

Simplicity – a tool for branding

Written by:

Frances Gordon
Founder, Simplified
June 2005
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Simplicity in general, and plain language in particular, offer new opportunities for positioning and reinforcing brands.

Plain language is not plain boring, plain bland or plain patronising.

It is a communications style that is carefully crafted to meet the needs of readers. Plain language documents give clear and honest information, in a way that's inviting and easy to read.

Trends towards simplicity and transparency

Plain language says what it means, and means what it says. Because of its simplicity and transparency, it has attracted the attention of brand practitioners.

In *Simplicity Marketing* (2001), brand strategists Steven Cristol and Peter Sealey argue that the more-is-better ideal of consumer society has resulted in information overload. Consumers are sick and tired of being bombarded with choice. Cristol and Sealey outline a new opportunity for brands – simplification. They claim that instead of bewildering arrays of choices, consumers are searching for brands that offer clarity - something to hold on to in the chaos of information overload. Successful brands will be those that are positioned to help reduce consumers' stress by simplifying their lives.

Do South Africans fit into this profile? 'Yes', says Gordon Hooper of Bateleur Research. 'South African consumers are crying out for simplicity. Brands are increasingly built on convenience rather than just price or product quality – and simplicity is a key element of convenience.'

But communicating simply is not just about convenience; it's also about honesty. The worldwide trend towards transparency is growing. In *The Naked Corporation* (2003), the authors argue that 'businesses must for the first time make themselves clearly visible to shareholders, customers, employees, partners, and society'.

The problem is that if communication is not clear, readers may suspect that the company is not being transparent.

In their everyday lives, consumers come across TLAs (three-letter acronyms) like ACI, ATB, ARB, MSA, DD, USB, PC, XP, AV, MMS. For many, unclear communications like these are WMDs (weapons of mass deception): signs that the company is 'hiding the truth', and is therefore not trustworthy. So simplicity and transparency are often two sides of the same coin.

A lack of simplicity also leads to disempowerment and a feeling of alienation from the brand. A colleague of mine wants to buy a memory stick, but she "doesn't know how to ask for one". She need not feel alone. According to a poll conducted for Microsoft in late 2000 by Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates:

- 72 percent of women 30 years of age or older find it intimidating to buy technology products because they feel that advertisements are not written so that the average person can understand them.
- Of the women 30 years and older who said they frequently feel intimidated by technology, more than half have been using a computer for at least four years¹.

It is obvious that in South Africa, with many consumers not receiving business communications in their mother tongue, it is even more important that language be plain. However, the value of clear communication extends beyond less literate or less experienced target audiences.

A survey conducted in Australia by the Plain Language Institute showed that 'the more experience a person has with business or legal documents the more likely that person is frustrated and angered by incomprehensible language'².

"Using plain English is not just a good intention. It is a business necessity."

Lord Alexander of Weedon QC, Chairman, NatWest Group

¹ Microsoft 2000

² As quoted by Stephens, 2003:

Plain language as part of the brand promise

In *Simplicity Marketing* (Christol and Sealey, 2001), one of the strategies that the authors put forward is to use the concept of simplicity as a brand promise.

The most notable examples of this strategy come from those sectors which offer an intangible product or service, for example, financial or professional services brands.

When Mutual Life of Canada demutualised in 1999, it repositioned itself around the concept of simplicity. This promise was made upfront in the new name, Clarica. According to the company website:

‘A new name, Clarica, was chosen to convey the power of clarity in helping customers make informed decisions about their health insurance, life insurance, and investments.’³

ANZ, an Australian bank, makes the following promise to its customers: ‘We will write all letters, brochures, ATM messages and other notices in plain language. In all our communications we will help you understand what they mean for you’. ANZ provides ongoing measurement of this promise through customer surveys, and claims to use the feedback as part of its financial literacy programme.

There is perhaps some correlation between financial literacy programmes and plain language: after all, both are about empowering customers and shareholders to make informed decisions. Citibank was one of the first financial services companies to focus on simplification (this was in the 1970s), and they have developed one of the most substantial financial literacy programmes in the world.

Professional services firms have also latched onto the brand promise of simplicity. In 2002, KPMG Australia ran an extensive marketing campaign with the slogan ‘It’s time for clarity’⁴. Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu has launched a Straight Talk series of booklets – its website gives the reasons why:

‘For far too long, the consulting industry has been filled with hyperbole and consulting jargon. Deloitte decided it was time to expose the truth and begin talking straight about important business and industry issues.’

Although we have yet to see any major South African brands be repositioned around simplicity, there are some precursors to this.

³ Example from Balmford 2002, page 5

⁴ Example from Balmford 2002, page 6

For example, Standard Bank is now 'Simpler. Better. Faster.'. Hollard helps you to 'get sorted'. OUTsurance customers 'always get something out'. Both Auto & General and OUTsurance have used plain language in their advertising: Auto & General boast that they were the first short-term insurer to be awarded plain language accreditation, and OUTsurance uses the theme of simplicity in a radio campaign.

Male voice:

So you desire to discharge your insurance claim. Kindly put pen to paper in the general vicinity of these documents and furnish us with your appellation and domicile. Then we will require you to come forth with the minutiae of the occurrence.

Voice-over:

Some people just make things complicated for the sake of it. Well car, household and business insurance needn't be. At OUTsurance we believe in simplicity....

OUTsurance's radio campaign shows its efforts to position itself around simplicity.

Plain language as a part of brand experience

Ongoing 'functional' communications (letters, user manuals, statements, bills, and so on) are often intimidating and packed with complex information – simplifying them helps readers to use them effectively. It also gives companies an opportunity to create a worthwhile touchpoint for their brand experience.

