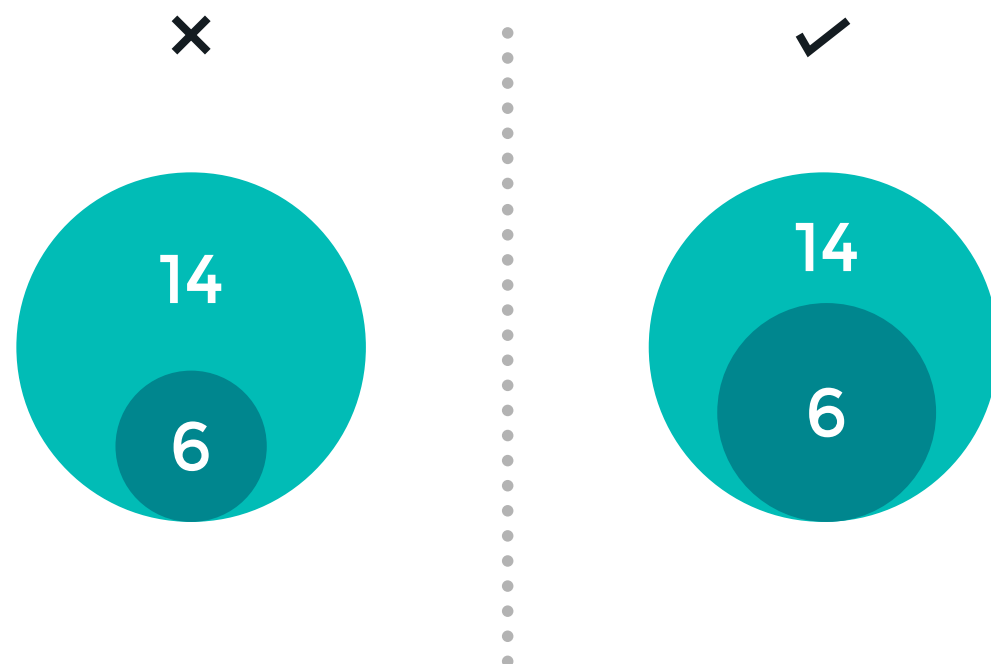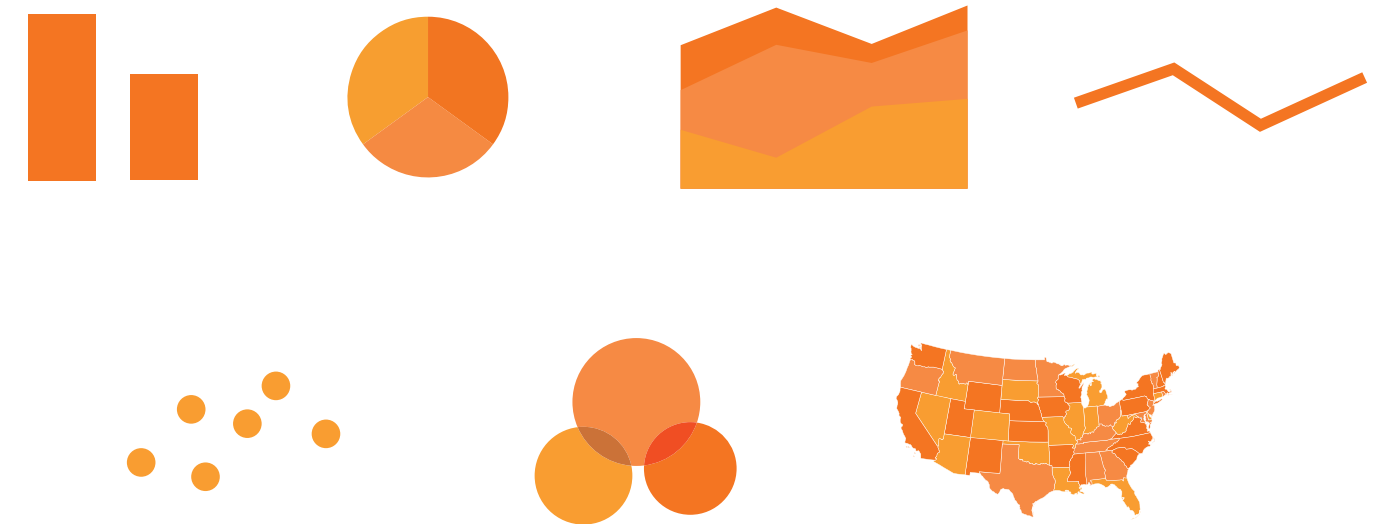
2. ACCURATELY PRESENT THE DATA

Ensure that all visualizations are accurate and don't skew data.

3. ORDER CATEGORIES LOGICALLY (ALPHABETICALLY, SEQUENTIALLY, OR BY VALUE)

This allows viewers to navigate data more intuitively.

