

Dealing with Poorly Formatted Data in Excel

BY BILL JELEN

Last month I discussed sorting in Excel. But in order to sort your data, the data set needs to be properly arranged. This month I'll take a look at a common problem and show you amazing ways to whip similar data sets into shape.

Filling in the Outline View

The data set in Figure 1 has a common outline format. Although each customer has multiple product purchases, the customer name appears only once in column A for each customer. The remaining records for each customer leave column A

blank, creating an outline view. Many programs use this view because it creates an aesthetic layout when printed, but it will be difficult to sort this data to find the largest sales.

Figure 1 shows a data set in outline format. The goal is to quickly fill in all of the blank cells in column A with the most recent customer name. This is actually quite easy if you know a few obscure tricks.

Select Only the Blank Cells

In order to select the blank cells in column A, follow these steps:

1. Select cells from A2 down to the last row that has data in column B.
2. Press the F5 key to display the Go To dialog box.
3. In the lower left corner of the Go To dialog, click the Special button. This will display the Go To Special

dialog. This powerful dialog allows you to select certain classes of cells. You can imagine times when it would be useful to select only the formulas, only the errors, only the visible cells, or, in the present case, only the blank cells.

4. As shown in Figure 1, choose the option button for Blanks. Click OK. Excel will now select only the blank cells from the original selection.

The next task is to enter a formula in all of those blank cells.

Enter a Formula in Four Keystrokes

While many people use the mouse to enter formulas, in this case the old Lotus “arrow key” method for formula entry works amazingly well. In fact, it requires only four keystrokes to create a formula that will fill all of the blanks in the range. Follow these steps:

1. Type an equals (=) sign. This tells Excel that you are starting a formula.
2. Press the Up Arrow. Ever since the days of Lotus 1-2-3, you can use arrow keys to refer to cells while entering a formula. When you press the Up Arrow, Excel builds a formula of “=A2” in cell A3.

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	Customer	Model	Q3	Q2	Q3	Q4
2	Albino Scanner Company	\$111	3641	3665	1399	4130
3		\$113	4623	3113	1812	3678
4		\$114	2827	2473	2469	2511
5		\$116	1119	2635	1800	3789
6		\$118	2877	4817	2577	4185
7		\$120	1873	4844	4858	2184
8						
9						
10						
11	Amazing Calculator					
12						
13						
14						
15						
16						
17						
18						
19						
20	Best Camera Trailers					
21						
22						
23						
24						
25						
26						

Figure 1



	A	B
1	Customer	M
2	Alharing Scooter Company	\$1
3	Alharing Scooter Company	\$1
4	Alharing Scooter Company	\$1
5	Alharing Scooter Company	\$1
6	Alharing Scooter Company	\$1
7	Alharing Scooter Company	\$1
8	Alharing Scooter Company	\$1
9	Alharing Scooter Company	\$1
10	Alharing Scooter Company	\$1
11	Astestishing Calculator Corporation	\$1
12	Astestishing Calculator Corporation	\$1
13	Astestishing Calculator Corporation	\$1

Figure 2

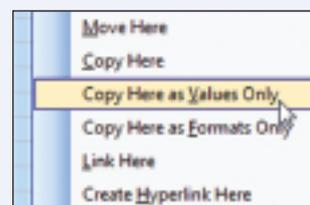


Figure 3

3. Now press Ctrl+Enter. This shortcut is the amazing keystroke to enter a similar formula in every cell in the selection. So while cell A3 will have the formula of “=A2,” cell A999 will have the formula of “=A998.”

You might quibble over whether =, Up Arrow, Ctrl+Enter is three or four keystrokes, but the bottom line is that this is an incredibly fast way to solve a common problem. As shown in Figure 2, every blank cell will now contain the appropriate customer name.

Converting the Formulas to Values

Before you can sort the data, you will want to convert those formulas to values.

Any method that pastes values can't work when you have a noncontiguous range selected. You will have to reselect from A2 down to the end of your data set. Since there are no longer blanks, you can select cell A2 and press Ctrl+Shift+Down Arrow. (Gotcha: This won't work if you've been using the Transition Navigation Keys setting ever since switching from Lotus 1-2-3. Instead, select cell A2, press the End key, then Shift+Down Arrow.)

There are at least half a dozen ways to paste values. If you regularly use one of these methods, read on for an incredible hidden option for converting formulas to values. Here are some of the possible methods for pasting values:

- Go to Edit, Copy. Then go to Edit, Paste Special; select Values and click OK.
- Right-click, select Copy, then choose Paste Values from the dropdown next to the Paste icon on the toolbar.
- Ctrl+C to copy; then Alt+E, S, V, Enter to paste values.
- In Excel 2007, go to Home, Copy; then go to Home, click the lower half of the large Paste icon to get the Paste dropdown, and select Paste Values:
- Customize your toolbar with the Paste Values icon, and then use the Copy and Paste Values icons.

There is another amazing method for converting formulas to values, which I learned from an audience member at one of my Power Excel

seminars in Columbus, Ind.:

1. Select the range of formulas.
2. While holding down the right mouse button, grab the right edge of the selection rectangle.
3. While still holding down the right mouse button, drag the selection rectangle to the right and then back to the left to return the selection rectangle to the original location.
4. Let go of the right mouse button.

As shown in Figure 3, an amazing menu appears. From this menu, choose Copy Here as Values Only. The advantage of this method is that you don't have to copy the range to the clipboard first.

Once you've converted the live formulas in column A to static values, you can sort or filter the data set without losing information regarding which customers purchased which products. ■

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