

Developing Materials That Convey Data With Charts and Graphs

If your audiences for sustainability are accustomed to seeing traditional charts and graphs to convey data, then it may be important to integrate these methods into your presentations and materials.

There are challenges to displaying data in this way, however. While they are straightforward visual displays, they rarely convey warmth or a sense of humanity. It's important to provide charts and graphs that are clear and easy to understand, but you may also need to frame those data with anecdotal stories, quotes, and photographs to provide a human context that helps reveal the larger story inherent in your numbers. You may wish to look at the *Alternative Methods for Conveying Data* in this section.

Here are a few tips on designing effective materials that integrate traditional charts and graphs to convey data.

Design for a Strong First Impression

You never get a second chance to make a first impression, and this truth also applies to your communication materials—particularly if you want to impress a potential new partner for sustainability. Whichever types of communication materials you have determined will best resonate with your intended audience, you can be certain that an aesthetically pleasing presentation will immediately reflect well on you and your initiative. If your initiative is unable to use the resources of a professional graphic designer or writer, here are a few tips to help guide your work.

The number one rule of design is: Simplicity rules.

It sounds easy to do, but all too often communication materials such as PowerPoints and factsheets are overrun by too many fonts, too many graphic elements, and too much information. The result? Your audience may get lost, lose interest, and miss your message altogether.

Fonts: Limit the number of fonts in any presentation to two. A best practice calls for using a serif font for content (e.g., Times Roman, Garamond) and a sans serif font for headings and titles (e.g., Arial, Helvetica). Keep point sizes readable. Avoid ALL CAPS, as well as an excess of underlined or *italicized* words.

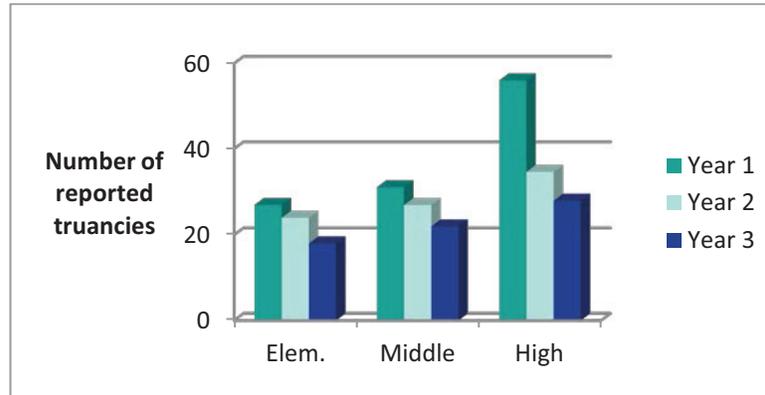
Charts and Graphs: Charts and graphs can add a great deal of visual impact, but they are best used sparingly to report truly important data sets. Overloading your presentation with charts and graphs will actually minimize the impact of your key findings.

A common design mistake is to explain a graph's purpose along the axis lines, where it is difficult to read and understand. We suggest that you state the graph's purpose in the heading and minimize all other text. If your chart doesn't easily stand on its own and requires a good deal of text to clarify its meaning, you might want to revisit the value of the chart.

Remember that the same information can be interpreted in different ways. Below are two common sample charts that illustrate this:

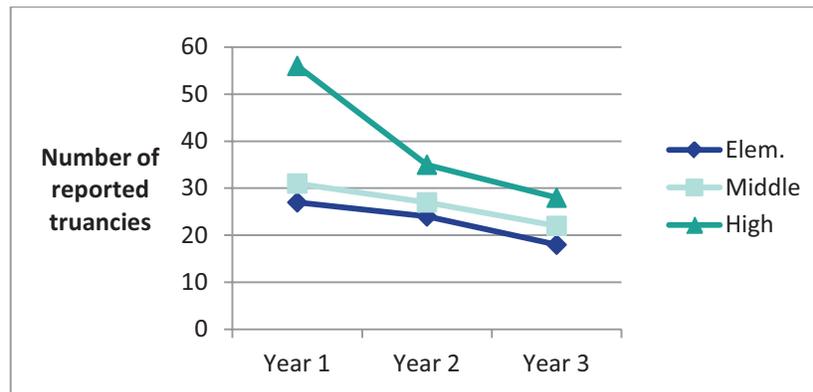
Bar graphs allow you to effectively compare amounts ...

