

# The **age** of **Eng** **ment**

The role of creative impact in a world of business marketing change

By Gordon Hochhalter

One in a series dedicated to the proposition that change is more than worth embracing.

It's worth cultivating.

Because, despite its challenge, if you play your innovations right, you can take advantage of change. Before it has a chance to take advantage of you.

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# Welcome to the jungle

If you don't want to be eaten alive — blend in. But if you want to attract a mate — stand out.

It's a new age of business communications. Rampant with gut-wrenching, mind-numbing, constant change. Where your customers and prospects now control information, communication and the purchase process. And that pretty much changes everything.

## **Watch it bring you to your sha-na-na-na knees**

It's a jungle out there. And the jungle is alive with so many traditional and new media forms it's enough to make your head hurt and your blood boil. How can you keep up with it all? Where is all the "best practice" stuff to lead the way? To tell you what to do. To make you look like everyone else.

## **Blend in or stand out**

After you've lived in the jungle for a while you quickly learn that there are only two laws of survival.

If you don't want to be eaten alive—blend in.

On the other hand, if you want to attract a mate—stand out.

Maybe it's because of all the upheaval that comes along with change. Or maybe it's all the confusion that comes with change. Maybe it's just because it's a jungle out there. But most business communications today are desperately trying simply to keep from being eaten.

## **Take the wallpaper test**

If you don't believe that, just peruse your way through any trade magazine. Or click your way some industry websites. It's like thumbing through a book of wallpaper samples. One ad blending into another. One after another without a

visual or verbal focus. Visual wallpaper full of unimaginative statistics. Or simple regurgitation of stark, uninvolved selling points that the marketer thinks will automatically sell the product.

In other words, communications and content of all kinds that simply put the product on a pedestal and describe it. And then wait for the world to beat a path to its door.

## **And they're still waiting**

This is no accident. It's mistaken logic. And it goes something like this: "If my marketing and communications are like my competitors', then I'll be considered a factor in the market and I will attract more attention which will attract more customers."

Nothing could be further from the truth.

If you want to attract customers out there in the new-age jungle of business communications, you have to concentrate on standing out. Not on blending in.

## **Today, it's stand out or disappear**

That's because of the dynamics of the new age of business communications. Technology is exploding. New media and new methods and new social networks are stacking up higher than the dirty dishes at Louie Anderson's house.

Your customers and prospects are grabbing control of communications and the buying process like Heavy D commandeering the burger machine at McDonald's.

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**Engage or die**

And in this new world, contrary to the emerging popular belief propagated by interactive agencies and social networking gurus, content is not engagement. Content is content. Engagement is making that content uniquely relevant, compelling and attention-worthy.

And if you don't do something to stand out amidst that chaotic mega-mess, to truly engage your customers and prospects and begin the process of establishing a two-way dialogue with them, your communications program and eventually your brand will hit the wall harder than Mr. Magoo at a Texas tag team cage match for the Unified Belt.

# The evil of content

Content is not engagement. Without creatively and emotionally involving your audience they will never get to your content.

There is a disturbing trend emerging from the shock waves of change that are shaking and reshaping our marketing, branding and communications world. People are treating content as if it were the end-all and be-all of the communications process.

## **The evil deception**

Content strategies are being skillfully developed. Complex message platforms are being devised, revised and re-strategized. Elevator pitches are being crafted in one minute, two minute and ten minute units. Content is being prioritized, hierarchized, maximized, minimized, mapped, scrapped and deployed.

And guess what, Skippy, no one who counts (as in customers and prospects) cares.

In an age of ever-expanding media, message fragmentation and ever-contracting time and attention creative engagement is a requirement. Without it, the people who count never get to the content.

## **A few pathetic examples**

In one category we know, marketers very precisely target many minute audience segments exclusively with online media to dump unbridled and, for the most part, unvisualized content on them. The net result of this precise content dumping is that awareness and familiarity of all the competitors in this market is almost zero. Despite the fact these companies have been in the market communicating to customers and prospects for almost a decade, no one knows who these purveyors of online content are.

This is beyond pathetic. It borders on tragic. Especially in a category where sales are driven by prospects finding vendors to include in their consideration set for rfps.

## **Follow me, I'm a twit**

You don't have to look far to see other examples of the evil confusion of content and engagement. Go to Twitter and you can follow it. Every minute of every day

One marketer wraps his followers in an orgy of ego that makes Donald Trump look like Mother Teresa. Apparently he thinks we have the time or the desire to care about where he is and what he is doing every hour of the day. Especially when it revolves around killing wild life back home in Montana, being interviewed by various publications and appearing on a variety of red carpets. Not as a celebrity, mind you, but rather crawling on all fours in the background as an almost invisible sponsor.

## **I tweet therefore I am**

In the middle of the Twitter spectrum are those marketers with their own self-serving, well-planned content agenda. They push out the same stuff on a repetitive schedule driving people to the same self-serving blog content hour after hour. This is the modern equivalent of the old paradigm of telling people what to believe about your products and expecting them to accept it just because you said it.

Engagement consists of the creative elements that gain attention, keep attention and make people want to have a dialogue with you around your content.

None of this is engaging. It is content for content's sake. In and of itself it does not stand out and get attention, nor keep attention, nor sustain a dialogue.

#### **A special tweet**

At the other end of the Twittiverse are people who use their tweets to expose us to information we never would have known without them. Some are about their products but many are not. In fact, most are not. They create a compelling personality for themselves 140 characters at a time by creatively providing what we value in an engaging voice that we want to follow.

#### **We've been sold a bill of goods**

As the digital world developed someone declared that content is king. You can pretty much bet the declarer was a techno nerd with the creative flair of a C++ manual and the engagement quotient of a 35+ year-old guy who lives in his parent's basement with a bunch of goldfish.

Content is not engagement, my friend. It never has been and it never will be. Because without creatively and emotionally involving your audience they will never get to your masterfully developed content.

