

WHITE PAPER

The Enduring Value of Narrative Reporting

5 Critical Aspects of BI Reporting for Modern Organizations



PYRAMID
ANALYTICS



Reporting is vital to decision-making. However, most organizations struggle to produce meaningful reports that aid in the decision-making process.

WHITE PAPER: THE ENDURING VALUE OF NARRATIVE REPORTING

Why does analytic reporting always fall short of expectations?

- 1) The answers to tough questions require deep subject matter expertise that not all analysts possess; the person who understands the problem isn't the one authoring the report.
- 2) Most reports are fundamentally descriptive; they lack the analytic sophistication and context that provides deeper insight into complex business problems.

While they throw numerous cross-department teams at the problem or embark on yet another technology initiative, year after year organizations continuously labor through the reporting process, delivering bland, formulaic reports that provide little decision-making value.

Many business intelligence (BI) solutions in the marketplace today—the very tools designed to interrogate data and produce meaningful insights—are only making things worse.

Traditional BI solutions make it notoriously difficult for everyone involved in the analytics and reporting lifecycle: business users and analysts can't prepare reports quickly and easily because they require a developer; developers can't prepare insightful reports because they lack specific topical expertise to deliver insightful analysis. These solutions are ill-equipped to handle the frenetic pace of today's business climate.

Meanwhile, emergent self-service BI tools promise to empower end users and improve speed to insight. While they can produce attractive data visualizations in dashboard-

style reports, they haven't made it any easier to produce the professional, narrative-style reports that many business leaders require.

Today's organizations need a modern analytics solution that makes it easy for all types of users to produce and distribute analytics reporting throughout the organization. The key is to use a BI solution that emphasizes five critical aspects.

1. Makes publishing professional reports a key aspect of the analytics process.
2. Delivers depth of context in the form of narrative reporting.
3. Lets end users control how and when analysis is shared.
4. Sends reports and alerts based on triggers when impactful business changes occur.
5. Provides a wide variety of output formats to suit stakeholder preferences.

In this paper, we explore these in greater detail, discuss why many BI solutions fall short, and explain how Pyramid Analytics excels in each of these key areas.

1

Narrative Reporting is an Intrinsic Aspect of the Analytics Process

Your BI solution should treat publishing professional publications as a key aspect of the analytics process—and include it as a core feature.

Analysis isn't an "end." It is a means to an end—an iterative, constant process that should clarify complicated data and point the way to better decisions. However, we don't pay our analysts to arrange and rearrange data all day. We want them to quickly model and understand data, and then produce meaningful insights and actionable recommendations.

When BI solutions focus exclusively on analysis, and not enough on sharing that analysis with others, the result is insight bottlenecks. A small number of individuals might understand complex information, but without a reliable way to share it in the form of published reports, all the work analyzing the data is wasted.

Typical Approach

Most BI solutions treat reporting as a second-class citizen. On both ends of the BI spectrum, providers fail to deliver reporting functionality that can convey analytic content and insights to wider audiences in

the form of published reports. Traditional solutions often acknowledge that reporting is important, but the publishing tools themselves are often difficult to use and require heavy IT involvement.

Self-service solutions, meanwhile, focus on making analytic exploration easy for the end-user, but offer limited reporting tool sets; some even surprisingly leave reporting functionality completely out of their product.

The Pyramid Analytics Advantage

Analytics is about information creation and discovery, but business users can't expect their insights to share themselves. Pyramid Analytics treats narrative reporting and publishing as an intrinsic aspect of the analytics process.

Pyramid allows business users to conduct analysis and create analytic content, and then embed that content in narrative reports that contain deep context—all on their own using a single platform.

Users can't expect business insights to share themselves.

2

Depth of Context is Vital When Sharing Analytic Insights

Your BI solution should be capable of delivering deep analytic context in the form of narrative reporting.

Depth of context is important. Those tasked with preparing published reports must labor through complicated data to produce compelling analysis. The challenge is to reduce the noise, and sharpen the focus on the aspects of data that are relevant and actionable. They must then articulate this analysis and prepare published reports that executives and decision-makers want to read.

However, they need to take care not to flatten the analysis so much that it becomes meaningless. Balance is important: publications that contain just the right amount of information become more relevant to the needs of their audiences.

Typical Approach

Many BI tools either make it too difficult to publish sophisticated analysis in reports, or they are so rudimentary that the resulting content provides shallow context.

Traditional BI tools may permit users to configure rich published reports that contain sophisticated data and attractive visualizations, but they often require power-user skill sets.

Self-service BI tools focus on data visualization in dashboard-style, and exclude publishing functionality altogether. While attractive, these visualization-based

reports lack true analytic depth and don't allow users to provide descriptive text that contextualizes the analysis. Plus, they don't fill the need for published reports still required by decision-makers, executives, and board members.

