

The Principles Of Brand Simplicity

By Alan Siegel

Research shows that consumers are willing to pay a ‘simplicity premium’ for products and services, like cars, cell phones, and travel and fitness offerings that make life easier while delivering premium performance.

Yet, the majority of products, services, and messages consumers get from business, health and financial services, and the government tend to have the opposite effect — evidenced by the fact that half of consumer electronics products are returned, in working order, because people cannot figure out how to use them.

Simplifying a brand mission presents challenges as well as opportunities. The first step in the three-part journey requires an empathetic approach to one’s business. Today, all companies and organizations can be considered to be in the ‘experience’ business. But too many customer experiences come up short of expectations for many reasons, from underperformance to miscommunication, to confusion, etc., but with each failure, the distance between customer and company grows.

Simplicity is about removing barriers and shortening that distance.

Empathy: The missing ingredient

Every day corporate task forces examine processes, streamline interfaces and redesign documents to simplify them, yet it’s usually a case of retrofitting — and complexity still thrives. Why is it so rare to find a new product or service launched with simplicity baked in? I believe the missing ingredient is Empathy.

By empathy, I mean imagining the context in which someone will buy, read, or use a product/service, then designing it to reflect those needs first and foremost. In other words, the creator of the experience must

'get inside the head' of the recipient to anticipate how the interaction will be perceived.

Sure, talking about empathy in a business context sounds *soft*, evoking a sentiment not usually associated with corporate America. But it's important to understand that *empathy* is not *sympathy*. I don't suggest that organizations sympathize with a customer's plight, but that they empathize with their circumstances to gain insight into the customer perspective. To be specific, I propose the emphasis be placed on understanding another person's thought processes, decision-making strategies, and attention span.

Account for the rational and emotional

For simplification to be effective, one must account for everything that may affect the user's rational processing. In circumstances where emotion overwhelms rational decision-making (think medical emergencies, home purchase, divorce and estate planning), it is critical to empathize with a person's emotional state. Physical distress, the enormity of impact, and urgency are filters through which essential information must be filtered.

Beyond one's real *needs*, simplification must also cater to one's *wants*. For example, pointing out on my phone bill that I might benefit from another plan, or allowing me to decide the monthly due date of my mortgage payment. Purely by customizing content, one unleashes a powerful way to establish an enduring bond with customers, donors or supporters.

By incorporating these practices, empathetic design can boost sales and increase customer loyalty by making products and services designed specifically for individuals. The result is a closing of the gap between customer expectations and what a company actually delivers. Unfortunately, current research shows the gap between customer expectations and brand's ability to meet them is expanding at an accelerating rate.

Make customers happy

On some level, companies do understand that they need to make customers happy. But the tendency is to think that the customer-brand relationship revolves entirely around a 'good product.' But people are unpredictable creatures, and often the product itself becomes incidental while seemingly trivial, and usually negative, interactions become the most memorable aspects of the customer/ company relationship.

Companies often claim to understand their customers - by conducting research and building databases - but cold hard data will not improve the customer experience unless acted upon with imagination and empathy. In the end, a commitment to empathy matters more than the tools per se.

Ideally, everything that a company puts out — from its products to its website, to every letter and invoice — should reflect its commitment to considering the customer's point of view. We're all looking for that in our interactions with organizations, a sense that someone is aware of us as human beings. In practice, this can be expressed in the most minor exchanges and mundane forms of communications, from clear instruction manuals and easy-to-read invoices.

Some of what I've said here may fly in the face of the prevalent view that business must cut costs to the bone to succeed. But simplification can also be a way to reduce costs, but not by scaling back customer care. Trying to save money on out-sourced customer service, phone trees, FAQs, or form letters only destroys any chance of developing meaningful relationships with customers.

In the business world, the notion that it might be important to 'put oneself in the place of another' has only lately begun to gain credence. For brand stewards who think of customers as 'targets,' it is a leap to embrace empathy as a business practice. Yet this is the critical first step toward achieving the simplicity that makes it possible to move on to other steps.