#### **As a great man once said**

"However much we would like communications to be a science – because life would be simpler that way – the fact is it is not.

It is a subtle, ever-changing art, defying formulization, flowering on freshness and withering on imitation; where what was effective one day, for that very reason will not be effective the next, because it has lost the maximum impact of originality.

Finding out what to say is the beginning of the communications process. How you say it makes people look and listen and believe. And if you are not successful at that you have wasted all the work and intelligence and skill that went into discovering what you should say.

It's not just what you say that stirs people, it's the way that you say it."

*Bill Bernbach*

#### **Content is a carton of eggs**

We do not mean to denigrate content. Obviously, it is vitally important. It is the strategic base of all that a brand is and does. Especially these days. Because content now is not only what you say, it also includes the interactive devices and social interactions that make content more involving.

But before people will ever get involved in your content you will have to emotionally engage them. We define engagement as the creative elements that gain attention, keep attention and make people want to have a dialogue with you around your content.

#### **Engagement is a soufflé**

So let's get the two straight. To say that raw content is engagement is like saying a carton of eggs is a soufflé. It is not. It never will be. It is what you do with the content of the carton that makes it special.

And without this special, emotive element called engagement your brand and your marketing will be about as interesting and involving to your customers and prospects as Ben Stein's Audio Book narration of the tax code.

# What's wrong

with business communications

The best communications is like a good conversation.

A few years ago, those wonderful people who brought you readership research, the folks at Starch, took a close look at business-to-business advertising. What they discovered was a big, black hole so dark, it could suck all the light out of Las Vegas and still have enough black left over to provide a lifetime supply of turtlenecks to the Yale English Department.

### Hear that sucking sound?

Their conclusion was that business-to-business advertising didn't make the same effort that consumer ads did to stand out. To be distinctive and involving.

And although their analysis was based on their specialty of measuring advertising readership, their findings apply to virtually all media executions. We'd even go so far as to say it applies to all b-to-b brand contacts these days.

Business ads, they said, failed to use three important creative principles of effective communications and engagement.

We pass them along (with the kind permission of the good people at Starch) in hopes that they'll be helpful to you. And frankly, to show you that all the stuff we just wrote about the importance of creative engagement isn't a bunch of subjective hogwash.

### "Business ads are distinctly unvisual"

"Business ads tend to be more about content than appearance. Many use several illustrations and concepts (in the same ad)—as opposed to a single, powerful image and one 'unique selling proposition'—to get key points across.

"This could be due to the supposition that business-to-business advertisers expect their ads to be read by an audience hungry for information, and therefore willing to work to get it.

"Magazine readers will read advertising, but they must be invited in (to the ad message). And the best invitations use illustrations that delight the eye."

### "They emphasize the abstract rather than the human element"

"Business-to-business advertising overestimates its readers' interest in their products."

Enough said.

### "They do not emphasize benefits"

"The one great failing in most business advertising is the failure to tell the readers what the product will do for them."

"The problem seems to be that business-to-business advertisers assume that readers are as interested in their product as the advertiser is. This is rarely the case."

"There is no great secret to business ad success. The key point to remember is that the best advertising is like a good conversation. All advertisers should remember the words of Benjamin Disraeli: 'The art of conversation consists of the exercise of two fine qualities; you must originate and you must sympathize; you must possess at the same time the habit of communicating and the habit of listening. The union is rare, but irresistible.'"

All audiences yearn  
to delight in what  
they see.

**No great secret revealed**

“Those who wish to create irresistible ads need to bear in mind that when anyone confronts an ad, his primary purpose is to walk away with the feeling that he has been listened to or understood. For business-to-business marketers, that means understanding that all readers yearn to delight in what they see, to make a human connection with the product and to depart with a sense that they have benefitted from the experience.”

**Ditto from us**

If you think about it real hard you might come to the same conclusion we have. Starch’s findings about advertising apply to virtually every aspect of business branding and communications as it’s practiced today.

Or perhaps we should say malpracticed today.

# Creative execution

where brand communications go to bore themselves to death

If your program fails to engage people creatively, in its execution, you'll be back to square one on the "crash-and-burn" game board.

So this guy goes into a b-to-b marketing conference for a shot of integrated marketing enlightenment.

What does he get?

First, he's served a direct marketing process, masquerading as integrated, where the only contact tools are mail, e-mail, phone and personal sales.

## **Sips of stupidity**

That's followed by an international guru with a nifty formula for global integration that sounds a heck of a lot like a public relations plan in disguise.

Next on the menu is a guy with a foolproof method for building integrated brand communications based on, of all things, response quotients.

If you want 90 percent brand building and 10 percent response, you put this device in this location on the piece. If you want 80 percent brand and 20 percent response you follow these handy-dandy instructions. And so on and so on in ten percent increments.

## **Gulps of gullibility**

Amazing. Especially coming from a guy who couldn't create gas after a bean dinner.

And if you're not as disoriented as Woody Allen at a family reunion by now, you can pick up a chaser at the registration

table—a book called "Words That Sell." This pithy little tome gives you all the time-tested phrases that "copywriters rely on to seduce audiences." All indexed by function from "snappy transitions" to "enhancing company image."

Oh, don't forget the guys with the nifty presentation on integrated online brand communications. All you'll ever need to do to build brand awareness is right there on the good old Internet. To them brand engagement is about where you place the logo on the navigation template.

## **Have we all gone stark raving mad?**

Is this what integrated communications has come to? Piecemeal processes that impersonate integration? Do we really believe that God is in the instructions? That the checklist is the solution? That serving up a bunch of strategies is communicating? That managing content is engaging people in your brand and your messages?

Not once in this pathetic formula fest was creative examined. Apparently, it's not a factor in getting people's attention and developing a conversation with them.

Heck, it was hardly even mentioned. Except, of course, to say, "Creativity is inherent in marketing communications."

What?