Some bleeding edge BI solutions promote machine learning and automation as part of the reporting process. These tools might be capable of effortlessly generating paragraphs—or even pages—of descriptive text, but they don't deliver nuanced commentary that only experts can communicate.

The Pyramid Analytics Advantage

Pyramid is the only product that makes it easy to add a wide range of contextual elements that adapt to specific data configurations. Not only are the visualizations and grids data driven, so is the commentary itself. This allows end users to create deep narrative context in their reports.

For example, end users can add slicers to their reports to filter and display pertinent data. In addition, they can configure Pyramid to display conditional commentary that changes sentences or words—or shows or hides entire sections—based on specific logic. This sharpens the analysis, and makes reports more impactful. Plus, it's wholly customized to the audience receiving the published reports.

3

Distribution Tools Let You Control When and How Information is Shared

Your BI solution should let end users control how and when analysis is shared across the organization.

Better decision-making is the reward for an organization-wide focus on analytics. But if the resulting insights cannot be meaningfully shared with others—and only a select few have access—the value of BI software to the organization is diminished.

For organizations to become truly data-driven, they must not only be able to process complicated data and conduct sophisticated analysis, they must be able to transmit this content promptly and securely to appropriate stakeholders. BI solutions need to come with functionality that allows analysts and end users to configure how, when, and to whom analytics information is shared.

Typical Approach

To operationalize the process of sharing analytic insights, organizations need tools that are closely aligned with employee communication and sharing habits.

However, too often BI solutions provide advanced tools for conducting analysis, but they make it

difficult—or even impossible(!)—to schedule and distribute reports. Traditional BI solutions feature cumbersome scheduling and distribution tool sets that often require a developer to manage, while many user-driven BI tools lack robust distribution engines.

Still others require separate, standalone reporting tools to gain scheduling functionality. But the cost—both from an actual product and configuration perspective—often outweighs the benefit. Without a mechanism for sharing analytic content, the result is ad hoc sharing processes, which are rarely secure or repeatable.

The Pyramid Analytics Advantage

Pyramid gives users tremendous control over when, how, and to whom information is shared. Users can schedule the periodic or conditional release of reports to secure centralized portals or to authorized recipients via email. This allows analysts and end-users alike to confidently distribute professional-caliber reports to internal and external recipients with security set at the role or cell level.

Better decision-making is the reward for an organization-wide focus on analytics.

4

Triggers and Alerts are Essential to Keep Constituents in the Loop

Your BI solution should be capable of sending reports and alerts based on triggers when impactful business changes occur.

Change doesn't occur on a predictable schedule. For organizations to navigate a constantly shifting environment, it is crucial that decision-makers have timely access to accurate information. But decision-makers can't rely on periodic reporting to reveal these insights.

A successful BI implementation should provide reliable mechanisms for alerting decision-makers and stakeholders when impactful changes occur, and automatically—and promptly—distribute supporting reports, analysis, and recommendations. It should also be configurable so that organizations have the ability to customize alerts and notifications for the appropriate circumstances and audiences.

Typical Approach

The ideal BI solution matches the entire decision lifecycle—from the time data is modeled, analyzed, and understood, to the moment analysis is shared and used to make business decisions.

However, life rarely runs on a schedule, and the analytics process rarely follows a regular cadence.

Yet many BI solutions—even those that tout their enterprise credentials—are inflexible. They're designed to churn out reports, not to dynamically alert the organization to changes. Alerting systems in most BI tools are rudimentary and only use simple conditional triggers. And while some solutions come with alerting functionality, the process for using it is difficult for most users.

The Pyramid Analytics Advantage

With Pyramid Analytics, users can notify colleagues with email alerts or platform notifications when important changes occur. In Pyramid, users can schedule alerts to activate when data is refreshed or specific business events occur. This can be a simple trigger (e.g., if a data point goes above or below a certain threshold), or a complex additive trigger that contains multiple criteria.

These alerts can contain formatting capabilities, including dynamic narrative content that displays when set conditions are met. Using this functionality, you can initiate the behaviors your organization needs to succeed through informed, managed communication.

Change doesn't occur on a predictable schedule.



5

Reporting Format Preferences Vary from Person to Person

Your BI solution should provide a wide variety of output formats to suit stakeholder preferences.

Form typically follows function, yet form gains special importance when the goal is to communicate complex information to numerous audiences. The analytics process is complicated enough. Why make it more difficult for those who are ultimately consuming analytic content? A CEO in meetings most of the day might prefer traditional hard copy reports. An on-the-go sales leader conditioned to give presentations may prefer PowerPoint. A busy marketing executive may prefer to view a PDF on a tablet. A best-in-class BI solution should be able to export analytics content in formats that match audiences' preferences.