Distill: curate and edit, lessen overwhelming choices

When Google introduced its search engine, the simplicity of its home page played a key role in its immediate success. But Google didn't just stumble into its home page design; the company developed a rigorous system with tight restrictions as to what could and could not be added to the page. To do so, its leaders had to stand firm against its own creatives and engineers and, in some cases, to defy the wishes of customers.

For Google, the ongoing task of holding the line against complexity is managed by an 'audition' process in which each new proposed feature is tried out on the advanced search page and run through a tough scoring system. While keeping its home page as clean as possible, Google understood the importance of including something to convey the brand personality, as reflected in its daily changing, whimsical animated logo treatments.

Simplification is often about narrowing the scope of one's offerings; distilling them down to their essence. It's one of the most challenging aspects of simplification and requires focus and discipline in the face of the constant temptation to add, expand and complicate. The challenge lies in knowing what to kill and what to keep, what is essential and what can be dispensed with. Google holds the line here by allowing no more than ten search results per page.

The quest for simplicity

The quest for simplicity often comes down to short-term impulses versus long-term interests. When a consumer makes a purchasing decision, the product with more features may seem appealing, but at the point of daily use, people much prefer a streamlined offering. Research shows consumers will invest only 20 minutes trying to figure out how to use a new gadget, at which point they give up and return it — at a cost of some \$100 billion a year in lost sales.

And that is not counting the cost to companies in terms of reputation and loyalty as once burned consumers are often reluctant to try that

brand again. This situation creates a conundrum for product engineers and marketers who strive to simplify the user experience and make their products enjoyable, which is key to consumer satisfaction and a brand's long-term success.

But creating a 'simple' product is no easy task as it involves constant trade-offs, and the right balance between quality, functionality, ease of use and cosmetic design. Apple, for example, attributes much of its success to its ability to combine these features with a simple, elegant appearance.

The notion that it's often better to have fewer options shouldn't be a radical idea, yet somehow in the current culture, it is. The bromide that freedom of choice is always a good thing in a 'free society' often results in difficult decision-making for folks who find themselves overwhelmed and confused.

In fact, providing endless choice can be a convenient means of passing the buck, allowing business to avoid the hard job of figuring out what people really need by offering everything. The dirty secret is that trying to give people everything is actually a lousy business model. For instance, the secret to Trader Joe's success lies in its ability to winnow choices for shoppers, while offering value and quality in the bargain.

The decisions made in distilling shouldn't be based on what the competition is doing or on marketing's wish list. Every choice should be based on trying to produce the most rewarding customer experience. But this is no easy task. Here, tools, like Apps, are having some positive impact, especially as small screens demand simplicity and specificity of purpose. As companies recognize that Apps with few purposes can be more inviting and user-friendly, their design clarity provides a model for other communications.

It makes sense to think of simplicity as a shortening of the distance between sender (seller) and receiver (buyer). Here sellers have two options: communicate clearly to improve decision-making or create a 'decision filter' to deliver the perfect choice, in effect, do the work for the consumer. Pandora, an excellent case, offers up music channels based on one's favorite song or artist.

The bottom line: Do not assume that by giving customers 'more' (information, options, features, songs), you're doing them a favor. By

distilling an offering to its essence, while it may appear you are providing less choice, you are more apt to provide a purer, simpler and more satisfying experience.

Clarify: too much information causes complexity

Whether it's confusing street parking signs or drug labels, the fundamental problem in clarifying communications has to do with providing too much information that doesn't actually inform. Everyone, from the airline pilot to the grandmother reaching for her pill bottle, wants clear, comprehensible instructions to help navigate a complex world. Instead, we too often fall victim to data, untamed, unfiltered, without order or shape and, ultimately, without meaning.

