

Visualization: Enterprises Catch Up With Consumer Tech



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The financial services industry lives on impressive quantities of data that expose, or more often obscure, the opportunity to spot pricing disparities that can be extremely profitable to the first who can identify and act on the information.

So it may be a bit surprising to learn that until fairly recently rows and columns of numbers in Excel have been the most common presentation format. That is changing, and not just in financial services but in sales and marketing, supply chain management, executive information and defense.



Frank Freitas, global head of product strategy at international brokerage firm Instinet, says the company's use of Adobe's Flex to provide an interactive rich Internet experience has been catching on recently, perhaps because a generation that grew up on video games is now moving into business.

"When I show our visualization tools to people I am trying to sell to, it is like watching a light bulb go on -- 'I can't believe I am seeing this, never thought I needed it and now can't believe I got along without it,'" says Freitas. "People who were used to working with green screens or Excel can now use this -- I would say that we are looking somewhat at a changing of the guard."

Panopticon, based in Stockholm and operating globally, also has its base in financial services but works with a variety of other companies in areas such as supply chain management and inventory controls. Hugh Heinsohn, vice president of marketing, says visualization often reveals problems in seconds that might otherwise require hours of searching through spreadsheets.

A treemap can show product shortages, and the size of the square will show how big a customer is involved; a snacks company will be more concerned about a shortfall at Wal-Mart -- represented by a big square on a treemap -- than at a single neighborhood convenience store which shows up as a tiny square. A furniture manufacturing company says it took two days to figure out what was going on in their orders and shipments with spreadsheet data; using Panopticon the same tasks take about half an hour.

Another tool combines information from a company's Web site with CRM information to help determine if a prospect is seriously considering a purchase. Visualization is especially important in fast-moving businesses, such as soft drinks on a hot summer day, because they can show potential problems and offer the option to drill-down to more data in time to send out supplemental deliveries.

"Visualization offers the ability to find things that are difficult or impossible to see with traditional measures, and do it fast," says Heinsohn. "People can interpret pictures very quickly, because the brain is oriented to that. The human brain is not well geared to look at columns and rows of numbers in a report." He uses the tool himself to analyze Google ad words and determine which words convert to action and where the company is paying too much for a word.