

WHITEPAPER

Building data interfaces that **tell stories**

A framework for planning data products that guide
decisions — not just report what already happened.

FOREWORD

What does it mean for data to tell a story?

Most dashboards and data products fall into one of three tiers. Understanding which tier you're building in is the first step toward building something more useful.

01 Descriptive data

Averages, totals, and percentages that summarize what happened. Useful for tracking progress, but it leaves the reader to dig through several data points to work out why something moved and what to do about it.

02 Prescriptive data

A step further — the product suggests an action. In practice, most prescriptive tools only restate what's already visible on the chart in front of you, rather than reasoning across a wider set of signals.

03 Storytelling data

The product reports what changed, explains why, and points to a next step grounded in more than the one chart on screen — the way a person would explain it to you directly.

Getting to storytelling data starts with separating what's active from what's dead — the handful of signals someone needs today, from the historical record that matters for reporting but not for right now.

The following pages lay out the framework we use at Driftline to plan interfaces that lead with active, decision-driving data — while still keeping historical reporting exactly where it belongs.

THE FRAMEWORK

Six questions to plan your next data product

Work through these in order at the planning stage, before a single chart gets designed. Each one is a lens, not a rulebook — the goal is a clearer decision, not a longer checklist.

01

Cadence

Every dataset has a natural rhythm. The product should move at that rhythm, not faster or slower than the decisions it's meant to support.

- What's the natural rhythm of this data — hourly, daily, weekly?
 - Does that rhythm match how often someone actually needs to check in?
 - At what point does a new period begin, and what happens to the old one?
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02

Separating active data from dead data

Active data is what someone needs to make a decision today. Dead data is the historical record — valuable for reporting, but not for right now. Most interfaces blend the two by default; this step is about deliberately telling them apart, and letting only what's relevant surface on its own.

- What data is needed to **report** what happened, versus **guide** what happens next?
 - How much history is needed before a forecast or recommendation is trustworthy?
 - What makes a piece of data worth surfacing right now, rather than always-on by default?
 - If everything not useful in this moment were removed, what would be left?
 - Does the layout shift based on what the user is trying to accomplish, or is it fixed for everyone?
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03

Baseline & comparison

A number on its own can't tell a story. It needs something to be measured against before it means anything at all.

- Does every number have a baseline, so it's clear whether it's good or bad?
 - What's the comparison point — a past self, a goal, a peer group, an industry benchmark?
 - What comparison data is available now, and what would need to be sourced to build it out?
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THE FRAMEWORK — CONTINUED

Steps four through six

04

Action & ownership

If a piece of data doesn't lead anywhere, it's decoration. This step forces every metric to justify its place on the screen.

- For every metric on screen, what decision is it meant to inform?
 - If it doesn't map to a decision, what other data points should be used to create one?
 - When a signal fires, who is responsible for acting on it?
 - Can you point to a concrete next step — not "something's off," but what's worked for others in a similar position?
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05

Trust

A story only guides action if the reader believes it. Trust is built by showing your work, not just your conclusion.

- Does the user understand why something is being flagged?
 - Is there a way to drill in, for someone who wants to verify rather than trust blindly?
 - Do we display the sources of data and third-party access used?
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06

What story is your data telling?

The final gut-check, run after the previous five. Step back and read the screen the way a stranger would.

- What's the headline?
 - Who's the character — the user, their team, their account?
 - What changed, why, and what happens if nothing is done?
 - Can it be summarized in one sentence a person would actually say out loud? (*"You're losing ground in X because of Y — do Z."*)
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Data that doesn't lead to a decision is just decoration. Run every new dashboard, panel, or product through these six steps before it ships — the goal isn't more data on screen, it's a clearer next move for the person reading it.