Spreadsheet skills: let your date leave a mark

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In this month's article we look at one of our readers' most common recent queries: timestamps in Excel. By Liam Bastick, managing director at SumProduct Pty Ltd.

Query
Is it possible for my spreadsheet to show the last time the file was modified or saved?

Advice
This will probably come as a complete surprise to my editor, but usually I write these articles a few months in advance, and not at the last minute as he probably thinks! [Editor: never doubted you for a moment, Liam.]

Every now and then though I write on a topic that attracts quite a few queries. Last month's article on automated filenames provided one such occurrence.

As a result I have had many queries along similar lines to the above question and this month I present three simple solutions.

It should be noted, however, that it all depends on whether you want the file to show when it was last **modified** (when any sort of change was made to the model) or you want to show when it was last **saved**.
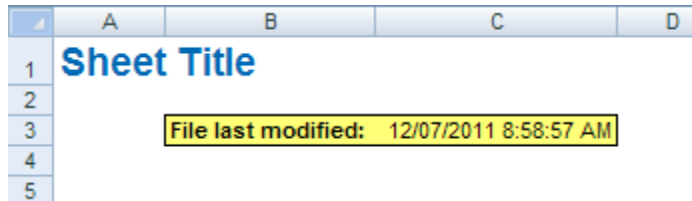
Using a volatile function
Volatile functions are a type of function that will always recalculate (for example whenever you press enter, save or use F9). This means that whenever Excel needs to calculate any part

of a file, those cells (even if on a different worksheet) containing volatile functions will also recalculate.

Common volatile functions include **CELL()** (see last month's article), **OFFSET(), RAND()** and the one I propose to use here, **NOW()**, which delivers the date and time at present.

If you type **=NOW()** into the cell where you wish the date last modified to be displayed, it will change each time a modification is made. This can be highly effective if displayed prominently:

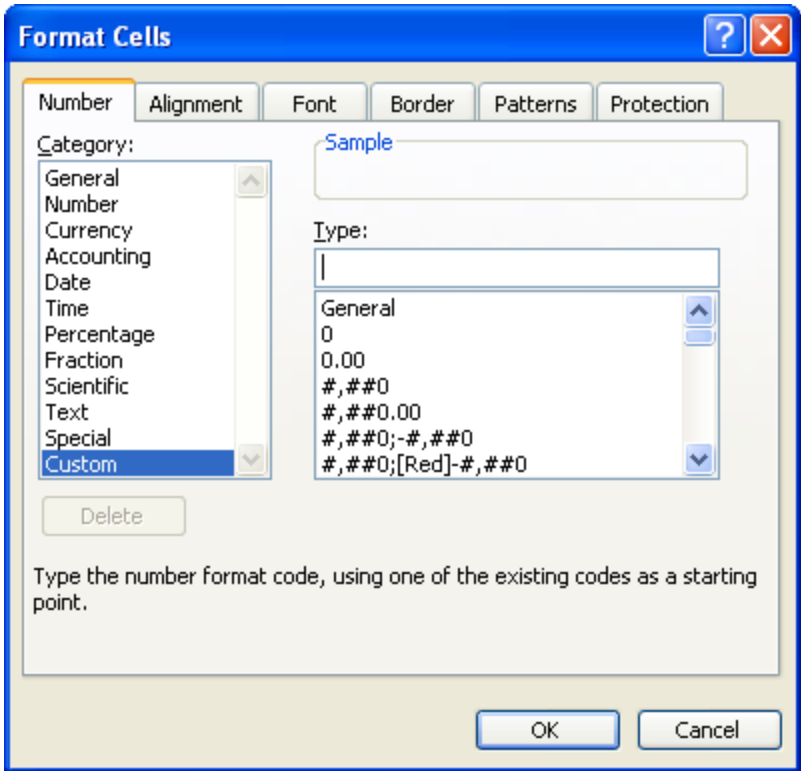**Using NOW() to note when a file was last modified**

To maximise accuracy, I would recommend using the number format **d/mm/yyyy h:mm:ss AM/PM** as the custom format (to remind yourself about custom number formatting, please see my October 2009 spreadsheet skills article).