While language itself is part of the problem, we must also apply design to information in order to organize, emphasize, and visualize. When dealing with complex information, one of the first orders of business is to sort and prioritize the data to establish a hierarchy of information. This process requires digging into the pile to extract the most meaningful information and the order in which it matters, if one hopes to communicate through a label, instruction manual, website, billing statement, etc.

A key to determining structure is anticipating needs in order to create a real-world perspective that's too often missing when communications are designed. This lack of perspective can be seen in all kinds of documents flowing from business and government, from the official Medicare handbook to typical insurance policies. Arranging structured information in buckets or clearly marked sections helps people navigate to the appropriate chapters.

When information is not organized in this manner, people experience cognitive overload. It's key to separate information into discrete ideas or steps; think sequentially, summarize longer material, de-emphasize less important content, get rid of what's unnecessary. The last step is usually the hardest due to the tendency to over-explain.

Disciplined focus required

To achieve clarity in communications with customers, marketing instincts to oversell must be restrained. Packaging design, where clarity is achieved through a disciplined focus on what's important to the customer, provides one of the best examples.

In packaging, as often in ads, white space can be one of the most critical design elements to help people focus.

Packaging that employs a simple design aesthetic with generous white space stands out on crowded shelves. Instead of making a laundry list of features and benefits, such packaging allows the consumer to project their own interpretation onto this blank canvas.

Clarity can make or break a sale at the point of purchase. A package has about four seconds to communicate meaning or the consumer is on to the next offering. Therefore, simpler packaging is more inviting and helps people locate specific information they need to decide. Cluttered design creates confusion, whereas simplicity equals clarity equals a satisfied shopper.

The power of visualization

The power of visualization is rooted in human biology; the brain simply processes visuals more easily than words. The human eye has evolved to seek out and focus on stimuli that are easy to recognize and separate from the visual clutter — including color, shapes, and patterns.

Recent advances in data visualization make it possible to take even the most complex concepts and distill them to dynamic images — a 50-page manual can be adequately summarized on a single web page. Moreover, visualization invites the viewer to interpret the images, to fill in gaps and draw conclusions that aren't necessarily spelled out.

At the same time, visualization makes abstract concepts more understandable and grounded in real-world images. For example, to bring clarity to the concept of “paying your credit card bill over time costs you more than paying in full,” we can use the power of

information design. A series of dinner plates show how one purchase made with a card grows in cost depending upon when you pay for it.

Visualization is an extremely important simplification tool, because it can provide context, show cause-and-effect relationships, reveal anomalies and trends — the kind of complex information that otherwise might require mountains of explicatory data. But as promising as visualization is, it can't save marketers from the plague of gobbledygook. Design can only do so much; the rest depends on the clarity of language. And, to be clear, words should be plain.

The human touch

Today, we are drowning in a sea of corporate-speak and technical jargon that few comprehend. It comes at us in tidal waves of fine print that we can't, or won't, read. Yet, we have pressing business to conduct, busy lives to lead, songs to hear, so we simply agree to everything in the fine print. And, the more we accept this situation, the worse it gets. For example, credit card agreements are now 20 times as long as they were in 1980. Why the need for all those pages? That's where the tricks and traps are hidden. The simple fact is that business and government are using language purposely to conceal, muddle, confuse and obfuscate.

One might think that learning to speak and write plainly would be easy for a business to master. But the tough part is breaking the old habit of talking like a company rather than as a person. One of the most important things that companies can do to bring more clarity to their communications is to abandon this impersonal, formal style and adopt a more "human" approach. Warren Buffet takes this approach in writing the Berkshire Hathaway annual reports, which he writes to be understandable to his sisters, who are highly intelligent but are not accountants.

Key to learning to speak clearly as a company is finding its own distinctive and authentic voice, abandoning the officious voice of a generic corporation, and expressing the brand personality and all of the humans who stand behind it. That voice should come clearly through all communications at all points of contact along the customer journey. And when they do, such empathetic companies will find its customers will rally round them in good times and even in times of crisis.