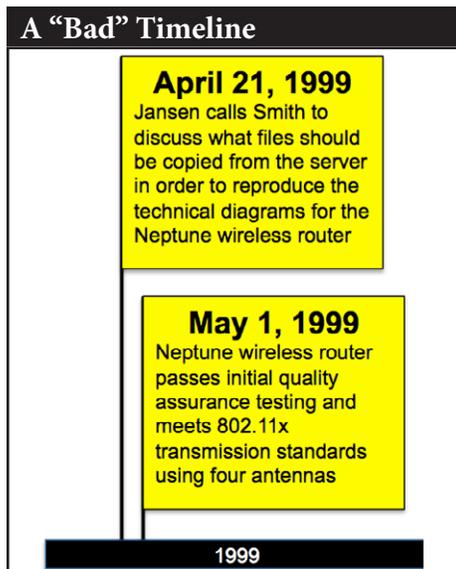


Building Better Timelines

We see a lot of timelines used in cases. Most are bad. Why? They are typically a collection of events plotted on a horizontal time axis--it's a visually awkward depiction of things that happened rather than a vehicle to advance the story.

Do you really need a timeline? Every chronology doesn't benefit from being displayed in a timeline. When appropriate, though, the timeline, can powerfully convey either conspicuous gaps or bursts of activity.

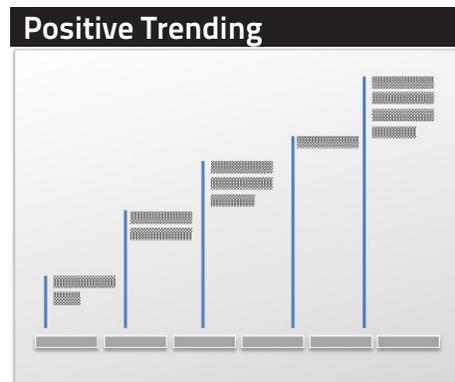
Below is a snapshot of the wrong execution for a timeline. It's just a bunch of events fitted to the time dimension. The events are too descriptive and unrelated. The time markers have more emphasis than the events and there is no way to distinguish one story from another doing what. It's just not persuasive.



Here's three things you can do to improve the timelines you use

Mass & Momentum

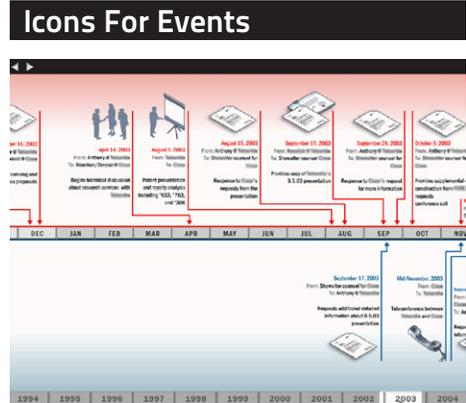
The visual arrangement of events should support the narrative story. Is it positive? Then make the events move upward. Is it negative? Events should move downward. Good versus evil. Put the mass of good events on top of the timeline and the bad events on the bottom. If the gaps are important, make that a content-free zone and distinguish it from the rest of the space.



Lose The Legends

Legends, generally, have no place in a timeline. Legends, like those used in charts and graphs, require deciphering and usually detract from the story.

A more effective alternative is to tie the appearance of the events to the plot or story of the timeline. If the markers represent actions of different parties, then you could use color to distinguish the parties or simply plot the events on different sides of the timeline. If the markers represent different types of events, then use icons or illustrations to visually set them apart.



In the example above, we've used a combination of techniques--icons to represent the types of events, colors for the different parties, and we've visually separated the parties to top and bottom of the timeline. For key events, you can use a related document, photo, illustration, or other evidence to provide better visual interest. Techniques like these create a secondary layer of information and lend structure to the timeline without resorting to a legend.

Tell One Good Story

It's best to think of each timeline as a single story with one lesson. One of the biggest mistakes we see is trial teams that use a single timeline for the entire history of their case. This "case-on-a-slide" approach can quickly become unwieldy. When you've lived with the complexity of the case for three or four years (as attorneys often do), it seems like the right approach but is often more confusing to people exposed to the details for the first time.

Discrete stories benefit from their own timeline because it keeps the audience focused on one message.