Using a volatile range name
Often, the **NOW()** formula, although simple, will appear as ########## in a workbook because the column is too narrow or because it has not been formatted properly. A simple way to circumvent this is instead to use a range name combined with the **TEXT()** function. The syntax of **TEXT** is as follows:
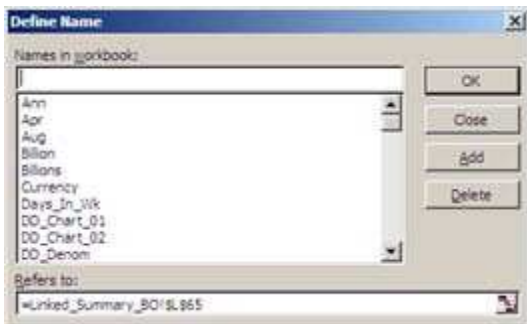
=TEXT(Reference,"Mask")

The **Reference** is the cell or formula that needs to be formatted and the **Mask** is the syntax you would enter for custom number formatting in the 'Format Cells' (CTRL + 1) dialog box, as below.
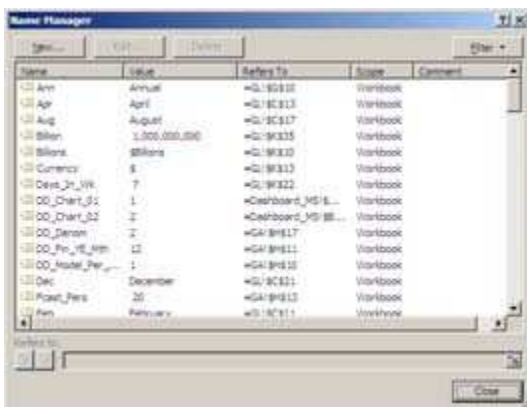
Format Cells, Custom Formats

This is used in a range name that we create using 'Define Name' in Excel 2003 and 'Name Manager' in Excel 2007. Simply use the keyboard shortcut CTRL + F3, and then if using Excel 2007 or later, click on the 'New' button in the 'Name Manager' dialog box).
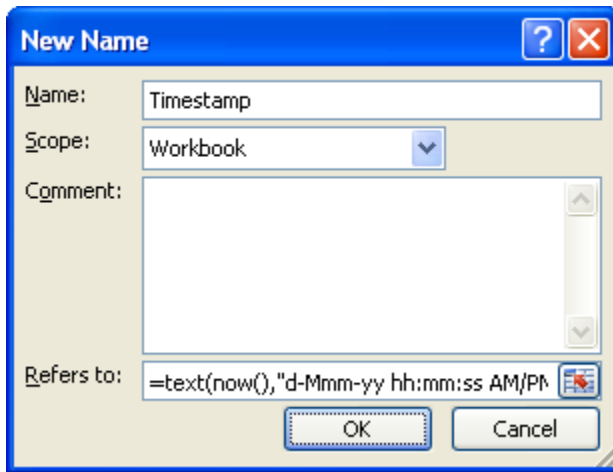

Define Name (Excel 2003 and earlier)

Name Manager (Excel 2007 and later)

Ensure if prompted that you save the range name scope as 'Workbook' so that it will be recognised globally in all worksheets.
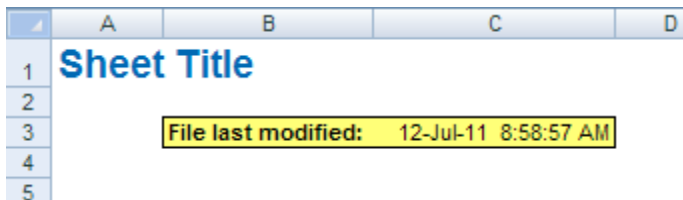

Format Cells, Custom Formats

Here, I have typed the following formula (albeit in lower case, which does not matter, it will capitalise automatically) into the 'Refers to:' section of the above dialog box:

=TEXT(NOW(),"d-Mmm-yy hh:mm:ss AM/PM"

Now, instead of typing **=NOW()** into the cell where you wish the date last modified to be displayed, type **=Timestamp** instead.

Note that I have used a slightly different date format.

Displaying when the file was last saved
This is slightly trickier and the easiest way I can think of is to use a very simple piece of code. Assuming you wished to put the date and time in the first Excel sheet (the sheet that Excel originally called 'Sheet1') in cell C3 the code would be as in this Notepad document (1KB).

The code should be copied into a 'this workbook module' for it to work as intended.

For a refresher on how to copy VBA code into the Visual Basic Editor, please see my June 2011 article.

Once a file is saved, depending upon the date formatting incorporated into the cell (see above), it may display as follows:

Using VBA code to display when a file was last saved

Do remember…
If you are going to use any of the techniques, ensure:

- the date will be displayed predominantly
- the file will calculate automatically
- you save the workbook as a macro-enabled (*.xlsm) workbook in Excel 2007 and later, with macros actually enabled
- the date and time settings are right on your computer!

If you have a query for the spreadsheet skills section, please feel free to drop Liam a line at liam.bastick@sumproduct.com or visit the SumProduct website.

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