# 5 Things Your Spreadsheets Can't Do

Great Hammer, Lousy Screwdriver

Data analysis becomes more important every moment of every day. For many, Excel is the go-to analysis tool of choice. But as useful as it can be, it just can't do it all. With pressure mounting to glean more insight from your data, spreadsheets don't always have the capabilities to deliver the insight you seek. The good news? There are plenty more tools in the box.

Here are five ways to go beyond spreadsheets and unlock more value from your data.

Integrate All of Your Data

Regardless of the size of your organization, chances are, you've got data everywhere, and a lot of it. It's not just living in spreadsheets anymore, but it's also stored in the cloud, and in on-premise data warehouses. It's called big data for a reason. Social media data, transactional data, customer records, and web analytics are just a few examples of mushrooming information that can't be properly analyzed in a spreadsheet. Excel and Google users often find themselves forced to use subsets of data for ad hoc analysis—which will only yield a glimpse of the answers they seek. The reality is, with just a spreadsheet, at a million rows, you're going to hit a brick wall.
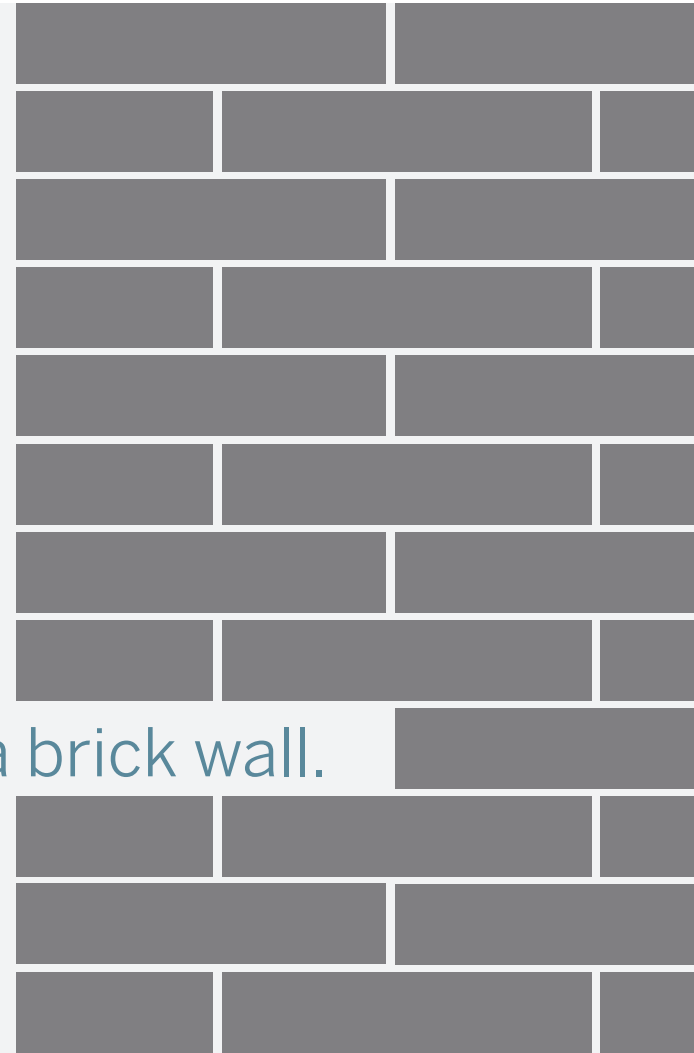
Integrate All of Your Data

Whether you're filling your spreadsheet to its breaking point or working with smaller data sets, running sophisticated macros and calculations in a spreadsheet can often bring a program to its knees—leaving you waiting and miserable. You are too busy to spend cycles sorting out which set of data you can live without or budgeting time to refresh your calculations.

"Now all of the data is integrated in a secure database, but the visualizations and reports are available—not just for that one user who has the Excel spreadsheet, but for anyone to whom we've granted access,"

**Roberto Bertolini, CIO, Granja Regina**

For the most accurate data insights, it's important to have the capability to use as much data as is necessary to paint the whole picture.