Part of your experience of your bank is your monthly statement. Customers of life insurance will never enjoy the benefits of the product they have bought – often their single experience of the brand is its letters and policy schedules. If these documents are clear, well-structured, and free of jargon and small-print – and if their tone of voice is aligned to brand values – they will help to reinforce the brand. If not, they cannot help but damage brand perception.

OUTsurance is among the first companies in South Africa to understand the impact of its functional communications on its brand. Head of Communications, Trevor Devitt, says that its simplified and redesigned policy document is part of the 'total package' customers receive from this short-term insurer:

"Our policy document is the first tangible experience customers have with our brand – before receiving it, they will have had only phone interaction. That's why it needs to reflect who we are and what we promise."

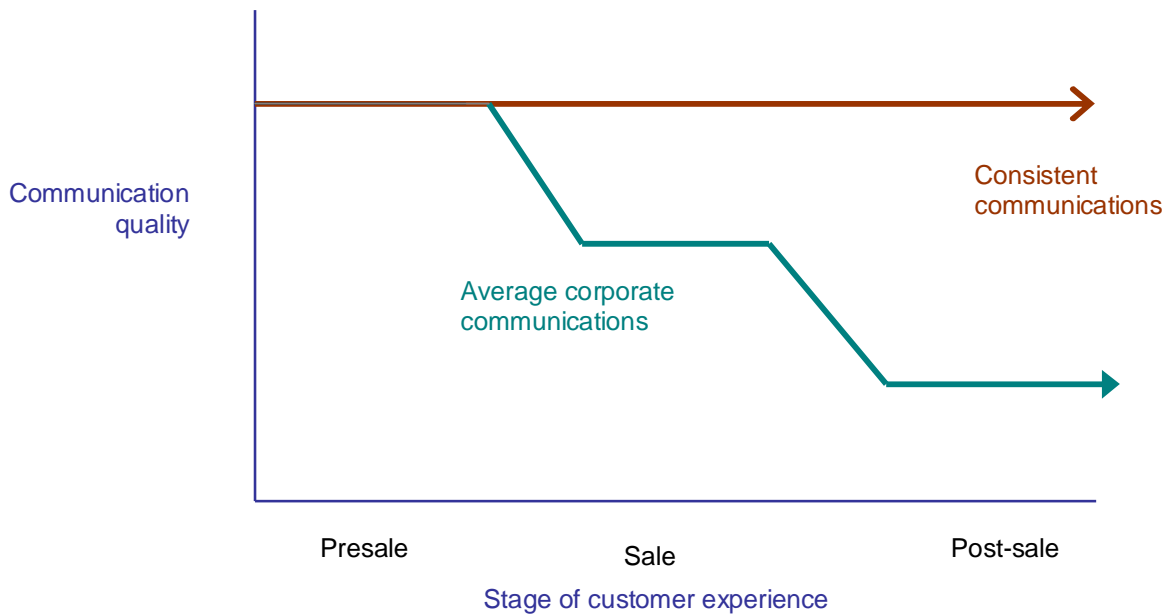
Devitt believes that the new policy document reflects what consumers have always wanted, but never thought they would receive.

Candice Burt, a plain language attorney and Director of training and consultancy business, Plain Language Communications, points out another benefit of simplifying policy documents:

“The more people are able to read and understand their policies, the more likely they are to understand the terms of their insurance. A lack of understanding – so prevalent in our insurance industry – often leads to disappointment when consumers try to claim. At worst, it may even result in expensive litigation.”

Other companies who are adding to brand experience through plain language include Kulula.com, who include plain language terms and conditions for air tickets, and Woolworths who use plain language throughout their stores.

Although they present ideal marketing and brand-building opportunities, these functional communications pieces are often difficult for the customer to understand, and ineffective in communicating the brand.



All too often, companies pay little or no attention to how their brand is expressed in ongoing customer communications.

Making new products into accessible products

Plain language is useful when companies want to widen the target audiences of brands – especially those involving high-tech products. We have already seen how a lack of understanding can make consumers feel disempowered and alienated from a brand. According to the framework set out by Moore in his book, *Crossing the Chasm*:

‘The point of greatest peril in the development of a high-tech market lies in making the transition from an *early market* dominated by a few *visionary* customers to a *mainstream market* dominated by a large block of customers who are predominantly *pragmatists* in orientation.’
(Moore, 1991)

While visionaries may be tolerant – even appreciative – of complexity, pragmatists probably need simplicity before trying a new product.

The power of plain language in increasing adoption of technology can be seen in the way new cellphone functions are marketed. The 35050 advertisements for downloading ringtones are almost step-by-step instructions – and provide a good example of how plain language can be used to encourage mainstream consumers to try out a new technology. It will be interesting to see at what stage plain language will be used to promote more complex functions like MMS and wireless features.

Where South Africa stands

Over the last few years, both regulation and legislation have been introduced to guide financial services companies into using plain language. Consumers, even outside financial services, have ‘wised up’ and are articulating frustrations with ‘small print’.

Although our plain language history is impressive in many areas (the South African constitution is recognised internationally as a model example of plain English law), our business communications have trailed behind.

This means that there is room in our market in most industries for brands to differentiate themselves through clarity. If this happens, it will benefit both businesses, and their customers.

Rob Gentle, author of ‘Read this – business writing that works!’ has worked on many plain language projects in South Africa. He notes that “while there is still space for companies to build competitive advantage through simplicity, it’s only a matter of time before plain language becomes a ‘must-have’ rather than a differentiator”.

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