cole nussbaumer knaflic

storytelling with data

a data visualization guide for business professionals

WILEY
storytelling with data
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“Power Corrupts. PowerPoint Corrupts Absolutely.”
—Edward Tufte, Yale Professor Emeritus

We’ve all been victims of bad slideware. Hit-and-run presentations that leave us staggering from a maelstrom of fonts, colors, bullets, and highlights. Infographics that fail to be informative and are only graphic in the same sense that violence can be graphic. Charts and tables in the press that mislead and confuse.

It’s too easy today to generate tables, charts, graphs. I can imagine some old-timer (maybe it’s me?) harrumphing over my shoulder that in his day they’d do illustrations by hand, which meant you had to think before committing pen to paper.

Having all the information in the world at our fingertips doesn’t make it easier to communicate: it makes it harder. The more information you’re dealing with, the more difficult it is to filter down to the most important bits.

Enter Cole Nussbaumer Knaflic.

I met Cole in late 2007. I’d been recruited by Google the year before to create the “People Operations” team, responsible for finding, keeping, and delighting the folks at Google. Shortly after joining I decided

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we needed a People Analytics team, with a mandate to make sure we innovated as much on the people side as we did on the product side. Cole became an early and critical member of that team, acting as a conduit between the Analytics team and other parts of Google.

Cole always had a knack for clarity.

She was given some of our messiest messages—such as what exactly makes one manager great and another crummy—and distilled them into crisp, pleasing imagery that told an irrefutable story. Her messages of “don’t be a data fashion victim” (i.e., lose the fancy clipart, graphics and fonts—focus on the message) and “simple beats sexy” (i.e., the point is to clearly tell a story, not to make a pretty chart) were powerful guides.

We put Cole on the road, teaching her own data visualization course over 50 times in the ensuing six years, before she decided to strike out on her own on a self-proclaimed mission to “rid the world of bad PowerPoint slides.” And if you think that’s not a big issue, a Google search of “powerpoint kills” returns almost half a million hits!

In *Storytelling with Data*, Cole has created an of-the-moment complement to the work of data visualization pioneers like Edward Tufte. She’s worked at and with some of the most data-driven organizations on the planet as well as some of the most mission-driven, data-free institutions. In both cases, she’s helped sharpen their messages, and their thinking.

She’s written a fun, accessible, and eminently practical guide to extracting the signal from the noise, and for making all of us better at getting our voices heard.

And that’s kind of the whole point, isn’t it?

Laszlo Bock
SVP of People Operations, Google, Inc.
and author of *Work Rules!*
May 2015
acknowledgments

My timeline of thanks

Thank you to...

2010–CURRENT My family, for your love and support. To my love, my husband, Randy, for being my #1 cheerleader through it all; I love you, darling. To my beautiful sons, Avery and Dorian, for reprioritizing my life and bringing much joy to my world.

2010–CURRENT My clients, for taking part in my effort to rid the world of ineffective graphs and inviting me to share my work with their teams and organizations through workshops and other projects.

2007–2012 The Google Years. Laszlo Bock, Prasad Setty, Brian Ong, Neal Patel, Tina Malm, Jennifer Kurkoski, David Hoffman, Danny Cohen, and Natalie Johnson, for giving me the opportunity and autonomy to research, build, and teach content on effective data visualization, for subjecting your work to my often critical eye, and for general support and inspiration.

2002–2007 The Banking Years. Mark Hillis and Alan Newstead, for recognizing and encouraging excellence in visual design as I first started to discover and hone my data viz skills (in sometimes painful ways, like the fraud management spider graph!).

1987–CURRENT My brother, for reminding me of the importance of balance in life.

1980–CURRENT My dad, for your design eye and attention to detail.

1980–2011 My mother, the single biggest influence on my life; I miss you, Mom.

Thank you also to everyone who helped make this book possible. I value every bit of input and help along the way. In addition to the people listed above, thanks to Bill Falloon, Meg Freeborn, Vincent Nordhaus, Robin Factor, Mark Bergeron, Mike Henton, Chris Wallace, Nick Wehkamp, Mike Freeland, Melissa Connors, Heather Dunphy, Sharon Polese, Andrea Price, Laura Gachko, David Pugh, Marika Rohn, Robert Kosara, Andy Kriebel, John Kania, Eleanor Bell, Alberto Cairo, Nancy Duarte, Michael Eskin, Kathrin Stengel, and Zaira Basanez.
about the author

Cole Nussbaumer Knaflic tells stories with data. She specializes in the effective display of quantitative information and writes the popular blog storytellingwithdata.com. Her well-regarded workshops and presentations are highly sought after by data-minded individuals, companies, and philanthropic organizations all over the world.

Her unique talent was honed over the past decade through analytical roles in banking, private equity, and most recently as a manager on the Google People Analytics team. At Google, she used a data-driven approach to inform innovative people programs and management practices, ensuring that Google attracted, developed, and retained great talent and that the organization was best aligned to meet business needs. Cole traveled to Google offices throughout the United States and Europe to teach the course she developed on data visualization. She has also acted as an adjunct faculty member at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), where she taught Introduction to Information Visualization.

Cole has a BS in Applied Math and an MBA, both from the University of Washington. When she isn’t ridding the world of ineffective graphs one pie at a time, she is baking them, traveling, and embarking on adventures with her husband and two young sons in San Francisco.