Connect to and analyze all of your data, no matter what the size, or where it lives—and make sure the process is fast.

Data Blending and Cleaning

A typical quarterly report might include data exported from your CRM system, more data extracted from your sales database, and yet more data posted by your finance team. With spreadsheets, you may spend hours on each set of data trying to connect the dots, making them seem unified, and then pasting them into a presentation.
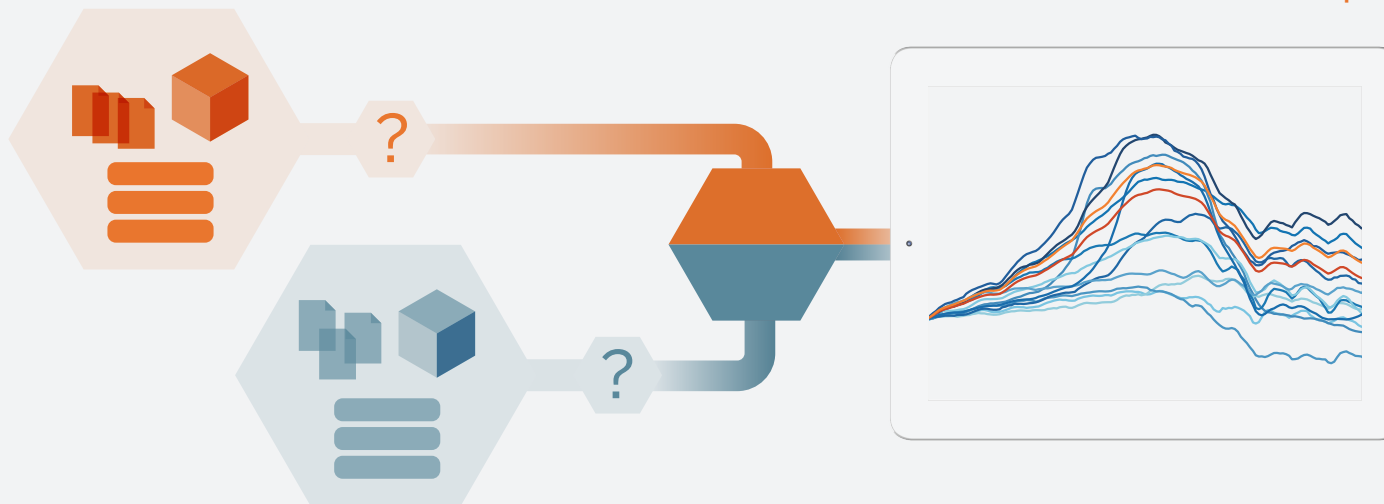
There is a better way. The answer is combining or blending data from multiple sources.
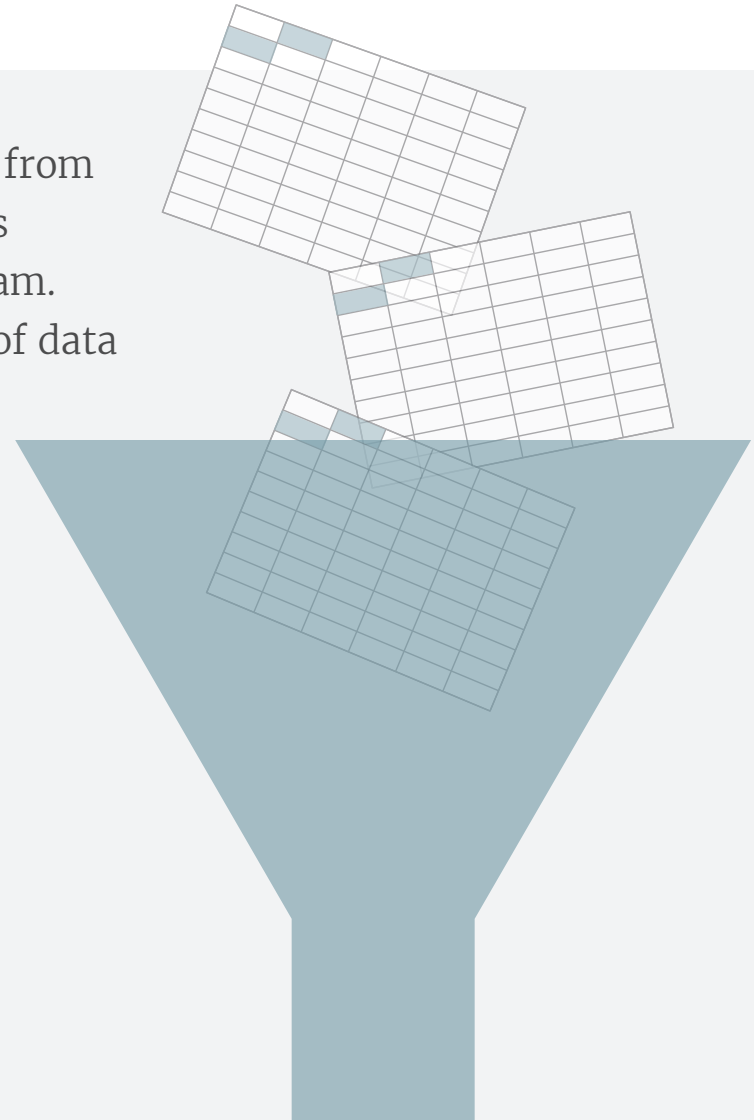
Data Blending and Cleaning

