

Delivering Competitive Intelligence Visually

By Angela Kangiser, Online Business Research

The breadth of intelligence information available, client requirements, and the continued development of new technologies now require that we disseminate much of our CI information visually. Visualization technology and the importance of conveying data using graphics and illustrations continues to be on the forefront of many CI practitioners' minds.

BENEFITS OF GRAPHICS

There are specific benefits in presenting competitive intelligence findings graphically:

- displays and explains complex data
- adds value to the supporting material and data
- emphasizes research results
- saves client time, thus enhances productivity
- is aesthetically appealing
- fosters communication and discussion

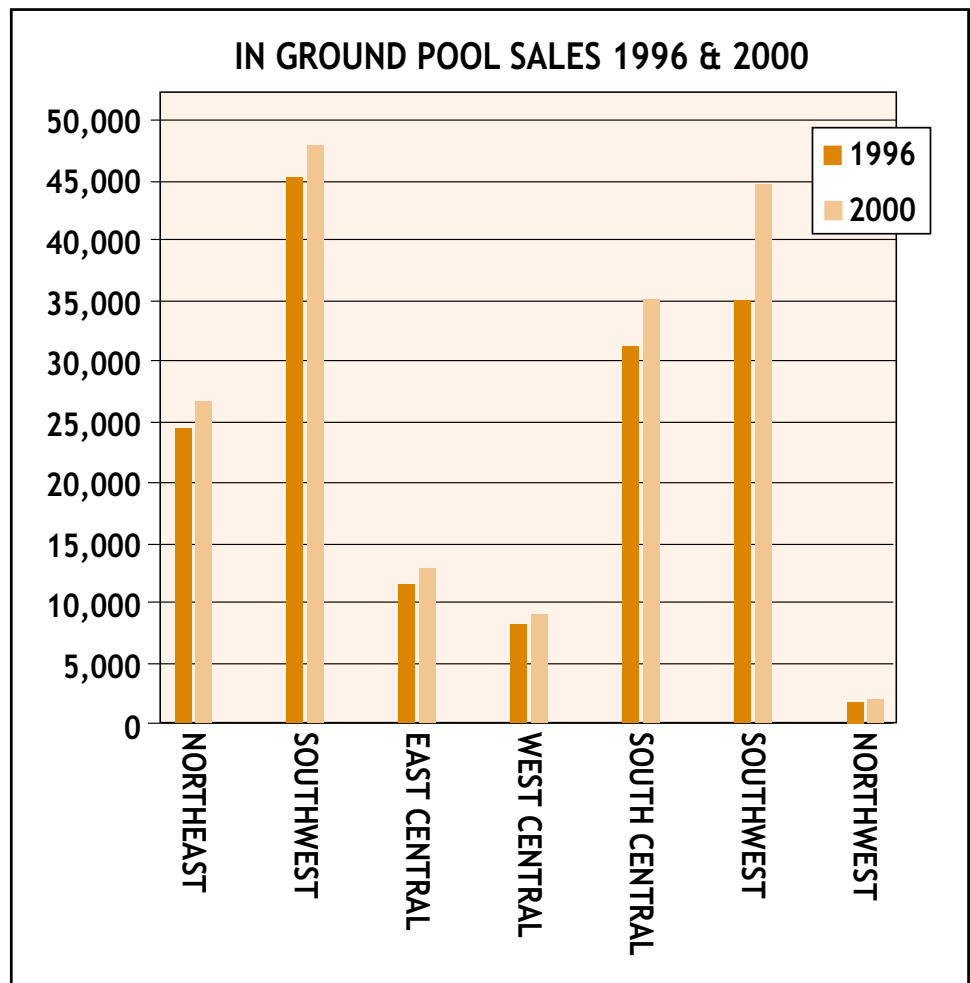


Figure 1: Bar chart

CONSULTING FIRM PROFILE MATRIX						
SERVICE OFFERINGS	FIRM 1	FIRM 2	FIRM 3	FIRM 4	FIRM 5	FIRM 6
ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT	X		X		X	X
TEAM BUILDING	X	X		X	X	X
HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT			X	X		X
EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT & COACHING	X					X
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT & TRAINING	X	X	X		X	X
MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT & TRAINING	X		X	X		X
CHANGE/TRANSITION MANAGEMENT	X				X	X
EMPLOYEE TRAINING				X	X	X
COMPENSATION & BENEFITS				X		
CONFLICT RESOLUTION	X			X	X	
NEEDS ASSESSMENTS	X	X	X	X		X

FOR WHAT WAS PRIMARILY A TELEPHONE RESEARCH AND WEB-BASED PROJECT, I CREATED THIS CONSULTING FIRM PROFILE MATRIX USING WORD'S TABLE CAPABILITY.