EMAIL
PHONE
SOCIAL

ALPHABETICALLY

PHONE
SOCIAL
EMAIL

BY VALUE

JAN
FEB
MAR

SEQUENTIALLY

✕

52%
Entertainment

48%
Discounts

37%
Customer Service

✔

52% Entertainment

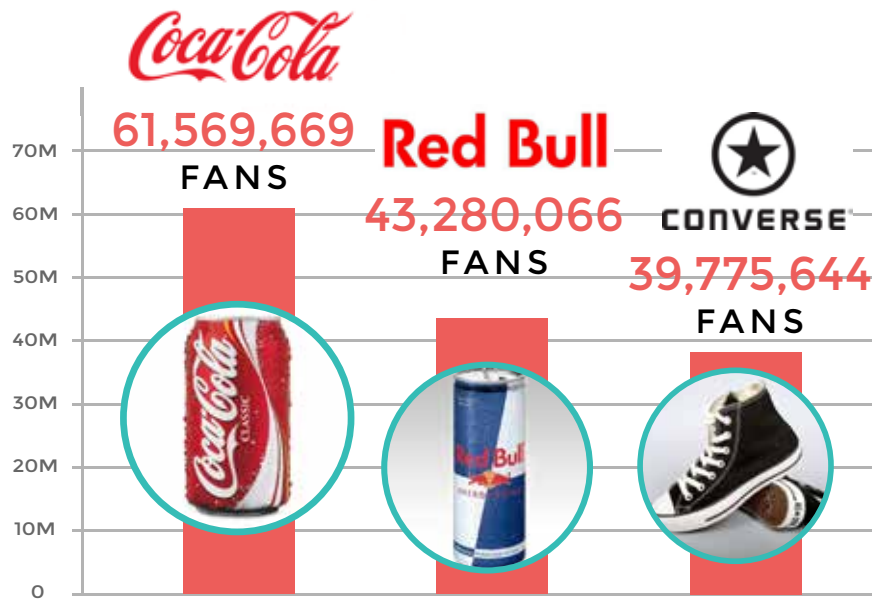48% Discounts

37% Customer Service

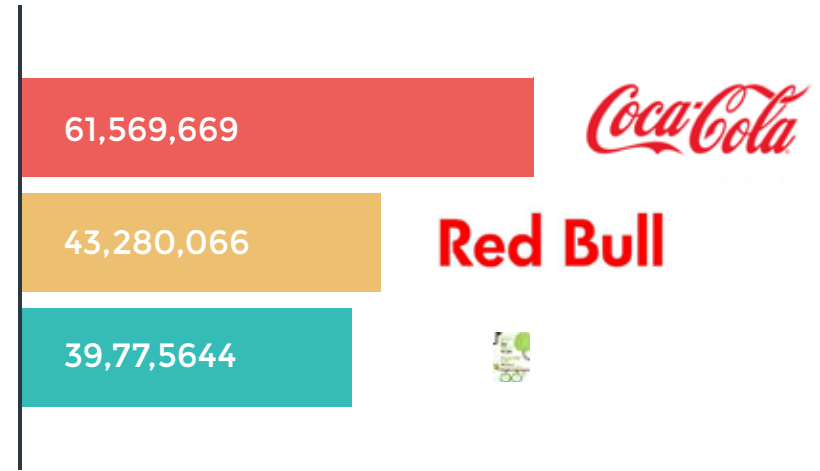# 4. VISUALIZE DATA IN A WAY THAT IS EASY FOR READERS TO COMPARE VALUES

Data visualization should always increase comprehension, not confuse viewers or make them work harder.
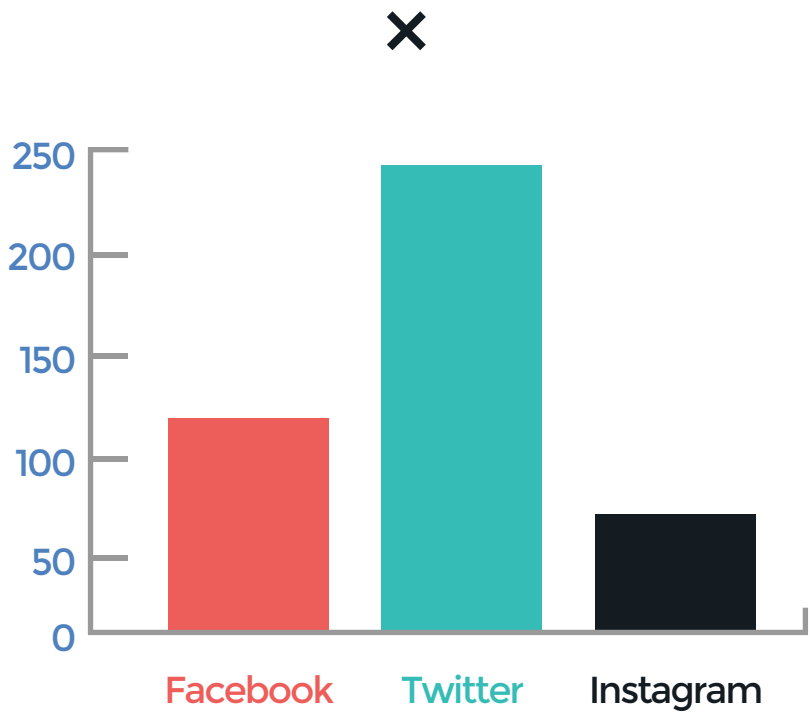
5. DON'T DISTRACT FROM THE DATA.