# It takes creative impact to engage people. To make them want to talk to you.

## **We've got news for you, Sparky**

It's not.

In fact, when it comes to integrated b-to-b marketing and brand communications, it's not even close.

As everyone who actually does integrated programs day-in and day-out (as opposed to what talking about them) knows, it's in the execution where most integrated communications programs fall apart. And don't kid yourself, Bucky; they're falling apart all over the place.

## **Creativity: First rule of engagement**

If your program fails to engage people creatively, in the execution, you'll be back to square one on the crash-and-burn game board.

Only in communications can you do all the up-front integrated strategy stuff perfectly and then watch it all go right down the dumper because its execution didn't have enough impact to get noticed. Or to involve the audience. Or get attention. Or start to engage your customers and prospects.

## **Enough already**

The cruel reality is that no matter what you do strategically, no matter how good and integrated your process is, you're still going to have to compete with a zillion other rapidly disintegrating brand messages.

And if that's not bad enough, you're going to have to compete for an ever-shrinking span of attention and audience time in an ever-expanding universe of media.

The emergence of ultra-specialized trade publications, the blogosphere, the twitterverse, 124-channel cable, automated inbound-outbound telemarketing, movie product placement, data-triggered CRM messaging and push/pull interstitial Internet email bombardment have provided enough marketing stimulation to keep most business people higher than Andy Dick on a four-day weekend.

## **But enough is never enough**

Oh, no. We want more. So today you've got your micro sites, your mega sites, your mini-micro sites, your mall sites, your RSS feeds, your social networks, your Facebook friends, your Twitter followers, your LinkedIn connections, your e-this, that and the other. As well as wireless phone displays. Even the screen in the office elevator.

And watch out, world. We're buying space on your fruit, coffee-cup sleeves and urinal cakes.

Why, there are so many new channels for communicating to customers and prospects and so many competing forces jockeying for position on them that the resulting pea-soup cloud of clutter makes it difficult for companies to get through to anyone. And the cloud grows bigger and thicker each day.

If your job is to get through to people, then you have every right to be as nervous and jerky as a Baghdad parking valet.

# Engagement is about getting people's attention and then getting them to want to interact with you

## **But you haven't seen anything yet, Scooter**

As technology gives your networked customers and prospects more choices of where they get the information they want, the way they want it, wherever they want it, whenever they want it, things will only get worse.

And even if it doesn't (like that's going to happen) it's already wreaking havoc with business communications and branding programs around the world. Why, there are more b-to-b marketing casualties out there over this one issue than there are in the director's cut of "Reservoir Dogs."

But let's get the issue straight. It's not so much that there are so many new and different media to deal with. (Even though many of them are untried, untested and indecipherable.) It's not even the fact that they're emerging so fast it's almost impossible to keep up with it all. That's not the real problem.

## **Clutter is not the problem**

The real issue for business marketers in this new paradigm is that messages are being fragmented like an overripe watermelon at a Dave Letterman fruit drop from the 82nd floor. Splat. Kaboom. Vaporize. Disintegrate.

And when messages go from being segmented to diluted to broken apart to pulverized until they turn to vapor and disappear completely, then brand promises and brand image, and even brands themselves, can't be far behind.

## **Time famine sweeps the planet**

But wait, there's more. Add to all that a little ditty we

like to call time famine. It goes something like this: There simply isn't enough time to assimilate the growing mass of messages. That means content. There isn't enough time to cope with the volume of it going through our brains. There isn't enough time to sort out the valuable from the mundane. And when that happens, content is in trouble.

So increasingly we let it all pass through like a bad bean burrito. Only in this case, it passes through unnoticed.

## **Complexity and overchoice reign**

And if that's not enough, let's add another idea from Alvin Tofler called "Overchoice." He says, "We are racing against the point at which the advantages of diversity and individualization are canceled by the complexity of the buyer's decision-making process."

There are simply too many messages coming from too many sources, chasing after too few openings in your customers' and prospects' minds.

Which means you can't expect a set of unfocused, disjointed content strung together by strategy to add up to long-term gains. Your audience simply has too many choices and too little time to pay attention to high-frequency, low-imagination, irrelevant, not-very-memorable, inconsistent, unengaging content.

Goosing is knowing what's important to them and what they want to hear at each stage of the purchase process and giving them enough to push them to the next stage.

#### **Out of the quagmire**

The new imperative is to develop a dialogue with customers and prospects that is highly identifiable, relevant and engaging and that looks, feels and sounds consistent from one medium to another. In other words, your messages will have to stand out like Drew Carey in a Day-Glo thong.

The idea is to use information and emotion to create value around your brand that customers will actually seek out. The paradigm has shifted from controlled, interruptive monologue bombardment to two-way, sometimes even three-way conversations, with customers and prospects when they want and need to talk. Dialogue, if you will.

#### **Through the prospect's decision process**

Throughout this process, relevance, creativity, emotional engagement and executional consistency are the ways out of the morass of slimy, smelly, decomposing messages and brands. But how do you do all that all at once?

First, you might want to start with a firm understanding of your customers' and prospects' buying processes. That includes knowing who is involved, what role they play and when in the process they play it. And of course, what's important to them when they make a decision.

#### **No dumping**

Secondly, you should consider posting a "no dumping" sign on all your communications. That's because you simply can't dump on people all the brand information you'd like them to retain all at once. Otherwise they'll be more confused than Al D'Amato on Celebrity Jeopardy.

The goal is to know what's important to them and what they want to hear at each stage of the purchase process and give them just enough information, incentives or offers to push them to the next stage. We call this goosing.

With each goose down the purchase path, customers and prospects deepen their knowledge and involvement with the brand through experience rather than interruptive corporate belching. They begin a relationship.

#### **The "no dumping" law includes:**

- Simplifying messages at the early stages of the buying process to engage them in dialogue.
- Dividing all brand information up into component parts.
- Prioritizing messages according to their relevance and importance to different audiences who are at different stages of the process at different times.
- Spreading them out along the buying path to take each audience from awareness through purchase and repurchase and to build and deepen involvement in the brand to create advocates.
- Making each and every message highly memorable, engaging and identifiable with your brand.