Figure 2: Consulting Firm Profile Matrix

“A relevant graphic or chart can spur a lively discussion as you and your audience discuss the implications of the data,” explains Bill Fiora in his article, “The Lost Art of Briefing” (*Competitive Intelligence Magazine*, v.5, n.3, May/June 2002, p35-36).

DISSEMINATION GUIDELINES

When disseminating CI research visually, following key guidelines will assist the intelligence client in reading and utilizing the illustrations quickly and efficiently.

First, ask the client directly during the reference interview how they would like the research data delivered in addition to how they will use the information.

Understanding who the ultimate client is and how the intelligence will be used helps define how to deliver it.

In addition, the client should be able to receive, retrieve, and manipulate the illustrations contained in the research. Check software compatibility and systems requirements. This is especially important when working with a client for the first time.

Finally, present the information in a format that is easy to interpret and use for key decision-making. Whether including graphs and illustrations as part of a written report, presentation, website, or during an in-person discussion, use images only if they make a real point.

SO MANY CHOICES

A wide range of visual dissemination software tools are now available. The level of software sophistication needed to produce images depends upon the audience, the images' application, analyst and client preferences, and their organizational procedures and requirements.

When using graphics and illustrations to present CI information, remember to:

- Take advantage of advanced features in the Microsoft suite of products.
- Use more sophisticated tools and technologies only when necessary.
- Include pertinent illustrations located during the research process.

FOR THE LOVE OF MICROSOFT

The Microsoft suite of products is a staple in the industry and fulfills most needs for creating graphics and

illustrations. Excel, Draw, Visio, PowerPoint, and Word's Table capabilities allow CI professionals to economically create and display data graphically, and cut and paste images into other documents.

Excel is an industry standard for producing graphs, charts, tables, and matrices, and is easy to use. “I present a lot of material in Excel spreadsheets and will make tables or charts using Excel,” states Kent Sutorius of Get Informed Solutions in Baltimore, Maryland, a firm that provides research services for the government, retail, manufacturing, and pharmaceutical industries. His projects involve competitive and industry profiles, product usability studies, marketing data and analysis, and historical data and trend analysis.

“I like summarizing information graphically. For example, trend analysis information can be clearly portrayed through pie or bar charts,” explains Mr. Sutorius. (See Figure 1.) “For SWOT analyses, I summarize the data with a TOWS chart. In a half page, the user can clearly see what objectives need to be fulfilled.”

A myriad of competitive information can be displayed using matrices including competitor product details, financial particulars, market highlights, and a company's strengths and weaknesses. Matrices provide the client with an at-a-glance summary of the salient information, which adds value to the research results and the deliverable.