Unnecessary illustrations, dimensionality, or ornamentations (aka chart junk) can clutter the visualization.
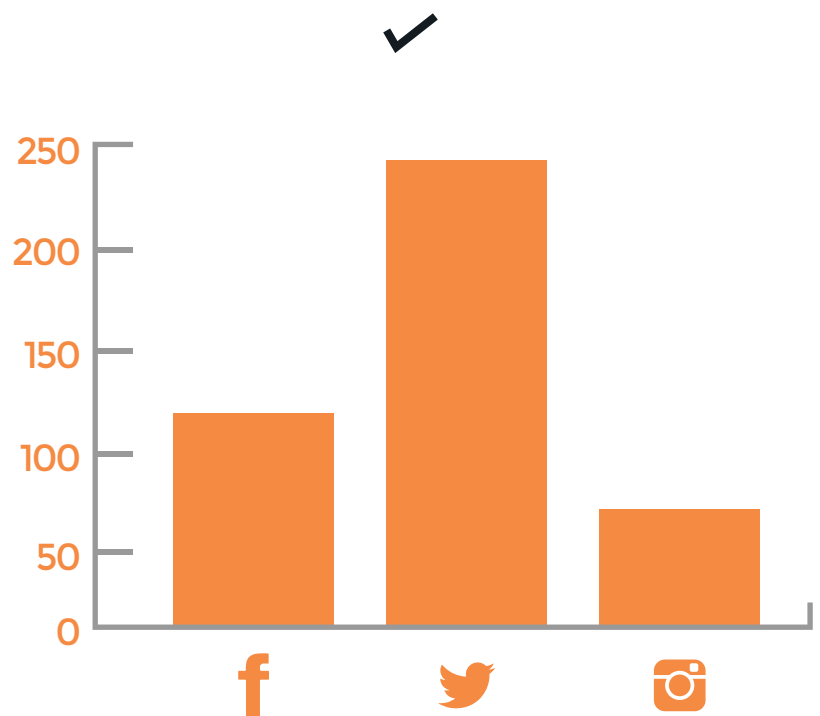

6. USE COLOR AND ICONOGRAPHY APPROPRIATELY.

This helps expedite understanding and reduce unnecessary labeling.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Look for opportunities to enhance all your communication, whether internal or external, with data visualization.

Start with your question, then look for the data that can help answer or give you more insight into your problem.

Work with a solid data set that includes relevant data from a reputable source.
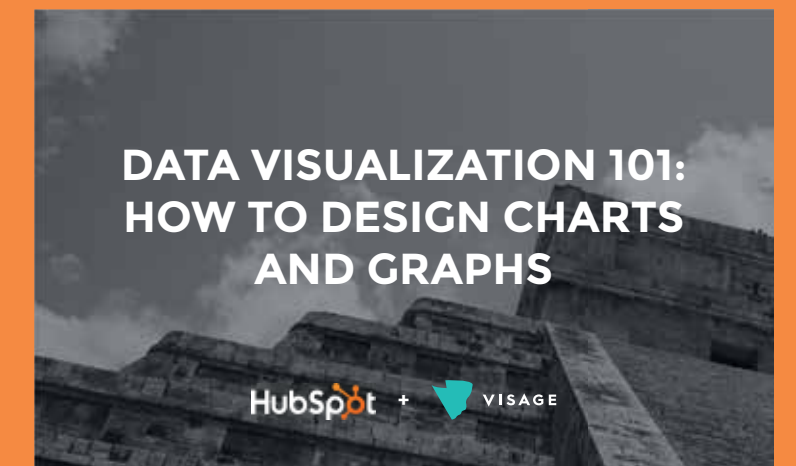
Craft a cohesive narrative around your key data points to deliver your message.

Follow data visualization best practices to ensure your information makes the most impact.

For more data design tips and best practices, download the free ebook, *Data Visualization 101: How to Design Charts and Graphs.*

DATA VISUALIZATION 101: HOW TO DESIGN CHARTS AND GRAPHS

HubSpot + VISAGE

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Visage empowers everyone in your organization to visualize data in beautiful, on-brand reports. Learn more and schedule a demo at visage.co.

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