

## Why simple is getting even smarter

*Using simplicity to build powerful brands*

### **Written by:**

Frances Gordon  
Founder, Simplified  
January 2006

Making things simple has always been a powerful strategy for creating and growing an effective brand. Let's find out why simple is getting even smarter.

Brand experience can be defined as the meeting place between the consumer and the brand, and the conversation that arises between them. Simplicity is a key strategy for keeping the consumer and the brand actively involved in this conversation.

Watch out for WMDs in your company's brand. Weapons of Mass Deception include:

- Inappropriate jargon
- Legalese
- Small print
- A brand architecture that bewilders your customers

## What customers want: convenience and honesty

There are two reasons why simplicity is so compelling for consumers: convenience and honesty.

### 1 Convenience

In *Simplicity Marketing* (2001), brand strategists Steven Cristol and Peter Sealey argue that *more* is no longer *better*. Consumers are living in a world of information overload. Marketers have bombarded consumers with choice, and consumers are ‘throwing up their arms in despair’. They outline a new opportunity for brands – simplification.

Cristol and Sealey claim that instead of endless choices, consumers are looking for brands that offer clarity – in the sea of information overload, these ‘clarity’ brands are consumers’ anchors. Successful brands are those that are positioned to help relieve consumers’ stress by simplifying their lives.

According to Gordon Hooper of Bateleur Research in South Africa, ‘consumers here 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’.

### 2 Honesty

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 way I see it, honest communications have two elements:

- The first is about disclosure – giving full information
- The second is about presenting the information in an accessible way – for example, if you put an important condition in six-point font size at the end of your brochure, and if you write it in a way that is not plain language, you are not being honest.

It is this second element that makes simplicity so essential. If communication is not simple and clear, readers will quickly jump to the conclusion that the company is trying to hide something and is being dishonest.

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

Lord Alexander of Weedon QC, Chairman, NatWest Group

## **Simplicity as the brand promise**

The authors of *Simplicity Marketing* (2001) suggest that companies consider using the concept of simplicity as part of their brand promise.

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

Citibank was one of the first companies to focus on simplification (this was in the 1970s). Many financial services companies have followed its lead, for example, National Westminster Bank (NatWest) who has gone on record as a supporter of plain English.

More recently, professional services firms have latched onto the brand promise of simplicity. 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.’

Technology companies have also begun to use simplicity to their brands’ benefit. Later in this presentation, I will discuss Philips and Google.

We are seeing many South African brands, especially in financial services, gearing up towards using simplicity as a brand promise. For example, Old Mutual has recently adopted the strapline, ‘simple solutions for success’.

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.

### **Using simplicity to build customer trust**

Earlier, we spoke about the brand experience being the meeting place between the person and the brand. These meeting places are called touchpoints – and the brand practitioner aims to make all of the touchpoints express the brand in a powerful and seamless way.

### **Functional communications – the unsung heroes of branding**

Post-sale functional communications like letters, bills, invoices, statements and user-manuals are in reality the unsung heroes of brand-building. They are the touchpoints where the brand promise is proved: where you stop saying how easy you are to do business with, and start being easy to do business with!

Part of your experience with 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.

### **The risks of low-quality customer communications**

Unfortunately, the reality is that there is often too little investment by marketing and branding professionals in post-sale functional documents. Although they present ideal marketing and brand-building opportunities, these documents are often difficult for the customer to understand, and ineffective in communicating the brand.

The insurance industry is particularly guilty of this. I'm sure all of us in this room have struggled to get through the small print on our policies. Candice Burt, a plain language attorney, points out the problems of complex policy documents:

"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."

Research shows that there is often a link between overly complicated communication, customer queries and customer dissatisfaction. In the Perplexity Poll<sup>1</sup> (2003), respondents were drawn from people who contacted the manufacturer of a children's medical product after having bought the product a week previously:

- 72% said the lack of clear, understandable instructions was their main reason for contacting the seller
- Around one quarter of these said they would "definitely not purchase another product" from that manufacturer or retailer.

### **Matching promise with reality**

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.

---

<sup>1</sup> Siegel & Gale, 2004

### **Personalised messages to increase usage without increasing spend**

Functional customer communications are also opportunities to increase customer use. A phone bill goes out every month – by including cross- and up-sell messages on it, you can increase customer use without incremental spend. In this way, the benefits of simplicity on brand experience can be tangible<sup>2</sup>:

- One of Prudential UK's annuity programmes increased revenues by more than \$20 million per year. A customised message on pension statements encouraged customers to increase payments into their annuity accounts.
- Bell South saved \$9.32 million annually after launching a new bill that met customers' needs and replaced direct mail and inserts with messages printed directly on the bill.

### **Reduced queries**

There are many case-studies that show that communicating simply, using plain language, results in fewer customer queries and complaints. For example, British Telecom cut customer queries by 25 percent using plain English<sup>3</sup>.

