



Jim Endicott

Custom charts help bypass PowerPoint shortcomings

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A well-crafted chart is the most fundamental of visual communications used in presenting. But it's certainly not the easiest to create. In fact, one of the biggest gripes I have with today's presentation-software packages is that they tend to be awkward and not at all intuitive in their approaches to the charting process. No wonder most presenters create such boring charts — charts simply take too much time to do well.

Compelling charts are the best way to convey raw data in graphical terms and to make information memorable. When creating charts, however, most people find the problem isn't deciding which of the 40 chart variations to use, but how to get the thing to look the way they want. If the software giants would spend as much time simplifying their charting tools as they do coming up with such obscure options as the cone or donut chart, we would all be more enthusiastic about jumping into the charting feature. As a professional presentation designer I often bypass the charting engine altogether for some chart types because I get frustrated with the tools. Let it plot the data, fine — but I want to easily make them more visually appealing and unique. If this sounds a bit familiar, you'll like this month's column. We'll look at using PowerPoint charting tools and how that information is orchestrated for the presenter.

1 Launch the charting engine

This is about the only straightforward part of the process. Selecting

INSERT, then CHART, will drop in a default chart. Unfortunately, PowerPoint's default chart rarely meets anyone's needs. This is where a chart wizard could go a long way. (Anyone listening?) If you create certain kinds of charts frequently, I suggest creating several chart types that you're apt to use more often and set them up as your own user-defined types. Believe me, this will save you tons of time in the long run.

Double-clicking (or right-clicking) on specific chart attributes is the quickest way to get to the options you want. These context-sensitive options get you where you want to go much quicker than hunting through drop-down menus. For instance, double-clicking on the text will launch you into a menu in which you can change the font. I recommend sticking with standard fonts. There's no point in embed-

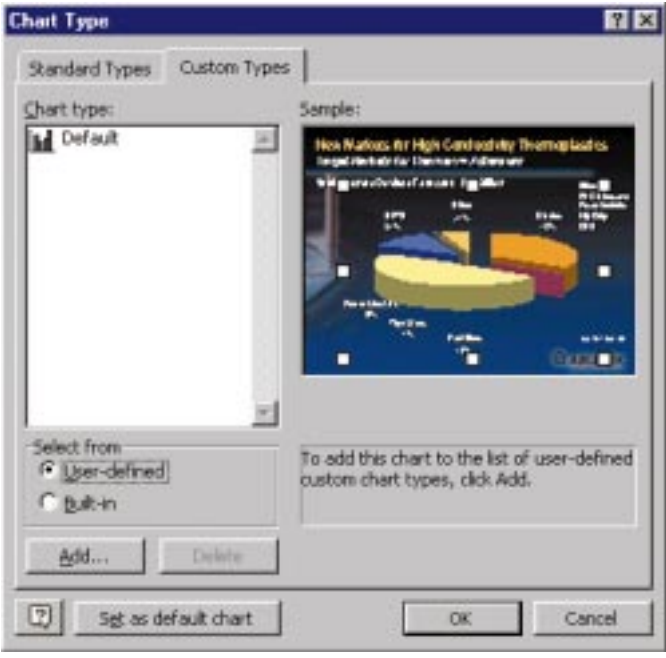


Save time by creating custom charts that can be reused in similar situations.

2 Set chart defaults

We'll begin with the default column chart (otherwise known as a bar chart) that PowerPoint creates. Be aware that you are now in the charting engine for PowerPoint 97. Your menu options have changed to reflect this. A data sheet has popped up at the top of the screen to initiate the process. Forget the data for the moment, though; let's concentrate instead on the chart attributes.

ding fancy fonts for exclusive use in charts. I also suggest sticking with sans-serif fonts, such as Arial or Arial Narrow, because chart text tends to be small. Legibility is essential. I suggest setting your defaults to 14-point type — you can always increase the size later. Also, under the SCALE tab in the FONTS menu, it's a wise idea to simplify the axis values. There's really no point to calling out grid-line value changes from 0 to 100. They just add visual clutter to your chart. Remember, charts



The best way to preserve a new default chart in PowerPoint is not to use the SET AS DEFAULT CHART tab, as you might expect. Instead, choose the USER-DEFINED option in the CUSTOM TYPES tab, click on the ADD button, and name your new chart.

are not legal documents, they're ways to represent data visually.

Review all the tab options and use only those that are essential. Right-click on any grid lines and simplify them. Double-click on the bars themselves to alter the color, bar width and data labels. Your goal should be to eliminate as much visual distraction as possible. The best charts are the visually simple ones. Let's face it, if they're too complex, you've defeated the purpose. (Note: PowerPoint will always default to the last four colors of the color-scheme menu when it assigns the first four chart colors. You may choose to alter those colors in the general COLOR menu.)



3 Create a default chart

OK, you've got that chart looking pretty good. Now, you want to preserve it. Supposedly, PowerPoint allows you to create a default chart by clicking on the SET AS DEFAULT CHART button at the bottom of the screen. Unfortunately, if you try that, all the attributes will change when you go to a new slide. The only way I've found to

4 Plot your data

With your own default chart placed and ready for data, enter the data sheet and turn off the default data rows or columns you will not need. Do this by double-clicking on the A-B-C column heads or 1-2-3 row descriptions. The selected areas will turn gray, indicating that they are now inactive and will not show up in your chart.

Step 1: Type in data labels along the top and side of the data sheet. Keep them concise.

Step 2: Highlight all the cells in which you will be entering data. After each keypad entry, simply hit the Enter key and the program will move to the next cell within the highlighted area. If you do this, you won't have to highlight and enter each cell individually as you go.

5 Spice up the visual appeal

Remember, simpler is better. But charts also need to be visually appealing. One good way to add visual appeal is to incorporate stock photos or images that visually reinforce the message you are

trying to communicate.

Talking about computer sales? Apply a bitmap image of a computer to a chart piece (or several) by double-clicking on the bar or pie slice, then selecting FILL EFFECTS under the PATTERNS tab. Under the PICTURE tab, you can choose how to apply the bitmap. Among other things, PowerPoint will allow you to wrap the image around a 3D chart element. Simply choose SELECT PICTURE, find your bitmap image and select OKAY. Now we're beginning to add some visual interest. But that's not all we need to do to create an outstanding chart. How we introduce the chart information — the build — can be as important to the chart's overall effectiveness as the way it looks.

6 Create a logical build

Unlike earlier versions, PowerPoint 97 allows you to animate chart information to create interesting builds. With your chart placed in your slide, right-click on the chart and select the CUSTOM ANIMATIONS menu. Explore the options under the CHART EFFECTS tab and PREVIEW them to find the animation that best supports your message. If you can't get the animations to work the way you want, PASTE a copy of the chart in a safe place and UNGROUP the original. This will allow you to animate the pieces of the chart individually. But if you do this, always save a copy, because the ungrouping breaks the links to the data.

It is sometimes difficult to avoid complex charts, but introducing information incrementally can take a lot of the pain and confusion out of the experience for your audience. Trust me, everyone appreciates a well-conceived, well-executed build.

There's no way we can do a comprehensive overview of charting in such a short space, but this should make your charting efforts less frustrating. Raw text data will always be lost onscreen, but all of us can comprehend data better when its presented in the clean, clear and simple graphical terms of a chart. □