Typical Approach

Most BI tools limit the output types you are able to use and take ease of distribution for granted. Rigid, inflexible output tools hinder your efforts to conveniently communicate your analysis. These reporting bottlenecks put unnecessary constraints

on your organization's decision lifecycle. The BI landscape is littered with examples of solutions that make it harder—not easier—to deliver analytics content into the hands of people who need it most. Some limit output capabilities because certain output formats don't fit in their technology ecosystem. Others simply don't consider analytics output to be a serious requirement. Still others require standalone add-on products that carry additional licensing and configuration costs.

The Pyramid Advantage

Pyramid Analytics allows you to easily create professional, data-driven reports in the format that works best for you and your audience. Organizations can publish sophisticated analytics content directly to PowerPoint, Word, and others to quickly render analysis in an easy-to-consume format. This allows you to customize the output to your audiences' needs.

Format matters when the goal is to communicate complex information to numerous audiences.

Evaluating Analytics Solutions' Narrative Reporting Capabilities

The following table summarizes the key publishing capabilities of notable BI products.

	Pyramid Analytics	MicroStrategy	Sisense	Qlik	Microsoft (PBI)	Tableau
1. Makes publishing professional reports a key aspect of the analytics process	Treats narrative reporting and publishing as an intrinsic aspect of the analytics process.	Low scores for ease of use for content consumption; requires heavy IT involvement.	End goal is to produce interactive dashboards, not published reports.	Requires separate NPrinting licenses to gain true publishing capabilities. Integrating NPrinting with the existing Qlik platform can be complicated and time-consuming.	Requires separate products (Reporting Services) to publish analytics content in narrative-style reports.	Believes data visualization is the culmination of the decision-making process; narrative reporting functionality is completely left out of the product.
2. Delivers depth of context in the form of narrative reporting	Easily add a wide range of narrative contextual elements that adapt to specific data configurations.	Configure rich published reports that contain sophisticated data and attractive visualizations, but this requires deep power-user skill sets.	No published reports; dashboards are comprised of data visualizations; users can add static text to dashboards, but there is no narrative context to speak of.	Limited narrative reporting functionality out of the box; organizations can purchase separate NPrinting licenses to gain publishing capabilities.	To provide similar context using Microsoft Power BI, analysts building reports need Reporting Services. But that requires deep skill, and not all analysts can use it.	Data visualizations lack analytic depth, and absence of narrative content limits contextual impact.
3. Lets end users control how and when analysis is shared	Confidently distribute professional-caliber reports to internal and external recipients with security set at the role or cell level.	Cumbersome scheduling and distribution tool sets; to subscribe to reports and documents, you must own the MicroStrategy Distribution Services product.	No published reports; all reports take the form of interactive dashboards.	With NPrinting, post static reports to portals or email.	Requires separate, standalone reporting tools that have scheduling functionality	Inferior distribution engine.
4. Sends reports and alerts based on triggers when impactful business changes occur	Easily set up alerts based on simple or complex triggers consisting of multiple criteria.	Has a very robust alerting engine, but it's designed for the power analyst and requires a deep skill set to configure.	No published reports; limited alerting capabilities.	No alerting capabilities without NPrinting.	Microsoft can provide alerting but it's driven through Reporting Services, can't be done with Power BI alone, and is power analyst-driven versus user-driven.	No alerting capabilities.
5. Provides a wide variety of output formats to suit stakeholder preferences	Publish directly to PDF, XPS, Excel PowerPoint, Word, and others to quickly render your analysis in an easy-to-consume format.	Output reports in standard formats (Word, Excel, PDF)	Designed for analytics dashboards, not published reports.	With additional NPrinting licenses, users can publish reports in a variety of formats, but this requires separate licenses and installation costs; without NPrinting users can only export single charts to PDF or Excel.	Requires standalone add-on products that carry additional licensing and configuration costs.	Limited output capabilities because certain output formats don't fit in their technology ecosystem

A man with short dark hair is shown in profile, looking towards the right. He is wearing a dark blue shirt. The background is a blurred office environment with white walls, ceiling lights, and a window with blinds. In the foreground, there is a blue semi-transparent box containing text. To the right, a woman with long blonde hair is partially visible, looking at a computer monitor.

Pyramid Analytics empowers analysts and end-users to build models and interrogate data in a single self-service environment. **Importantly, it treats narrative reporting—reporting that provides deep data-driven context beyond the static data views and visualizations found in traditional reporting—as a core part of the analytic lifecycle.** Users can craft and automate engaging, dynamic narrative reports using the very same platform they use to prepare data models and conduct advanced analytics inquiries.

When reporting ties directly to data, includes dynamic content that provides deep context, and conforms to established security protocols, reporting delivers more than just pretty pictures or historical facts—it delivers contextualized insights that shows the way to better decisions.

To learn more about narrative reporting from Pyramid Analytics, email sales@pyramidanalytics.com.