New technology and new techniques are widening and deepening the giant quagmire mistakenly called “communications clutter.”

**Hit them when they need you**

Of course, the most effective way to do that is to hit them when they are most susceptible to each message. This usually has a direct relationship to when, where and why they enter the decision process.

What emerges from this analysis are unconventional media that are much more effective because they are totally relevant. Not only in message but also in time.

Customers and prospects initiate many of these communications. And all of them deliver the right message and opportunity for dialogue when the audience is dealing with that relevant issue through the medium that is as close as possible to their stage of the decision process.

**Don't go quietly into that dark cesspool**

All of which means that fighting the slime of info-glut, clutter, and disintegration means truly integrating your messages across all media, threaded together with a central, unique, compelling, creative buying concept that is executed memorably and consistently in every medium.

But it also means making those messages stand out instead of blend in. And that requires you to make them more relevant, interesting, engaging, believable and emotionally resonant to the people you want to reach. (A principle of communications efficiency we call creative leverage.)

**Stand out of the quagmire, don't sink into it**

Because every day, new technology and new techniques are widening and deepening the giant quagmire mistakenly, in our opinion, called “communications clutter.”

Make no mistake about it. It is much more than that. It's more sinister and disruptive than mere clutter.

It is really message and brand disintegration on a giant scale.

And unless you develop a strong, consistent, unique, relevant, consistent, impactful, consistent, easily-recognizable-in-every-medium, memorable, consistent, comprehensive, consistent and, of course, consistent presence out there it's going to be glug...glug...glug time.

# Dialogue communications

Engaging customers and prospects by listening, understanding and responding

The disparity between what companies think they sell and what customers and prospects really buy and are interested in hearing is yawning like George Sanders watching a fishing show hosted by Alan Greenspan.

After several decades of information manipulation, reality spinning and one-way monologues carefully crafted to tell people what to believe, most companies' emotional bank accounts with the people they serve are more overdrawn than an M.C. Escher doodle pad.

## **Crossing the credibility chasm**

The disparity between what companies think they sell and what customers and prospects really buy and are interested in hearing about is yawning like George Sanders watching a fishing show hosted by Alan Greenspan.

Repetitious, interruptive, self-obsessed messages about how great your products are as opposed to how you can solve customer problems are about as popular as Marla Maples at a benefit screening of "First Wives Club."

No wonder public opinion polls show that marketing and communications people have attained the status of a pork chop at the Wailing Wall.

## **Shift to the rescue**

Fortunately for all of us, mega-shifts in practically all market dynamics are redefining the game.

In fact, business marketing is being altered more often and more dramatically than the late Michael Jackson's nose.

Most of these alterations are driven by customers and prospects gaining control of information, communication and the purchase process.

If understood, all this shiftiness gives business marketers and communicators an unprecedented opportunity to claim pivotal positions in their customers' value chains. Positions that go beyond even product/service offerings, into areas of value creation based on information, emotional support, connectivity and reciprocal relationships.

## **If you let it**

In this new market order, listening, understanding and responding to customers' and prospects' information and value proposition needs is how business marketers will establish their value positions with customers and drive sales from prospects.

We call the actions by which this listening, learning and responding takes place "dialogue communication."

And without this personal two-way communication, the chasm between you and your customers in this new paradigm will grow so large it will make the Grand Canyon look like the space between Japanese rail commuters.

## **Dialogue as process**

In its simplest form, dialogue communication consists of listening to customers and prospects, engaging them in a creative way that makes them want to talk to you, soliciting a response, listening to their reply and responding in kind with additional information, advice, answers or questions.

# Creative engagement is the pivotal step in developing dialogue.

## Step one: Shut up and listen

As you can see, listening is a vital activity in several phases of the dialogue process.

It includes listening to customers and prospects before you create engagement messages so that you understand what's relevant to them and how they'd like to be communicated with. That's the shut up part. It's like good sex: listen before you initiate.

This initial listening is not difficult to do. You ask (through research, Web surveys, etc). They tell you.

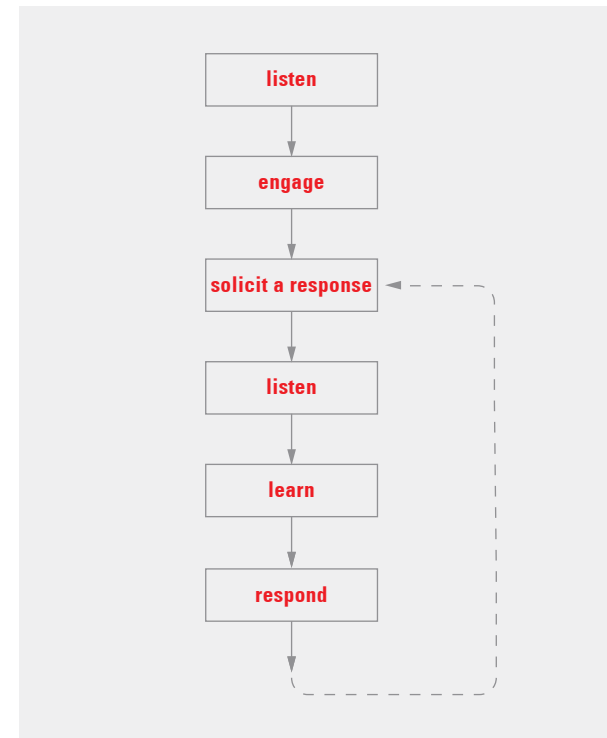
## Step two: Engage them

Based on this information, the next step is to engage them. It's kind of like asking someone to dance. You don't just grab them and begin the gyrations as many so-called "direct" communicators and the practitioners of CRM do.

No indeed, Sparky.

