



SPOTLIGHT ON YAHOO!



TRICIA LORD, PRODUCT MANAGER

In July 2010, product manager Tricia Lord gave us the inside scoop on Tableau's growing popularity at Yahoo!. Over 400 users worldwide rely on Tableau Server and 100 "data explorers" are digging deeper with Tableau Desktop. "Four billion impressions of ad serving data come into our database every day," Tricia explains. "We have the largest multi-dimensional database in the world that Tableau's running on, so it's really important for our users to get an understanding of the data."

“They can show which size of the ads work better and which audience segments are responding to the ads. That’s a piece of the data that they’ve never been able to get before.”

TABLEAU:

What is your role at Yahoo!?

TRICIA:

I’m a product manager at Yahoo! in their Advertiser Business Intelligence group. I help our business users—including account managers, optimizers, media buyers, and pricing yield managers—to optimize their campaigns on the data that we provide.

TABLEAU:

And how do you use Tableau?

TRICIA:

Tableau is an internal product that is used by over 400 users worldwide targeting analytics and optimization.

TABLEAU:

What kinds of decisions are your users able to make with Tableau analysis?

TRICIA:

They’re able to optimize the campaigns that they’re running for advertisers on the Yahoo! network. They’re able to make better decisions on behalf of our advertisers and find better publishers to show their ads. They can show which size of the ads work better and which audience segments are responding to the ads. That’s a piece of the data that they’ve never been able to get before. The segment data—looking at user audiences by geography, by age, gender—has been a really great tool for our account optimizers to enhance campaign performance.

TABLEAU:

How did you do this type of analysis before Tableau?

TRICIA:

This type of analysis wasn’t really done before. Segment data is new to Yahoo! and being able to have users access that directly. Before they would have had to send an internal request to an engineering team to do a query pull and send the extract to them. Then they would play around with it in Excel. That’s obviously not a very good way to conduct your business. You want something that you can update all the time, instead of relying on somebody else to pull it for you. So this has been a much more automated way for them to get the data.

TABLEAU:

What kind of dashboards and reports do you do?

TRICIA:

On the server side we have an embedded product called Report Center. We’ve taken Tableau Server and put a little Yahoo! wrapper around it. So it doesn’t look like Tableau. It’s like a Yahoo! product that our users can log in to. We are publishing about 80 standard canned

reports that can be customized by many different slices of data, like advertiser/publisher segment. Users can filter down and find the specific advertiser/publisher they're managing and look at the performance.

At the same time we have about 100 users using Tableau Desktop to do their own analysis. I call them the data explorers. I would say they represent 10-20% of our user base. They're the type of users that really want to get into the data, roll their sleeves up, and explore it. They don't want to be backed into a corner with canned reports. They want to do their own thing. The really big benefit of having Tableau is that it's given our users the opportunity to do their own reporting, instead of relying on an engineering team to do it for them. It's all self-service.

TABLEAU:

Can you tell me a little more about your users on Tableau Server?

TRICIA:

They're mainly account managers. There are media buyers and some executives, but typically people just managing different advertisers that are advertising on Yahoo! sites.

“We didn't have to create thousands of reports to represent every possible slice of the data that they want. We were able to just create the base templates, and then they customize when they use the product.”

TABLEAU:

Who prepares the standard reports you mentioned?

TRICIA:

I wrote a lot of them and other engineers. What's nice is that we have been able to use Tableau's parameter filter rendering feature, and our users on Tableau Server really like the flexibility. They can take a standard report and customize it based on different parameters like advertiser or publisher or segment or audio segment. We didn't have to create thousands of reports to represent every possible slice of the data that they want. We were able to just create the base templates, and then they customize when they use the product. So it also saves time on the database side on querying. We didn't have to run a bunch of reports that weren't being used. The users are running queries on the data that's really useful.

TABLEAU:

How would you describe the value and benefit your users get from Tableau?

TRICIA:

The primary benefit that they can do it themselves, on the Desktop side. They don't have to rely on another engineering team to do the

analysis for them. Our users are very data savvy. They want to play around with it, and Tableau is a really great sandbox for doing that. They can mix and match different types of visualizations and play with it until they see what they want. And they share it with each other, which I think is a really big plus. In the past, with canned reporting tools, it was not that exciting to share numbers with other people. It's more exciting to share something visually appealing, and it's easier to present and to explain.

TABLEAU:

When did you first find out about Tableau? What specific problem were you trying to address?