By joining different data sets on a common field, you can get a single, holistic view of things like performance and track completion of goals at every step of your process. With the right tool, you can create links to each of your data sources, either live or as an extract, and easily blend them.

Regardless of data type, blending your data on common field will elevate understanding and decision-making. Learn how to do it in this quick tutorial.

Data Blending and Cleaning

While you're blending your data, it's important to keep it clean too. For example, most spreadsheets store dates in lines across columns. This makes working with them painful and messy.

Having the ability to remove unwanted rows, and even the flexibility to rename dimensions and measures, regardless of original headings, is key. Even better, none of these changes will compromise your data updates.

Better Visualizations

Data visualizations are meant to be easy and fast to read. Number–based tables and spreadsheets are often the opposite. This is a use case where a picture really is worth a thousand words.

Sure, spreadsheet tools do let you create some basic, built-in charts, but in today's marketplace, these standard graphs are just table stakes, and the real data wins are found in multiple types of advanced visuals. Does this scenario sound familiar?
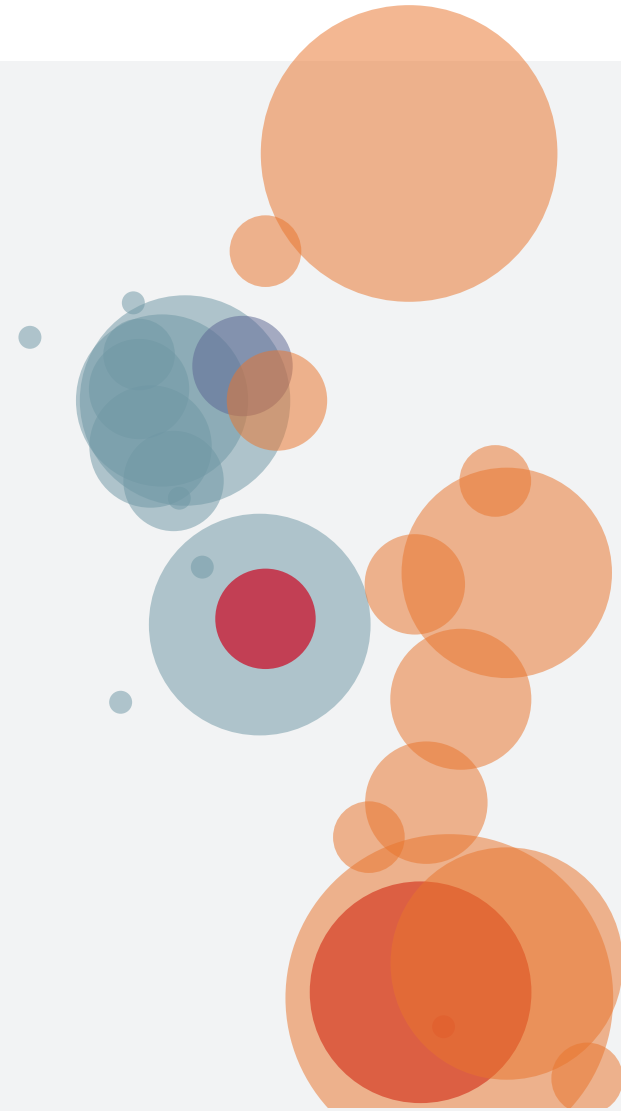
Better Visualizations