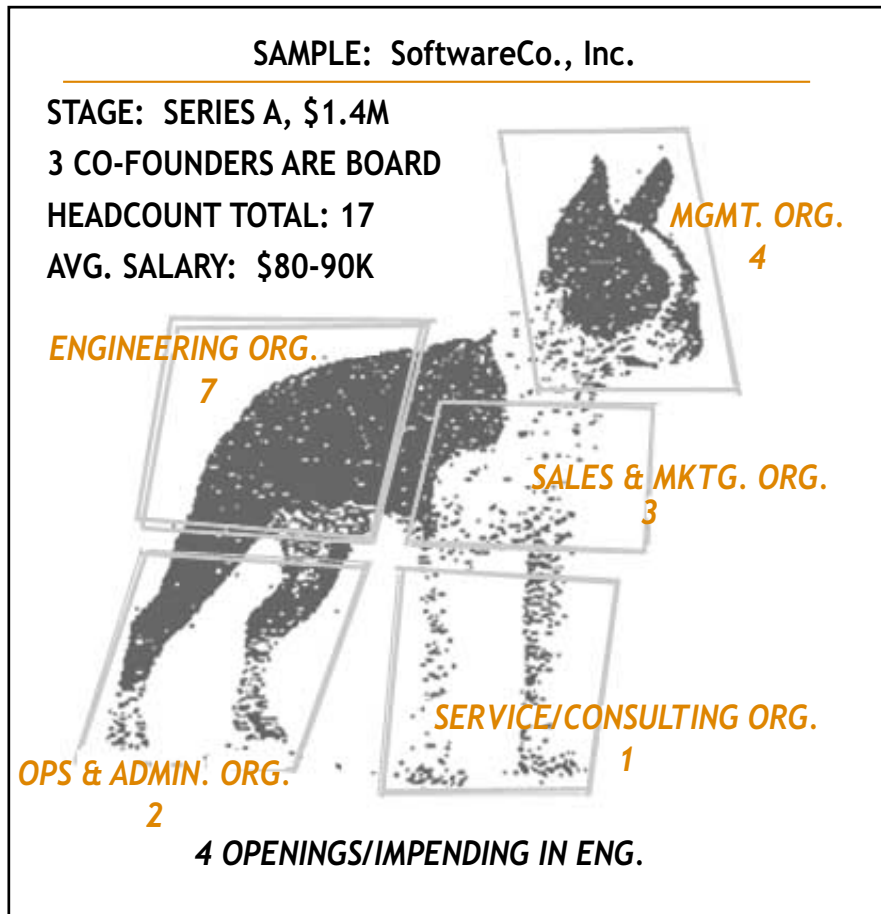


Figure 3: Unusual impressions

John Levis, president of John E. Levis & Associates in Livonia, Michigan, specializes in competitive intelligence and market research for the healthcare and medical industries. A CI project may include researching product sales, new product information, the developmental process, acquisition information, and competitor product details. He likes to present competitor product and financial information using matrices created with Microsoft Excel. “Matrices are a jumping-off point to expand analysis even further,” explains Mr. Levis.

PRIMARY RESEARCH MATRIX

Primary research findings can be displayed using a simple matrix. In a recent project, I investigated the competitive landscape for a new management consulting firm establishing itself in a particular city. Using primarily telephone research and web sources, I researched each competitor’s company contact information, company details (specializations, years in business, number of employees), service offerings, clients, principals and their bios, and consulting rates.

To display a critical portion of the research, I created a Consulting Firm Profile Matrix using Word’s Table capability.

This provided the client with an at-a-glance document that detailed each competitor’s service offerings and illuminated the information most important to them.

“In the consulting business time is money. So any time I can look at a graph or a business model, it adds value for me as well as my client,” explains one owner of a business consulting firm. (See Figure 2.)

ONE LEVEL UP

More sophisticated tools and technologies like Photoshop, Paint Shop Pro, SnagIt, CatchTheWeb Solo, and FullShot, are available for more advanced applications such as creating or outputting complex illustrations. This software captures, manipulates, edits, organizes, and enhances images from web or online sources located during the research process. Incorporating existing on-target illustrations and graphics into the deliverable can save valuable time, but remember to source images for copyright purposes.

Paint Shop Pro is a dedicated photo program used to copy pictures from the web and other sources. One of its strengths is its ability to read a variety of

formats. Adobe Photoshop is more expensive, (around \$600 for the 7.0 version available at the website), but can be useful in producing high-quality photos or diagrams of a competitor’s product or device, for example.

PICTURES ARE BETTER THAN WORDS

Photoshop is a favorite image creation tool of David Carpe, principal of Clew, LLC, in Boston, Massachusetts. Clew focuses on applying competitive intelligence to strategic human resources in the first specialized ‘HRCI’ practice in the country. Clew clients range from early stage venture backed corporations to large consulting firms and corporations across multiple industries. The projects tend toward strategic talent acquisition programs as well as organizational mapping and research, and deliverables vary depending on the client.

“Even if I need a very concise graph, I usually produce it directly in Excel and then decide to either put it into a PowerPoint file, or pull it into Photoshop to beautify it for the client,” explains Mr. Carpe. “I do believe that pictures are always better than words, particularly when accompanied by a presentation in person or by telephone. Specifically