Tests conducted in singles bars and clubs around the world have proven that you can dramatically improve your chances if you engage them in a little conversation first. So they have a sense for who the heck you are.

These "engagement" messages have conventionally been called brand messages. Of course, we don't believe you can separate brand messages from any other kind of message. To us all messages are brand messages. But for the sake of argument, let's call them messages designed to build awareness, familiarity and preference.



## The fine art of soliciting

At this stage of the dialogue, they don't have to be personalized. But they absolutely have to get your audience's attention.

Engagement is about emotion and empathy, delivered in a voice that makes people want to talk to you.

Then they should solicit a response. Ask for a contact, ask a question, ask for a reply, make an offer. You can direct the reader to a Web site where you can more interactivity ask them questions, diagnose problems, get their opinions, involve them in your products through social networks and online communities who share their interests and problems.

These mechanisms for conversation must be built into your overall integrated brand and communications strategy and plan. Each forum for conversation may come at a different point in the purchase process. However, each forum must also have mechanisms embedded in the communications vehicle itself to initiate a dialogue.

But engagement goes beyond vehicles.

Engagement is about emotion and empathy. It's about developing a customer/prospect point of view that is delivered in a voice that makes people want to talk to you.

Ultimately, engagement is about creative execution.

### **Step three: Listen and respond**

Of course, once someone asks a question, answers a question, asks for more information or responds to your engaging solicitation in any way, the hard part begins.

Creative execution rears its squishy ephemeral head again.

If you don't do it right, your responses will be received with all the enthusiasm of Matt Helm at a radical feminist poetry reading. And you don't want that.

So you have to be prepared to respond immediately to specific requests or questions with personal, specific replies delivered in whatever form they want them.

But even more important than that, you have to have mechanisms in your communications to listen for their responses and learn from them.

Having done that, you're now in a position to initiate other highly relevant communications with them based on what you've learned about them.

By the way, no matter what media you use to continue this conversation, they'll have to function interactively.

### **What constitutes a dialogue**

To qualify as dialogues, these communications must:

- Offer personalized messages based on criteria such as name, job function, firmographics, customer purchase history or customer behavior.
- Answer specific questions posed by customers and prospects based on their profiles.
- Deliver information requested in the form (media) requested by your audience in as close to real time as the requested media will allow.
- Ask questions of customers and prospects and request a response that allows the brand to provide additional, more relevant information or engage in an ongoing conversation.
- Diagnose a situation and suggest remedies.
- Provide methods for customer/prospects to add their own information and opinions to a community and receive feedback from others.

# Beyond their structural characteristics, dialogue messages contain five intrinsic creative execution requirements.

## **Five requirements of dialogue**

Beyond their structural characteristics, dialogue messages contain five, intrinsic creative execution elements.

### **1: Value**

Your customers and prospects aren't interested in having their business lives interrupted by your marketing messages. Believe it or not, they'd rather not have their voicemail bloated with your non-relevant telemarketing offers. Or their email inbox jammed with messages about you. Why, they're not even excited about continually being offered another line extension they don't think they need, but you do.

More and more, they resent these intrusive messages. And, as a result, they are creating more and more defense mechanisms against them.

But they are willing to be part of a dialogue if it is clear to them that you respect them and their time and that you have something of value to give them.

In other words, to avoid being considered intrusive, a message must have an added value to the recipient. It also has to be received when, where and in the form preferred by your customer or prospect. Unless the message contains something they perceive to be of value to them personally, chances are they'll reject it.

Value, by the way, includes much more than relevant product information. It also includes things like entertainment, status, empowerment information, job effectiveness and professional development.

### **2: Access**

An essential aspect of dialogue communications is making it easy for people to contact your company at any time, from any place, for any reason.

The more ways they have to access your brand, the stronger their relationship will be. The easier it is for customers to get questions answered and problems dealt with, the easier it will be for the customer to develop a supporting brand relationship.

Easy accessibility, particularly at the time when a buying or use decision is being made or when there's a need for information, is an added value to customers and prospects. One that goes a long way to strengthen their relationship with the brand.

### **3: Human attention**

Merely providing people with an 800 number, Web address or email contact does not qualify as response in the dialogue process.

Response is providing a company representative or system that can listen to your customer or prospect, put the conversation into a context of their profile and history and stay with them throughout the dialogue. And as a result, this promise of human attention in a human voice builds a personal as well as an emotional connection to your brand.

The brand and its voice is the thing that connects your customers and prospects and their dialogues with your company.

#### **4: Personal recognition**

Of course, once someone is a customer, he or she likes to be personally recognized. That's one of the first steps in establishing a relationship.

In terms of communications, that means much more than addressing them by name or personalizing content. When a company gives you its business, they feel that a relationship has been established. Even if you see it as merely an "acquisition" or "transaction."

If you fail to recognize this perceived connection, then your customer will view the relationship as a weak one, not worthy of their loyalty. So it becomes incumbent on you to treat customers differently than the general market. Which means treating them individually and personally in the kind of information, emotional incentives and value offers that you make to them.

#### **5: Brand reinforcement**

If you have the impression that a dialogue is an ongoing, continuous, daily occurrence, then we've overstated things. Or you're living in another disconnected Shirley MacLaine universe somewhere.

Customers and prospects do not spend their days thinking about how they can break away for a few hours to talk with you over the Internet.

In reality, dialogues pop up now and then over time. When they need to. Where there is a need. When it's of value to customers and prospects. Not necessarily when it's convenient or efficient for you. But rather when they want them to occur. Because they're in control.

That means two things. Dialogues need to be reinforced. And conversations should revolve around the customer or prospect and their relationship with the brand.

#### **The brand's the thing**

The brand and its voice is the thing that connects your customers and prospects and their dialogues with your company. In their minds, they are communicating with the brand. It is the hook they have in their heads that categorizes and consolidates all these disparate interactions and conversations.