You finish your analysis, confident you know just the chart to show in an upcoming presentation. You take the time and click through a whole series of steps and make the chart. You think it looks pretty good. All the while you're hoping nothing changes before your meeting.

You get to the meeting and there are questions that the chart doesn't give answers right away. People ask to see a different visualization to answer their new questions. And now you have to start over and schedule another meeting.

Say goodbye to this situation and hello to better data visualizations.

"A well-crafted, thoughtful visualization makes the light bulb go off. You just don't get that with a spreadsheet."

Dana Zuber, Wells Fargo

Better Visualizations
Maps

Geographical maps are a great example of a better visualization—and no, maps are not a standard issue on a spreadsheet's lineup of chart types. Seeing your data on a map brings a level of intuitive understanding that no pivot table could hope to achieve.

Mapping your data will reveal patterns to inform your decisions and guide next steps.
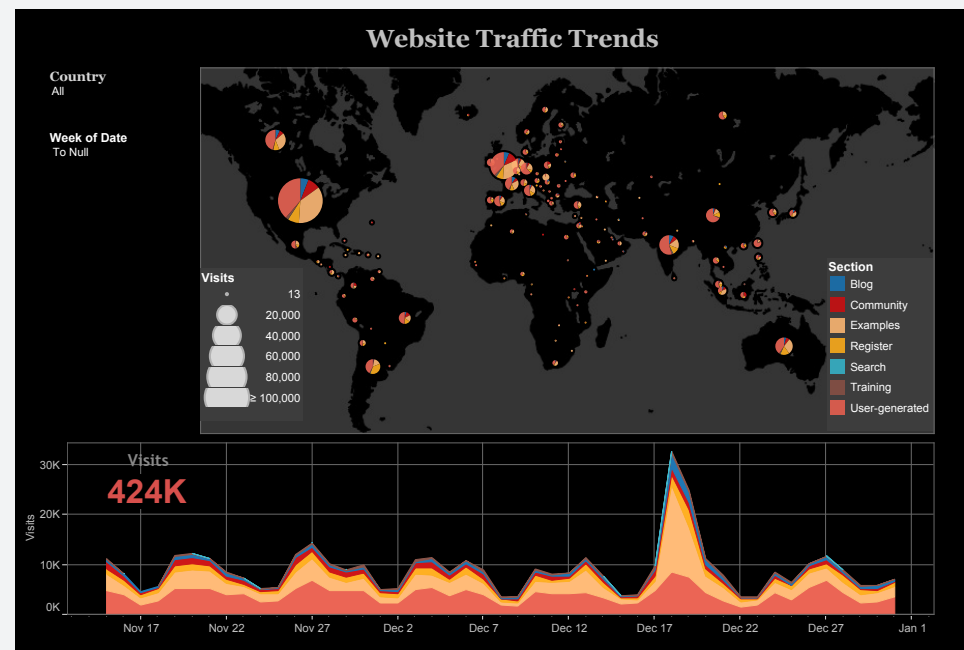
This dashboard is connected directly with Google Analytics, and is easy to see traffic trends by country, section of website visited and number of visits in a given time period.
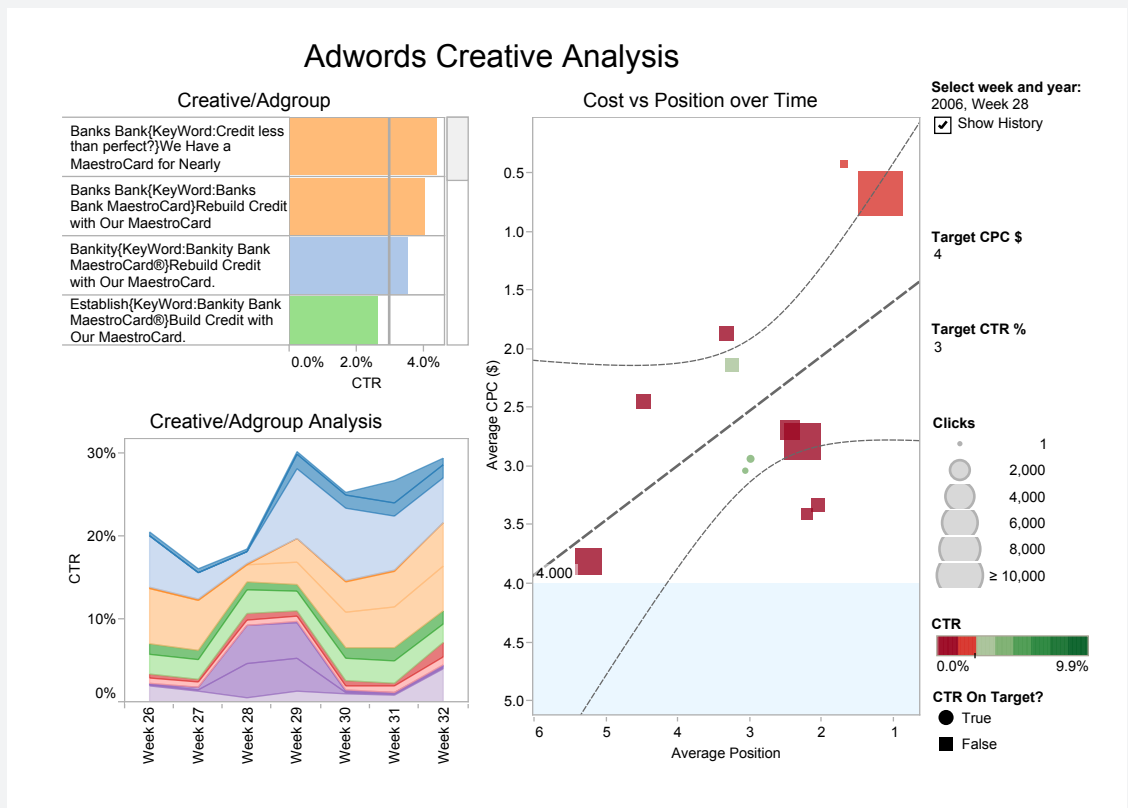
Better Visualizations
Variety