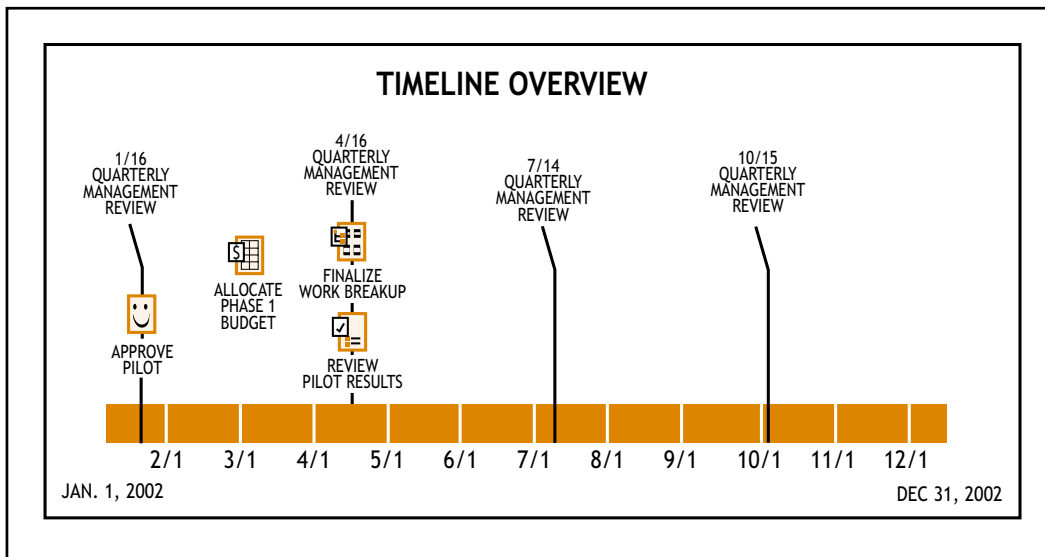


Figure 4: Caper eBook Software's timeline

numbers — anything from revenue to percentages to headcounts — are always well-served by imagery.”

His favorite use for visualization is in support of *common sizing* data. For example, a client might ask how many employees are dedicated to engineering within three firms, with staff ranging from circa 30 to 800 people. Rather than just showing actual numbers, Mr. Carpe will present three differing size entities (relative scale) with an indication of percentage. Presenting the information this way helps the end-user to understand where organizational emphasis is being placed, without the distraction of small and large numbers.

“Images last,” adds Mr. Carpe. “And I’m particularly fond of unusual impressions.” (See Figure 3.)

HIGH PERFORMANCE PACKAGES

More complex applications sometimes warrant using more sophisticated software. These technologies were mentioned by subscribers of SCIP researchers, an electronic discussion list of SCIP professionals.

With Microsoft Visio as its backbone, the Caper eBook Software (www.GumshoeKI.com) allows the CI practitioner to collect and disseminate findings visually (or diagrammatically) via an e-notebook. The notebook allows the user to link visuals to data in documents or on the web, rather than cutting-and-pasting the information, so as not to lose the entire source document.

The resulting “Visual Net” helps research to be used more directly, which makes the percentage of data more usable. There is a feedback mechanism, table of contents, and search feature. To view the data, only a web browser is required. The recipient can search the report just like a search engine. The strategy, timeline, and diagram linking features

are appreciably useful for CI practitioners. (See Figure 4.)

Another software gaining attention is MM4XL – Marketing Manager for Excel (www.MarketStat.com). MM4XL is an Excel add-in software that features charting and analytical tools useful for market research, competitive intelligence, and strategic and operational planning. MM4XL’s latest version 6.0, runs in five different languages.

“The output of this great little plug-in for Excel makes it easy to use and install, and populating the data is as easy as it can be as well. It also makes for very high-impact visuals in well-accepted formats for executive decision-makers,” explains Arik Johnson, managing director of Aurora WDC in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin.

CONCLUSION

There are many software packages available that support the intelligence industry in a variety of capacities. Fuld & Company’s *Intelligence Software Report*® 2003: Leveraging the Web, provides a review of some of the technologies available for CI practitioners (www.fuld.com/Products/ISR2003/).

No matter what visual technologies we employ in our work environments, it’s important to consider its usability and the needs of the client. Images should provide the salient information quickly and efficiently in order to assist the user in making business and strategic decisions.

Angela Kangiser is president of Online Business Research, a firm providing primary and secondary research services in the areas of competitive intelligence, business and industry, and market research. She is the author of ‘After the Research: Information Professionals’ Secrets for Delivering Results,’ ONLINE, January/February 2003. Angela currently serves on the board of the Association of Independent Information Professionals (AIIP). Angela can be reached at (719) 266-1545 or akangiser@onlinebusinessresearch.com.