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### ***Other data follies***

By Paperitalo Staff

I heard from some of you last week telling me I was all wet about my views on Six Sigma.

Let me clarify.

The point I probably did not emphasize is this. Six Sigma is fine, as long as you consider it one tool in your whole kit of tools. It is nothing more, nothing less, just another tool. The danger comes when you and your minions look at it as if you were looking at the obelisk in "2001: A Space Odyssey" (if you are under forty-five, have someone explain it to you). It is not the be all and end all to your problems, although there are plenty of consultants out there that want you to believe it is.

But, undaunted, let's plunge off into some other data follies people pass off as "facts." I speak of Graphs. With the help of Bill Gates' product, Excel, anyone can now be an "expert" at "Graphs." You can make a graph to prove anything you want to prove.

In fact, think about it, isn't it the case that every time you produce a graph you are producing it to prove a point? That is what I do, and I don't think I am much different than anyone else. I carefully select the ranges of both the x and y axes, I choose the resolution I want on those axes, I decide if I want to use a log scale and so forth and so on. All to make the point I want to prove stand out to the observer.

I had a boss one time that insisted, that in a group of graphs in a report, that the y axis should always be of the same range. This was his way of trying to keep you from doctoring the data.

Some data we think we present benignly. This would be data such as production records or downtime and so forth. Well, by the time you came along, its presentation form may have existed so long that it is benign to you, but I'll suggest somewhere in the past, the person that first put the data together chose the presentation parameters very carefully.

As an observer in a presentation, I always have some mental fun trying to figure out what the presenter is trying not to tell me. For if a large population of data exists, the presenter chose what data they believed important to convey. By necessity, they left some out. Where they left that out because it truly was insignificant or because they were actively trying to hide something is the fun of this hide and seek game.

Of course, today, any data that makes it into the popular press is suspect. This includes any economic or employment data, or, my favorite, "global warming" data. Regardless of the underlying data, public data always contains a certain amount of fiction. If you call it author out on it, you'll have fun watching their indignity.

If you are serious about data presentation, however, I suggest you procure a copy of "Envisioning Information" by Edward Tufte ([www.edwardtufte.com](http://www.edwardtufte.com)). This is the definitive work on how to accurately present data.

When it comes to safety data, at least in the United States, the government dictates how we will present it. However, do your people know what it really means? We talk in shorthand so often about safety data, that I am not certain if anyone really knows the significance of the numbers. Be safe and we will talk next week. ##