And one of the important benefits of broad-based awareness and familiarity building communications is its ability to reinforce existing relationships with people who have already bought your brand. In fact, studies have shown that the majority of ad readers are current customers.

Reinforcement of your brand image and promises as well as key functional and emotional buying criteria should be part of your dialogue strategy. It reduces buyer remorse and ties both customers and prospects closer to the brand in a way that makes them want to initiate dialogue.

# The business value

## of creative leverage

Saying something  
in a memorable way  
has monetary value.  
It can make a  
million-dollar budget  
work like three million.

In this new age of business communications, we are moths and repetitive, interruptive, boring messaging is the porch light we've been slamming our heads against for decades now. Not because it affords any illumination.

But because it barely beats eating socks.

### **Creative impact in a new world**

In a world where customers and prospects control information, communications and the buying process, engagement through creative impact is a lot more effective than repetitive, interruptive, self-serving messaging.

And whether you choose to recognize it or not, it takes creative impact to engage people. Because, in this new communications paradigm, it is creative execution that makes your customers and prospects want to talk to you and focus their attention on what you can do for them.

Simply put, creative impact is critical in starting the engagement process. And it is vital to sustaining the communication dialogue over time through consistent, highly recognizable and memorable response messages.

### **Memorable means money**

That means you may not have to repeat an interruptive, self-serving message a hundred times. With true engaging, creative impact, you may only have to say it ten times or only one time to get the same effect.

Saying something in a memorable way has true monetary value. When done right it can make your million-dollar budget work like three million.

When you rely on frequency, you not only waste money, you also lose valuable time. Because without creative impact, your message is relegated to the slow seep of frequency.

### **Frequency is osmosis**

Or evolution. You wait patiently for nature to take its course and for your selling points to eventually seep in.

If they seep at all.

The fact of the matter is, in this new age of fragment messages and an every expanding universe of media channels, frequency is akin to waiting for the late Jimmy Stewart to recite the Mahabharata on the back of an arthritic tortoise in a hammock hung between two trees in the intensified gravity of the planet Jupiter.

### **It takes too damn long**

In the meantime, a competitor can zip past you at the speed of light and get into your audience's head with a new idea or benefit before you. Or even take a position or attribute or point of differentiation away from you.

All they need is the right integrated strategy and the powerful engine of creative impact.

If an idea doesn't make some company executive's sphincter lock up tighter than Windows 98 on overload, then you're probably not saying anything worth saying.

#### **Creativity is lightning**

Maybe it's time to start measuring the effectiveness of your integrated marketing or branding efforts by their impact instead of just their methodology and cost-per-thousand efficiency. And impact, my friend, is a direct result of how fresh, original and relevant your creative is.

Despite the tremendous communications and marketing paradigm shifts that are going on out there, people will always stop, notice, connect and pay attention to a message that's fresh and direct and engaging and human.

Always.

Because people react strongly to something they've never seen or heard before. No matter what medium they see it in.

#### **But it's not for spineless weasels**

Creating an integrated marketing or communications or branding program that stands out and has impact means running risks. There's no way around it.

If an ad or web site or video or direct marketing piece is provocative, interesting and intriguing, it will create an adverse comment or two along the way.

Especially inside your company.

In fact, you can count on it. Somebody in your organization will become as jumpy as Barney Fife on a triple espresso.

#### **That's when you know you've got something**

If the idea doesn't make some company executive's sphincter lock up tighter than Windows 98 on overload, then you're probably not saying anything worth saying.

And when his or her sweat hits the fan, that's the time to pull a Dennis Rodman and start getting aggressive on the offensive glass. Do not go gentle into this bad night.

When people inside get nervous it usually means your communications is being direct. It's taking a stand. It's taking on an issue that resonates with an important segment of the market.

It has power. Mostly because it's not hiding behind the obscure, the obvious or the obtuse.

Of course, there is an alternative to taking creative risks. It's communication that's so bland there's no bite. And very little interest. And, as a result, very little visibility.

#### **The difference between impact and controversy**

Anyone can create outrageous communications that shock and offend. That is not impact.

Impact comes from stating a relevant message in a way people have never considered before. In fact, you can test your next concept for creative impact:

An impactful creative message has power because it's not hiding behind the obscure, the obvious or the obtuse.

#### Check your guts

1. Does the idea it upset the status quo?
2. Does it question conventional thinking?
3. Does it take people by the shoulders and shake them?
4. Does it remind them of how they felt, feel or want to feel?
5. Does it force them to reexamine their attitudes and their assumptions?

Being on the receiving end of any one of those kind of concepts can be an unsettling experience. That's what makes them so impactful. That's what makes them work.

And that's what makes them so cost-effective, too.

# The power of self-interest

Every creative concept should be based on customer and prospect challenges, issues and benefits

The only relevance that counts out there in this new world is your audience's. Not yours. Or your agency's. Or your public relation firm's. Or even your company's.

## **What matters**

All that really matters out there in the market jungle where messages live or die is "what's in it" for your prospects. From your prospects' point of view. So every engagement concept should be based on customer and prospect benefits.

Otherwise it's just hype—that glittering rhinestone on the jumpsuit of mediocrity that catches our eye and makes us think, "Hey, maybe Britney Spears doesn't suck."

## **Welcome to the wonderful world of me, myself and I**

Eventually, you have to put everything you want to communicate in terms of its value to your potential customers and what's already in their minds. Not what's in yours. Or your company's. In fact, your customers and prospects are more interested in their tans than they are of your company's agenda.

If you really want to engage people and have a dialogue with them centered on the most compelling reasons for buying your product or service, remove yourself, your words and your visuals, from your business and look inside your customers' and prospects' lives and businesses.

## **Where you can stick your benefits, Buddy**

When you find them, customer and prospect benefits should be reflected in every component of creative execution.

They should be in every headline. And in illustrations. And in subheads. And in key visuals. They should be the basis of your website, the reason for your tweets, the core of your online and offline presence.

