What Good Charts Look Like

Idea In Short

Study the best data visualizations you can find, then practice relentlessly. Choose the chart type that fits your argument, keep graphs simple enough to read from three feet away, and ensure every graph supports the narrative you present.

Consultants See Patterns

Analyzing data, separating signal from noise, and interpreting patterns form the core of consulting work. Some consultants excel at this naturally. Most develop the skill over years of practice. Finding good presentations and studying them accelerates the learning process. Like a craftsman who appreciates solid work, consultants should examine graphs and analyses with genuine curiosity. Start collecting good presentations, learn how to storyboard, and learn how to tell stories with data.

Study Graphs, Charts, and Tables

Getting good at graphs requires more than technical proficiency in Excel or Tableau. You need to know which template makes the most sense for your argument. Pie charts, tables, line graphs, bubble graphs, and waterfalls each serve different purposes. The choice depends on the story you tell and the message you want the audience to take away. Edward Tufte established foundational principles for graphical integrity that remain relevant, emphasizing that visual representations must tell the truth and maximize data-ink ratio 1.

Learn from The Economist

The Economist stands as a gold standard for data visualization. Its Graphic Detail blog publishes charts that are clean, informative, and persuasive. Subscribers can access five to ten articles free every month, and the podcast costs nothing. The visual data team at The Economist maintains a deliberately limited color palette, using dark blue as the primary color

and light blue as a secondary accent. This restraint keeps charts cohesive and prevents color from overwhelming the message 2. The full Graphic Detail archive is available online for continuous study 3.

Scatterplots Reveal Distribution, Not Narrative

The Economist published a chart showing how the age of Nobel Prize winners keeps increasing over time. The publication made a smart observation that many scientific discoveries are experimental rather than theoretical. The committee waits years to gauge lasting impact before awarding the prize. They also noted wryly that the selection could be age-weighted, since elderly recipients have less time and no prizes are given posthumously.

Scatterplots are not the most persuasive format. Too often they signal to the client that the consultant used a lot of data and should be trusted. The format shows minimum, maximum, and distribution visually. The Economist improved the chart with a trendline that highlighted the larger point. Prize winners are old and getting older. The axes shared the same scale, providing a common reference point. The chart also identified the oldest winner at ninety and the youngest at seventeen.

Scatterplots remain more visual than informative. The article noted critical facts that the picture did not make obvious. No one under fifty has ever received the economics prize. Only nine of the 112 literature winners were younger than fifty. Since 2000, only eight percent of award winners in chemistry, physics, and medicine were under fifty, compared with thirty-six percent in the previous century. None of these insights were clear from the scatterplot alone.

Line Graphs Tell the Clearest Story

The Economist demonstrated very clearly that both the rate and total number of violent crimes, murders, and property crimes fell over thirty-five years. The number of murders in New York City in 1990 was 2,245. Last year it was 352. The decline was unmistakable.

Line graphs are the best format. They are simple and clear. The best graphs are readable from three feet away. The message lands instantly. Crime is down. That level of clarity and potency should be the goal for every consulting chart. The Economist normalized the rate per 100,000 people, so the violent crime rate appeared as 370-plus rather than 0.371

percent. The raw percentage is difficult to visualize, while a rate per 100,000 is intuitive and immediate.

Beware the Data Buffet Graph

Some graphs pack too much information into a single frame. One Economist chart showed several data elements across multiple cities. In a consulting presentation, you would break this into four or five separate pages. Presented together, the graph serves as reference material but does not tell a single story. It tells many stories simultaneously.

This resembles a buffet. The audience picks what they want. The graph is not curated and appeases different tastes rather than driving one point home. The chart did rank cities from least violent to most violent and placed the national average in the middle. Despite these efforts, it remained informative rather than compelling. A smart consultant would take the crime statistics and drive correlation analysis against geography, economic growth, immigration, and industry mix. Data buffet graphs tend to provoke the dreaded client response of asking what the point is.

Bubble Charts Add a Dimension

The Economist showed that the number of craft breweries per 100,000 people is largely inversely correlated with the level of self-professed religiosity. This seems almost obvious, yet many consulting recommendations share this quality. Sometimes data simplification confirms intuition and reveals the magnitude of the relationship.

Bubble charts take a standard plot graph with X and Y axes and add a third dimension through the size of the bubble. Sometimes this adds too much information, but in this case the bubble size proved informative. Vermont appeared very high on the Y axis for breweries per capita, but the state has a small population and small beer production, visible in the tiny bubble. New Jersey and Alabama both had small bubbles despite different positions on the religiosity axis. The inverse correlation was strong enough that the publication added an entirely separate state map in the top right corner.

The Graph Must Support the Story

The Economist noted a perfect storm in global shipping. Excessive capacity from too many

ships met falling demand. The Baltic Dry Index fell 95 percent from its 2008 high. Container lines lost $10 billion that year. Hanjin, the seventh largest liner, filed for bankruptcy. The industry announced alliances, which the graph displayed.

The graph was adequate but bordered on a data buffet. It contained lots of data without a strong central point. The deeper issue was that the article discussed supply, demand, and profitability, but the graph emphasized alliances and mergers and acquisitions. This mismatch occurs frequently in consulting. What appears on the slide does not match the narrative being presented. If alliances and consolidation were the big story, the accompanying text should support that line of persuasion.

Graphs Serve Arguments, Not Egos

Consultants must remember that graphs exist to serve arguments. Every chart should answer a question, support a recommendation, or reveal an insight. When the graph and the narrative diverge, the audience feels confusion rather than conviction. The best consultants choose their chart type deliberately, keep their visuals simple, and ensure alignment between what the slide shows and what the speaker says. Study the masters, practice the craft, and let clarity be your guide.

- 1Thedoublethink
- 2Economist Education
- 3The Economist

Summary

Great charts tell a single story with clarity and force. Consultants who study masterful visualizations, choose the right chart type for each argument, and align graphs with narrative deliver work that clients remember and act upon.