### **Simplicity building trust**

A brand in which the promise matches the reality, personalised messages, and fewer customer queries and complaints all contribute to increasing customer trust. After all, if customers understand – and can believe – what you are telling them, then you have taken a first step to being worthy of their trust.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ohlin, P: 2004

<sup>3</sup> Kimble, 1997

## Simplicity in technology branding

Simplicity is useful when companies want to widen the target audiences of brands – especially those involving high-tech products. 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, the far larger group of pragmatists need simplicity before trying a new product.

A lack of simplicity leads to disempowerment and a feeling of alienation from the brand – especially when it involves a new or technical product. 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 years<sup>4</sup>.

In 2002, a poll run by the Consumer Electronic Association showed that 87% of people said ease of use is the most important factor when it comes to new technologies<sup>5</sup>.

---

<sup>4</sup> Microsoft, 2000

<sup>5</sup> Tischler, 2005

### **A new kind of innovation**

However, it is very difficult to balance this need for ease of use with that for innovation and new features. With new technologies, there is no longer an incremental cost for each new feature to be added – so the temptation is to keep adding more and more features just to keep up with the competitors.

The solution is two-fold.

1. The first part involves product designers. They need to focus on designing products that match people's needs (rather than just adding feature upon feature).
2. The second part involves the marketers and branding people: The easy way to market a new cell phone is by listing its myriad features. I would argue that the time has come to think of other USP's (Unique Selling Propositions) to hang the product on.

In terms of new technologies being introduced in our marketplace, unfortunately marketers still tend to focus on features rather than on what their target markets are interested in. For example, when I look at marketing materials for Blackberry and for general broadband services, I must admit that I question whether even the marketers really understand the features! Describing Blackberry as a 'push' technology is correct, but is meaningless and completely ineffective marketing when it comes to most target audiences.

## Case studies

An article in FastCompany (Tischler, 2005) provides two case studies that are worth noting:

### **Philips: sense and sensibility**

A well-publicised example is the sense and simplicity campaign from Philips. After extensive research in the 1990s on how to turn their not-very-successful business around, they hit on the concept of simplicity. To quote their website:

'We're promising to make technology easier for you to experience and designed around your unique needs, while still remaining advanced. Our brand now reflects our belief that simplicity can be a goal of technology. It just makes sense.'

Philips has simplified its company structure, vastly reducing the number of businesses it is in. More interestingly, it has simplified its product design process. Now the philosophy is not just to take what it has and simplify it; it's to start from scratch using what customers actually want as the foundation.

The strategy seems to be working, with sales numbers growing more than 30% in the first half of 2005.

### **Google: a clean, uncluttered customer interface**

A good example of complex technology presented simply is Google. Google, one of the world's most successful technology brands and one that constantly surprises and impresses brand strategists, has always been about simplicity.

Marissa Mayer who is responsible for the Google home page says<sup>6</sup>: "Google has the functionality of a really complicated Swiss Army knife, the home page is our way of approaching it closed. It's simple, it's elegant, you can slip it in your pocket... A lot of our competitors are like a Swiss Army knife open – and that can be intimidating and occasionally harmful."

Remember, if Google can avoid the temptation to put more "stuff" on their homepage, anyone should be able to avoid cluttering their products.

---

<sup>6</sup> As quoted in Tischler, 2005

## **Lessons to learn about simplicity**

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.

So remember:

1. A simple brand may be easy to use, but it's not easy to create.
2. Design products and communications from the customer's point of view, not according to company or product logic.
3. Ban all jargon and unnecessarily complex language from your company. Skill up in plain language.
4. Consider all your communications – including post-sale customer communications as marketing opportunities. Ask yourself how you can get the most from your statements, bills, customer letters, terms and conditions, and so on.
5. Remember the closed Swiss Army knife. Present your products simply, so customers can gradually learn how to use more complex functionality.
6. Avoid marketing lists of features. Unless you're aiming at an early adopter audience, this strategy may not be effective. Find out what the customer really wants.

## References

Balmford, C: Plain language: beyond a 'movement', Presented to the Fourth Biennial Conference of the PLAIN Language Association, 2002

Cristol, S and Sealey, P: Simplicity Marketing: End Brand Complexity, Clutter, and Confusion, Simon & Schuster Inc, 2001

Kimble, J: Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please. *The Scribes Journal of Legal Writing* volume 6, Michigan: Thomas Cooley Law School, 1996–1997.

Microsoft: [www.microsoft.com/presspass/features/2000/04-06digitaldiva.asp](http://www.microsoft.com/presspass/features/2000/04-06digitaldiva.asp)

Moore, G: *Crossing the Chasm*, Harper Business Press, 1991

Ohlin, P: Customer experience is your brand's catalyst, *Brand Voice*, Siegel & Gale, September 2004

Siegel & Gale: Perplexity Poll – summary of results, 2004. Available from [www.siegelgale.com/newsletter4/PerplexityPollSummary.pdf](http://www.siegelgale.com/newsletter4/PerplexityPollSummary.pdf)

Tapscott, D and Ticoll, D: *The Naked Corporation: How the Age of Transparency is Revolutionizing Business*, Free Press, 2003

Tischler, L: The beauty of simplicity, *Fast Company*, Issue 100, November 2005