TRICIA:

Tableau was selected as an ad hoc analysis tool for Blue Lithium in 2007, and Yahoo! bought Blue Lithium in 2008. So that's how Tableau got into the Yahoo! domain. There are other reporting tools within Yahoo! already, but Tableau's making a big inroad and getting really popular among the more data savvy business users. When Blue Lithium selected Tableau to do ad hoc analysis, they were loading 300 million rows of data a day. They wanted something that would let them really dig into that data.

“It's more exciting to share something visually appealing, and it's easier to present and to explain.”

TABLEAU:

Tell me a little about how Tableau use has grown at Yahoo!.

TRICIA:

Tableau's grown a lot in the last year within Yahoo!. We started out with a small deployment of about 100 Tableau Server users and maybe 40-50 Desktop users. We rolled out our TAO product worldwide, so now we have users all over the world in Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, India, all across Europe, all across the US and Canada. That's about 400 users of Tableau Server and about 100 users of Tableau Desktop.

TABLEAU:

How did you ensure a successful deployment of Tableau?

TRICIA:

The key to making our deployment of Tableau successful was first having beginner templates created that would really help people get started. We also set up user groups within the community. They would have a subject matter expert come in and that person would be in charge of helping their team get started up in using Tableau.

TABLEAU:

Do you have any advice to others about how to get users engaged when they're rolling out Tableau?

TRICIA:

I would recommend getting users involved as part of the prototyping process. Give them access to the data right away. They can play around with the tool and become familiar with it. They can play with the data, and they also learn the data.

I think a big part of Tableau is that it really begs the users to ask more questions about the data that they see. They're finally able to do things themselves. And then they want to ask more questions, and they learn exactly what's going on underneath the data. Our data is very complicated. Four billion impressions of ad serving data come into our database every day. We have the largest multi-dimensional database in the world that Tableau's running on, so it's really important for our users to get an understanding of the data. Doing it up front as part of the development process is key.

TABLEAU:

The largest multi-dimensional database in the world? Tell me a little more about that.

TRICIA:

We use Tableau on a Microsoft SQL server analysis cube, also called a MOLAP cube. Apparently we have the largest MOLAP cube in the world. 12 terabytes. We load, as I said, four billion rows a day, so it's a lot of data to be crunching every day.

TABLEAU:

Wow. Okay, let's get back to the prototyping process with your users. Tell me about how that ended up influencing your report writing process.

TRICIA:

Our report writing process has changed in that the users are doing it themselves instead of relying on an engineer or somebody in IT to do it for them. That person in IT might have ten other requests to work on, so it's not really a priority. Our users can now do it themselves, and they can play around with the data. They can quickly set up their data elements to what they want and run it, and they can decide if they want to publish it to Server for other users.

TABLEAU:

How quickly are your users able to get answers to their questions?

TRICIA:

Our users get answers really quickly in Tableau. And then they're able to ask further questions. I call it speed of thought analysis. They can just run a query, and then they're like, "Ok I want to ask this now." So they just quickly add a different data element, a different visual, and they're able to drill in and decide what path they want to go on for their analysis.

TABLEAU:

How long does it take new users to ramp up on Tableau?

TRICIA:

Our users get savvy with Tableau pretty quickly. It's very easy tool to use. It's very intuitive.

“Our users get answers really quickly in Tableau. And then they’re able to ask further questions. I call it speed of thought analysis.”

TABLEAU:

What kind of feedback have you gotten from your users about Tableau?

TRICIA:

When people use Tableau they say, “Wow, you’re not going to believe what I was able to do!” They love to share their analyses with each other. It sparks discussion in meetings or even through email. It makes them ask deeper questions about what they’re looking for. It really creates a nice rapport amongst the team. Just looking at numbers on a spreadsheet isn’t conducive to that kind of rapport with your colleagues.

TABLEAU:

So, there are clear benefits to your users. At the higher level, how does Tableau benefit Yahoo! as a business?

TRICIA:

Tableau has really benefited the business in that we have been able to see trends across the entire ad exchange. We can look week over week to see which advertisers are moving the market and which are not. If there is a big movement, we can then go talk to that specific account team and figure out what’s going on, negatively or positively, what’s working and what isn’t. That’s been a really big benefit from a more macro view of the business.

TABLEAU:

Is there anything else you’d like to share about your experience with Tableau?

TRICIA:

I’ve been doing business intelligence product management for the last 15 years. I’ve worked for vendors similar to Tableau, and this is the product that I would have dreamed about trying to develop. It’s something that users are really happy with and that we can deploy really easily. It’s easy to set up. It’s easy to maintain. It’s been a pleasure getting to know the product and getting to advocate for it within Yahoo!.

Tableau Software helps people see and understand data.

To learn more visit <http://www.tableausoftware.com>