

Clarity, not simplicity

How brands can benefit from writing that reflects the language of their audience.

Copywriters of the world, are we doing it all wrong? Just maybe. When it comes to bringing a brand's tone of voice to life it seems that less isn't necessarily more. In fact it's the little extras that make all the difference.

You don't have to go far in the world of branding, advertising and design to hear a clamour of voices expounding the power of simplicity. The Modernist assertion that less is more has become an article of faith amongst creatives everywhere, but is this always right? My view is that while simplicity is good, clarity is far, far better. The information expert Richard Saul Wurman makes the point that while clarity is an essential prerequisite for understanding, simplicity often means taking away the very bits that made the message interesting in the first place. The line between simplicity and simplistic is precariously fine; crossing it can have disastrous consequences for understanding. So the question arises: can a focus on clarity rather than simplicity help brands communicate more effectively? Can it act as a practical guide to producing better work?

In my own area of copywriting, the answer is a definite "yes". There are some notable brands that don't insist on talking down to their audience and aren't afraid to use a few extra words to create the right atmosphere. The result is a truly distinctive tone of voice. In the UK, brands like Innocent, Orange, Ikea and Egg come into this category. These remarkable identities are examples of what I term minimal brands, super-confident corporate identities that make their own rules. They have clarity of purpose (in terms of what they are about and why they exist) and clarity of expression (in terms of how they present themselves to the world). In fact they are minimal precisely because of their clarity – it's their distinguishing quality.

So while the pursuit of clarity may deliver simplicity as a by-product, it isn't always the case – it all depends on a brand's audience and context. As a copywriter I'm constantly torn between the (perfectly laudable) desire to simplify, and an awareness of the complexity with which my audience actually talks. By substituting clarity for simplicity the problem dissolves. Technical or specialist language is crucial when talking to groups for whom this language is their everyday shorthand. Specialist vocabularies arise out of the need to increase the granularity of standard-issue language in response to very specific communication conditions. *The point is that the language used to address a particular audience must be appropriate to that audience.* This is the most important idea in this article – speak the language of your audience or be damned. It's amazing how frequently this is forgotten.

Paradoxically, an emphasis on clarity may mean leaving some aspects of your message open to interpretation, ready to be completed in the mind of your reader. A clear but open-ended

message can sometimes make a lot more sense than either a simpler version that leaves out essential details, or a lengthy explanation that tries to nail down every semantic loose end, boring its audience to death along the way. If the message is right for the audience, and the audience is right for the message, they'll get it - simple as that. It's a powerful realisation, but like many such realisations, frequently forgotten. Exactly what "Just Do It" has to do with sports apparel isn't too clear, but it works. Put the right cues in front of the right audience and the magic will just happen. Meaning will somehow detonate in their minds.

In fact, in some situations the pursuit of simplicity can work *against* effective communication. The more you cut, the less you can say. It's the stuff that surrounds the core of a message that constitutes its tone of voice. This is often where the real communication takes place – the communication not of facts and figures, but of emotions. As the writer and tone of voice expert John Simmons has pointed out, Winston Churchill could have expressed "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat" as a bulleted list along the lines of "My offer: blood, toil, tears, sweat". This would have ruined the emotional impact of his message – the longer, less direct form has infinitely more power.

As usual, it helps to compare brands to people. Think of an individual with a characteristic tone of voice – that tone of voice is made up of their choice of words, their phrasing, their use of punctuation, idioms, figures of speech, rhetorical flourishes and so on – all the things that are, strictly speaking, unnecessary for communication to take place. What they say (their core message) and how they choose to say it (their tone of voice) are two different things. The more a writer simplifies a text by cutting away anything that is surplus to the requirements of basic intelligibility, the more she reduces the possibility of creating an original tone of voice, simply because there are fewer words to play with. The result is not so much a loss of meaning, but rather of emotion. In the area of branding copywriting at least, it seems that just occasionally there are times when less is not necessarily more.

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