SS/HS Truancy Reduction Is Working!



... while a line graph better describes outcomes by visualizing trends over time.

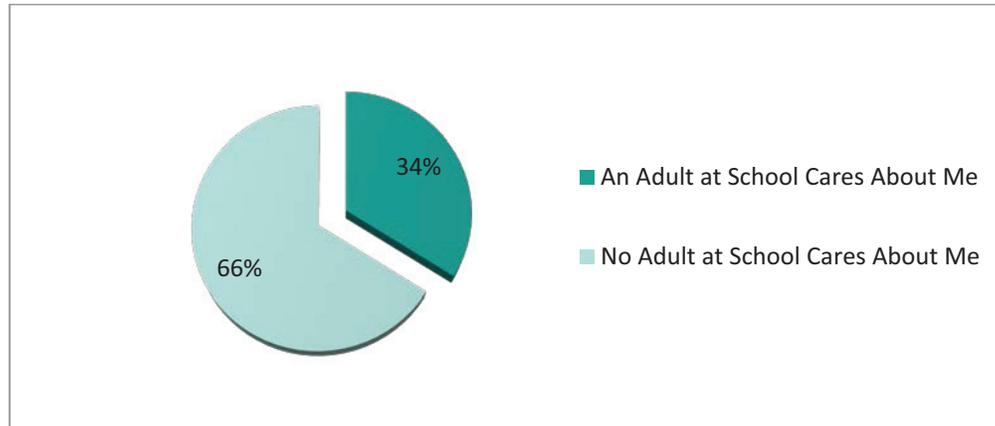
SS/HS Truancy Reduction Is Working!



Pie charts were developed in an effort to create a simpler way to visualize data than bar charts and line graphs, but they have their own challenges. Because a pie represents a whole, this type of chart forces the user and audience to view data that can only be conveyed as 100 percent. It can be effective to convey a snapshot in time, but you would need multiple pie charts to communicate longitudinal outcomes, which are far more effectively displayed through a line graph.

Pie charts, however, can be very persuasive when there is one remarkable data point you wish to share:

Student Perceptions About Adults In School



If you choose to convey data using charts and graphs, the Communication & Social Marketing (CSM) Center recommends that you limit your choices to bar graphs, line graphs, and pie charts. While products such as Microsoft Office offer other options that include bubble, scatter, doughnut, radar, and stock charts/graphs, most audiences will have a more difficult time understanding the data with clarity.

Finally, when you use charts and graphs, we encourage you to work closely with your evaluator and communication specialist to determine how best to illustrate the data for your intended audience.

Language: Remember your intended audience as you write your content and frame your data. Your language must be easily and clearly understood by everyone at the table. Too often, those of us involved in prevention and mental health assume that everyone speaks the language of “case management,” “risk factors,” and “resiliency.” It’s highly likely that you will encounter a multitude of possible audiences for sustainability for whom these words have no meaning or value.

Layout Guidelines: Avoid placing too many design elements on a page. You’ll end up with a cluttered, unreadable document if you attempt to put three differing types of charts on the same page with two pictures, three fonts, and four paragraphs. Again, consider simplicity in your layout. If you need to squeeze in so much information that it’s tough on the eyes, you might want to look for another way to present your data and information.

Color: Maintain color schemes and consistency in your layout. As with fonts, just because we have hundreds of options from which to choose doesn’t mean we need to use them all.

Pretest: Once you’ve finished developing your materials, ask yourself if you’ve created something that’s truly easy to understand and pleasing to the eye—then ask someone else! Pretesting your materials will help you learn if they will have the desired impact on your audiences. If you are not able to pretest your materials or presentation with a member of your intended audience, we suggest that you share it with someone who is not at all associated with the initiative to make certain your content is easily understood.

As you craft communications for sustainability, the CSM Center hopes you will bear in mind that your evaluation data can be one of the most important tools you have for telling your story. Just remember:

- Know your intended audience;
- Convey the data that will have meaning to your audience;
- Help uncover the human story behind your data; and
- Present it in appropriate and well-considered ways.

If you believe charts and graphs may not be the best ways to convey your data to key audiences for sustainability, please refer to *Alternative Methods for Conveying Data* in this section of the Celebration Kit.

For assistance in creating materials that incorporate your evaluation data, contact your communication specialist or the CSM Center at 800–790–2647.