Not everything has to be a pie chart or a bar chart. Because the human brain processes a number, a visualization, or a picture as single "chunk" of information. The process of comprehension and gaining insight is dramatically faster when data is visually displayed on a dashboard in various types of graphs and charts. Utilizing multiple types of visualizations, colors and filters in a dashboard, you can quickly understand and share the complete picture and get to the bottom of all those questions that standard reports just don't anticipate.
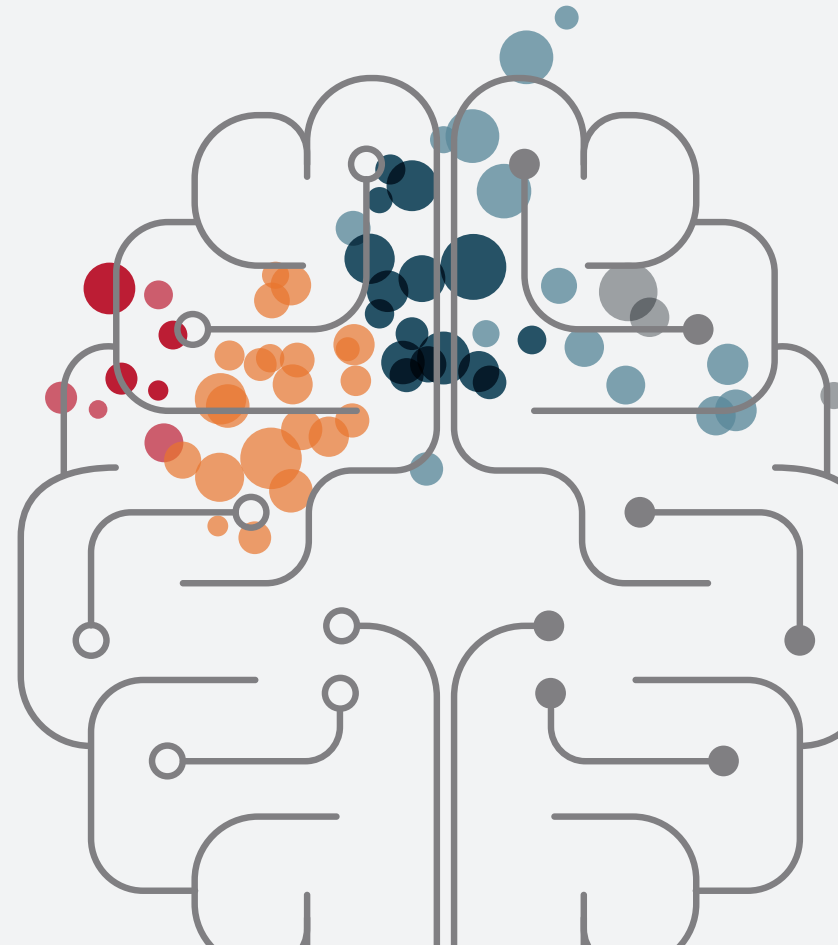
Better Visualizations
Variety

This dashboard offers a variety of unique views to see and understand how your advertising is performing. You can look at all the data and determine which channels, media, banners, and keywords are performing and driving the most bottom line impact.


Adwords Creative Analysis

Better Visualizations
Forward Looking

Utilizing visuals to look at a time trend for a seasonal influence gives you the ability to forecast and plan appropriately. Make decisions by applying data for historically slow quarters, summer slumps, and end-of-year booms.

Simply by understanding patterns throughout time you can make more informed decisions about the future.
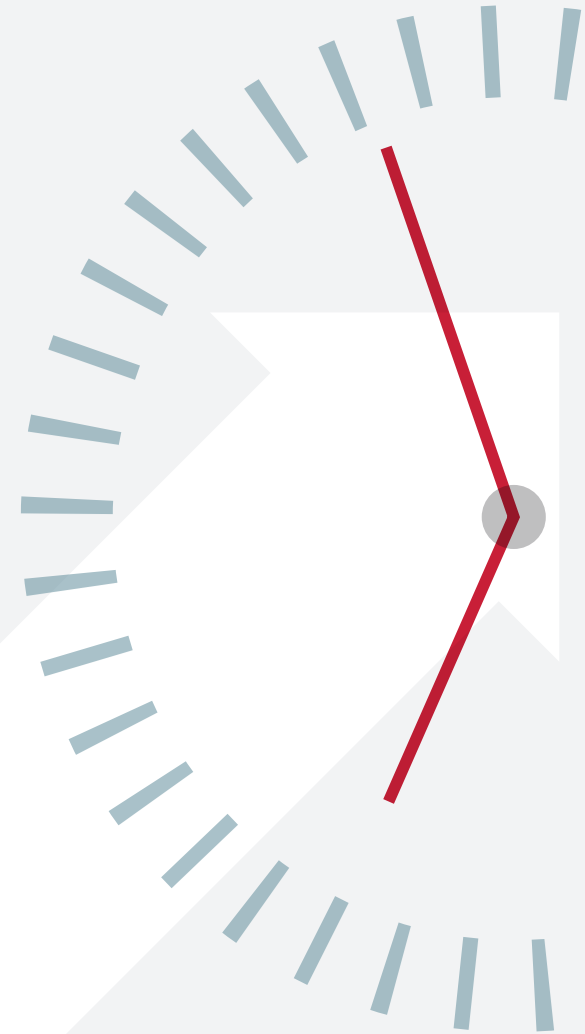
Better Visualizations
Forward Looking

Here we see GE's stock price over a period of years. Looking only at the last year suggests the stock may be on a downward trend; extending the date axis to the future suggests that the stock may hit $15 in the near future. Change the date range of the analysis to see different trend lines.

