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Advisor Answers

Creating Excel files

Visual FoxPro 6.0, 5.0, 3.0

Q: I'm having an interesting problem with the COPY TO...TYPE XLS command. If there is a date field in the table I'm copying to it shows up in a format like:

01-Feb-99

23-Jan-99

which isn't bad except that Excel won't let me change it. If I select **Format > Cell > Date > "MM/DD/YYYY"** in Excel, it does nothing. Worse yet, when Excel sorts it, it uses the day first, and the sort shows up in the order above.

Do you have any ideas why this is happening and how to solve it?

–Steven Dingle (Huntersville, NC)

A: This is one of those things that seems obvious once you know the answer, but could drive you crazy in the meantime. The APPEND FROM and COPY TO commands have been around for a long time. With each new version of FoxPro, new formats have been added to what was already supported, but in order to avoid breaking old code, the new formats have to use new names. TYPE XLS has been there for a long, long time. In fact, it came into the language in FoxPro 2.0. The name XLS refers to Excel 2.0. When you COPY TO ... TYPE XLS, the data is saved in Excel 2.0 format. In the process, date fields are converted to text.

Fortunately, VFP supports later versions of Excel. To save a table in Excel 5.0 format, use TYPE XL5. This conversion handles dates as dates rather than as text.

Actually, Excel stores dates as numbers, but formats them to appear as dates. Internally, Excel treats a date as the number of days since 12/31/1899. (In fact, Ted talked about this in ADVISOR Answers in January 1997.) COPY TO ... TYPE XL5 performs the appropriate conversion so that Excel recognizes the dates properly.

While VFP 6 can't create later Excel versions, it can read them. COPY TO's converse, APPEND FROM, supports a TYPE XL8 clause that reads Excel 97 and Excel 2000 worksheets. For both TYPE XL5 and TYPE XL8, APPEND FROM also lets you specify which worksheet in the workbook you want to extract.

–Tamar