They should be all over the place. Everywhere.

In fact, we believe that the content, voice, visual and design elements of any engagement communications in any medium exist only to emphasize benefits.

## **Shut up, be quiet, listen, zip it, zipitt**

But you have to be willing to invest the research and creative time it takes to redefine your offering from the prospects' point of view before you start writing or visualizing or designing. You need to understand their issues, concerns and buying criteria from their viewpoint. You need to understand their world in their words. You need to see what they see from their eyes.

Because without a strong, relevant premise, even the most outstanding creative efforts will make indelible something that doesn't matter to your audience.

And they will simply reject it.

Reject it? Why, they'll flip it off quicker than a triple-ply, polythermal ski parka in an overheated station wagon.

# Words and pictures

are indivisible

The right words with  
the right images  
speak a third, more  
memorable, language.

They need to be more inseparable than George Wendt in a wetsuit. Together the right words with the right images speak a third, more memorable, language.

## **Speaking the third language of engagement**

Finding that third language is the goal of engagement. And that third language goes well beyond content. It makes what you want to say (mere content) arresting and memorable. It makes content real, relevant and compelling to your audience. It makes it new, unique and interesting.

In fact, when two good creative people get together—a writer and an art director—to reach the goal of engagement you won't know who's doing the writing and who's doing the art. Because they both get wrapped up in something that's bigger than either one of their specialties.

It's called an idea.

## **An idea. What a concept!**

And a visual/verbal concept is what fuses words and pictures together to bring new meaning or insight that either one of the elements alone cannot bring to the communications.

When you evaluate any communications, look for the concept. Not a visual with a label. A concept.

Because even if you execute a bad or incomplete idea exceedingly well, it's not going to get you anywhere. It's kind of like biting into the crisp candy shell only to discover there's no creamy chocolate center in there. What's the point?

## **The difference between an idea and a label**

Somewhere out there in Creativeland there's a writer composing a caption for a visual that was handed to him by an art director. This will be foisted off on someone as a visual/verbal idea. A creative concept.

It is not. It is merely a picture with a label. A label is not an idea. A label simply describes what you are looking at.

When visuals and words are developed together they take on a new life and new language to the viewer. The visual adds a meaning to the words that did not exist before. In the same way, the words add a unique insight into the visual that would not exist without them.

That's why we believe in developing words and visuals at the same time. As a unit. As one. They are inseparable. Just like George Wendt in a wetsuit.

# Stand for something

or you'll stand for nothing

Positioning is as much a creative issue as it is a strategic one.

In this new world of customer- and prospect-controlled communications, you can't afford to be an "also-ran."

You can't afford to be perceived as just one of the herd offering the same stuff that everyone else is offering. If you do, you'll see more growth on Doogie Houser's face than you'll see on your marketing ROI.

To succeed in this new paradigm, you'll have to become top of mind (number one) in something in your prospects' heads.

#### **What not to stand for**

Problem is most companies want to stand for everything.

But the fear is, you can't. If you try to stand for everything, you'll end up standing for nothing. And your brand will be lonelier than Marvin Hamlisch at a Stones concert.

That's because positioning is not something you can pack into your product. Positioning is what you do with the prospect's mind by understanding their world view.

The first company, the first idea into the minds of people, has a tremendous advantage over its competitors. It becomes awfully hard to dislodge. And, in fact, blocks out communication about other companies within that category.

#### **Stand in your prospect's heads**

To get there first, you have to speak with such creative impact that you simply take the position in the category.

What many marketers don't want to admit is that positioning is as much a creative issue as it is a strategic one. And it will be even more of a creative issue in the future.

The reason is the tremendous, ever-expanding diversity of media and communications options that are fragmenting audiences and messages all over the place.

In fact, right now, out there in this new, cold, cruel business marketing world, messages and brands just like yours are being ripped apart, fragmented, pulverized and torn asunder with such violence it makes what Tyson did to Holyfield look like Richie Cunningham giving one of the Hooper triplets a hickey. And it will only get worse.

So in order to capture and maintain a presence in your audience's mind, you're going to have to present not only a compelling but a consistent personality, voice and point of view. Each one of these components is a creative issue.

#### **The terrible secret is out**

Every creative strategy should establish or reinforce a consistent position for your company that is valued by its customers and prospects. And that is perceived by them to be distinctive. Every piece of creative communications must match that position.

So if your company is perceived to be a leader, your creative strategies should revolve around selling the concept that made you famous. And then broaden its applications.

To succeed in this new paradigm, you'll have to become top of mind (number one) in something in your prospects' heads.

If you're not the leader, then you should find a perceptual niche no one else is filling and become its leader. Or, try to reposition the competition in the prospects' minds.

**Now we'll have to kill you**

Well, truth be told, positioning is a highly creative process. It involves the expert integration of words, pictures and ideas to build a unique brand position and personality for your company. And that personality becomes the central part of your company's position.

Just as you cannot separate words from visuals, you can't separate image from position.

That's why few people really do it well.

If you doubt it, just look at a few corporate business ads or websites. You can practically hear the traditional agency types bouncing off the strategy walls as they careen their way, with no clear, consistent creative direction, through the hallowed halls of positioning like Gary Busey trying to find the john at the House of Blues.

But when done well, the right positioning forces communications to be relevant to your prospects. And it gives all creative work continuity.

**Why you should believe in creative continuity**

Continuity that has a high level of creative impact can double recognition of your buying message.

That's why engagement and dialogue communications are so powerful in the new marketing environment. In a world of fragmented messages and more media outlets than anyone can keep track of, brand personality is the connection point between your company and your over-communicated, overwhelmed customers and prospects.

Because when audiences become familiar with your communications, they do a lot of the work for you. It's like seeing a familiar face that stands out in a crowd.

The fact is, people simply pay more attention to brand personalities and communications that they know.

Unfortunately, many business marketers don't take advantage of this little quirk in human behavior.