GE Stock Trend Analysis

Select date range to update trend line:
6/18/2010 to 6/27/2011
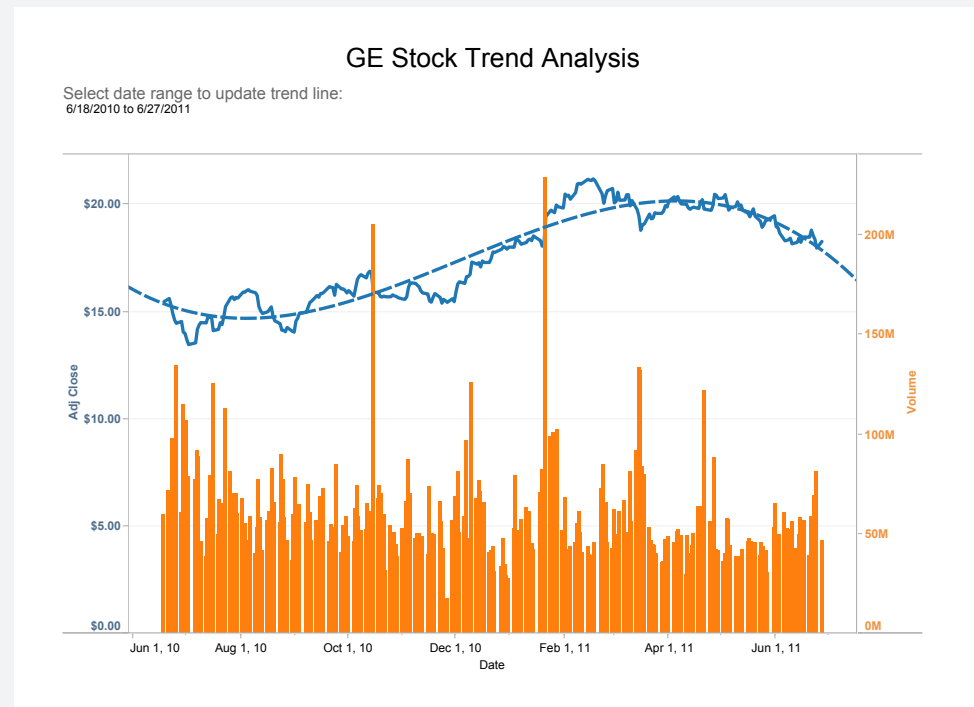
Better Visualizations
Current and Interactive

It's never fun not to know the answer—especially in a meeting where you're trying to solve a problem. Set yourself up to answer questions on the fly, by using interactive visualizations.

Interactive dashboards with a current data feed can enable important analytical tasks, such as filtering views, adjusting parameters, performing quick calculations, and drilling down to examine underlying data. Answer the unanticipated questions immediately with a few mouse clicks.

Data can be from this quarter, this week, this hour, or thirty seconds ago—there's no doubt about it, a current data feed, or a feed within the right timeline for your organization, will elevate your problem solving and your daily operations.

> "People have rekindled their interest in asking questions."
>
> **Rishi Kumar, Director of Analytics, Unilever**

Drag and Drop Dashboards

Gathering all relevant information in one place is critical for driving focused, smart discussions. No, a pile of spreadsheet printouts doesn't count as putting all relevant factors in one place. Adding dashboards to your analysis toolkit equips you to consider all relevant factors for your decisions in one place.

