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Give Your Charts a Makeover

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Sift through the pages of *The New York Times* and you'll notice that the charts used to illustrate the stories don't look like typical Excel offerings. They're uncluttered and attractive, and even though they're mostly monochromatic, they make good use of differing grays. Their designers also manage to jam a lot of useful information into a very small amount of space. Still, the distance between a *Times*-style chart and an Excel one really isn't that great. You can create charts that are as good in Excel with a little additional time spent on design—and a little additional Excel know-how.

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Graphical niceties such as shadows and photo images, minimal chart axes, grouped multiple charts—all the features of a *Times* chart can be reproduced in Excel 2007, so you too can produce great-looking pieces of informational art. Here are some makeover techniques to use on your own charts.

Shrink the Size

The plot area does not have to take up the entire chart area; you can reduce its size to make room for other elements. To do this, click the plot area to display the sizing handles, and then drag them to shrink the plot area or to move it inside the chart area. You can also change font and size, and shrink large numbers by formatting them to show as millions. Enter the custom Format Code #,,"M" and click *Add* to reduce millions to a shorter display format.

Add Artwork

You can format the shapes in your chart with more than colors and borders. Select *Format Shape*, then *Fill*, and click the *Picture or Texture Fill* option. Select a texture or image to place inside the shape. You can then configure the border and transparency of the picture fill so that it either stands out or blends in.

Get Rid Of the Excess

To declutter a chart, hide or de-emphasize parts of it. Select any chart object—say, a gridline, legend, or axis—by clicking on it; right-click; and choose *Format <chart object>*. Then, for example, to remove the line from an axis, click the *Line Color* option, then *No Line*. The *Format Object* dialog in Excel 2007 stays open but lets you click on various areas of a chart to modify them.

A Few More Tricks

By some careful arrangement, you can make a series of different charts look as if they are all part of the same chart. To do this, create a shape such as a rectangle and then move two or more charts onto the shape. If the y-axes of all the charts are on the same scale, you can remove the axis from every chart but one and line the charts up so they share the single visible axis. To make them look less like individual charts, remove the border from around each of them and use the No fill option, as shown here.

Text boxes are particularly useful with grouped charts, and if you insert them in a chart, they'll move with the chart. Click the chart to select it, then insert a text box and type text into it. You can use text boxes to create chart titles as well as to place additional data that's relevant to the purpose of the chart but not actually charted.

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