And yes, you can make a variation of a dashboard in some spreadsheets, but many business leaders avoid it. Why? For some, it's because creating a dashboard carries the assumption that a painful, long IT project is the only path.
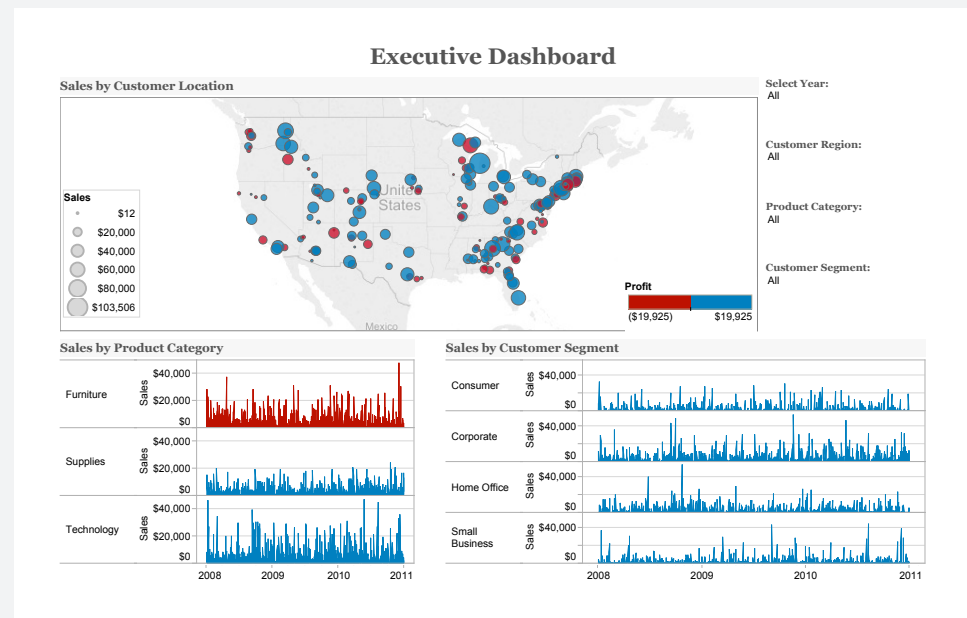
Drag and Drop Dashboards

Try building a dashboard using a drag-and-drop interface. Try creating filters and drop downs that help you interact directly with your information with a click of a mouse.

"I'm finding it's a lot faster to get analysis done, and more enjoyable. I'm freed up from manipulating the data into certain formats and just being able to drag and drop to see trends easily is a great benefit."

Adam Yeoman Senior Analyst, Supply Chain Development, Tesco
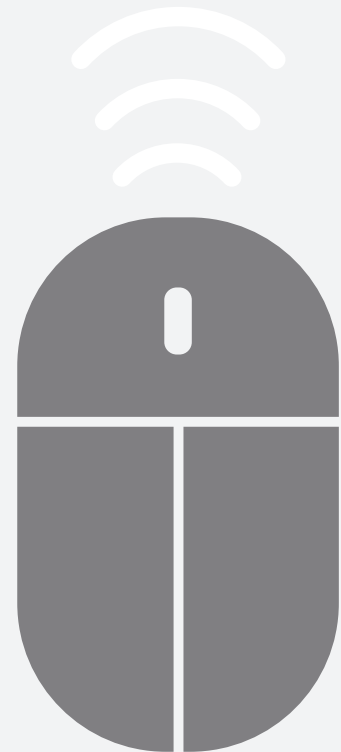
Automatic Updates

Your spreadsheet is only good until your next data extract or update. What if you created your dashboard once and it stayed up-to-date every time you opened it?

Putting even a basic dashboard together in a spreadsheet can take hours. Often you get to what you think is the end, and an email arrives with new data attached. With the right analysis tool, your dashboards can be linked to your data sources and automatically update every time they are opened.

If you have team members who don't always have an Internet connection, you can use extracts and set them to update on a schedule. This kind of flexibility makes building dashboards faster, and more reliable.

Automatic Updates

You don't have to ditch your spreadsheets all together; but integrating them into your analysis with better data visualization is easier than you think.

Tableau Software helps people see and understand data no matter how big, or where it is stored. Quickly connect, blend, clean, visualize and share your dashboards with a seamless experience from the PC to the iPad. Create and publish dashboards with automatic data updates, and share them with colleagues, partners or customers—no programming skills required.

Begin a free trial today
tableau.com/trial.