**Send in the "thingbes"**

What they should be doing is developing integrated programs that use different media to reach prospects at different stages of the purchase process with consistent, highly recognizable, familiar communications.

Instead they're off sending a "thingbe" here and another unrelated "thingbe" there, and a third inconsistent message over there and one that doesn't look or sound like the others down here. And while they're at it, they're testing a social media program that takes on a totally different voice than anything else they're doing. After all, it's difficult writing 140 characters in a brand voice.

Just as you cannot separate words from visuals, you can't separate image from position.

**You might as well set fire to your budget**

The terrible monster that's keeping those "thingbes" from hitting is getting more terrible every day. New technology, new media, new communications techniques are already widening and deepening that giant quagmire called communications clutter.

And unless you develop a strong, consistent, easily recognized, consistent, unique, consistent, relevant, and, of course, consistent creative communications presence, it's going to be glug...glug...glug time.

**How to create a program that reeks**

Developing a truly integrated program or campaign is not about the consistent use of your logo, a type treatment or a color pallet. It's the consistent use of a single, overriding, compelling, creative idea.

Every part of the program should reek of it. It should be based on how your customers and prospects view their business—not how you view yours.

And it should be unique, so you can own it.

And to make it look and sound familiar, you should create a highly recognizable visual and copy style. Then apply them to all media. Even the ones with 140 character limits.

As we said before, this little exercise will double recognition of your buying message.

# Be human

Like it or not, your brand is now part of a very human conversation.

It's hard to believe, we know, but there are business-to-business companies out there that are viewed as fuddy-duddies by their customers and prospects. And old, staid, fuddy-duddies, at that.

Unfortunately, they often support that misconception with communications that are impersonal, aloof and boastful.

None of these are good things to be in the new world order of customer controlled marketing.

## **The changing brand voice**

That's because whether you like it or not, your brand is now part of a very human conversation.

And thanks to the Web, the very sound of that conversation is in stark contrast to the monotonous, lifeless, self-centered, boastful, drone coming from most business-to-business companies around the world.

## **From corporate-speak...**

The problem is that companies have become more comfy with this inane, self-possessed, corporate-speak than Ed Begley, Jr. in an electric car on his way to a recycling center with a trunk full of empties.

In fact, they're so comfortable with it themselves they actually think that people on the outside (like customers and prospects) relate to this indecipherable babble.

We've got news for you, Skeeter. People on the outside are more involved in their tans than they are in this stuff.

## **...to corporate belching**

Corporate belches consist of a mixture of meaningless mission statement mumbo jumbo, indecipherable acronyms and jargon and the legalese and weasel words that companies hide behind. They are the inward mumbles of old world hierarchies that are more top-heavy than Pamela Anderson in a centrifuge.

And don't forget the strategy-talk that somehow turns communications objectives into copy that tells people what they should believe.

This is particularly true of current integrated programs that are based on pretty sound strategy but are self-destructing all over the place like a squadron of kamikaze pilots after a mail drop of Dear John letters.

In other words, in this new marketing/communications/branding paradigm, if your brand has even the aromatic hint of a belching weasel, you've got a problem.

## **...to belching weasels**

Because belching weasels smell like all the stuff that Web-empowered, networked customers and prospects can see through in an instant. That's because technology has enabled them to know more than you do, faster than you do.

This new market conversation offers people the pure sound of the human voice, not the elevated, empty speech of the corporate hierarchy.

Especially about their choices.

Compared to the emerging voice of real, human market conversations, typical business-to-business copy sounds about as natural and spontaneous as a Jesse Helms bowel movement. Even before he died.

#### **...to the power of the human voice**

In contrast, these new market conversation offers people the pure sound of the human voice, not the elevated, empty speech of the corporate hierarchy.

What's more, these new voices are telling one another the truth based on their real experiences with the brand. Again, in stark contrast to the packaged corporate messages aimed at presenting that edited, finely polished version of reality that could generously be called the best-case scenario. Or it can be called bullshit.

Since the first markets, we, as human beings, seem to know intuitively when something spoken, written or recorded is sincere and honest. When it's trying to connect with our hopes and dreams. When it comes from one person's heart instead of a synthesis of corporate-speak filtered through a myriad of English class editing, trimming, targeting bullet pointing and legal machinations.

#### **Survival of the humanist**

There is a self-indulgent pomposity in what passes for business communications today. Missing is the voice, humor and simple sense of worth and honesty that characterizes person-to-person communications.

But that will change. It has to.

Because in order to survive in this new age jungle, a company and a brand must have a human voice. It must stand for something. It must mean something. And it must want to stand out, meet people and show that it's trying to understand those people.

#### **Have a heart**

Consider this: Your company is not made up of pieces of equipment. Or an army of workers. Your company is made up of people. Individuals. Beings who are human.

And although your audience is made up of highly trained, analytical professionals, they, too, are human. They can be moved by emotion as well as by logic.

The breakthrough business-to-business marketing and branding programs of the future will make contact between these two very human elements.

#### **Buyers have hearts**

That's why good business communications is written as people speak. As one person talks to a friend. In short, sometimes incomplete, sentences. Simple words. No jargon.

Not because we are less than literate. But because that's the way people talk. And that's the fastest way into someone's mind.

The shortest distance into anyone's mind goes through his or her heart.

And we believe that business communications should be illustrated in human terms, using human situations. Visuals should involve the human feelings of the viewer. In fact, as business marketing becomes more and more high-tech, your communications should become more and more high-touch.

**Even geeks have hearts**

The shortest distance into anyone's mind goes through his or her heart. By that we mean you can get extra credit from your prospects if your communications are engaging.

You've heard the old saying about sales representatives. The one that goes: People buy from people they like. Well, your brand and marketing communications can create just as strong a personality as your sales force. A brand personality can predispose people to like you and your products and make them want to interact with you.

**All God's children have hearts**

So your communications should present your company's message in a direct and honest way that shows you take your audience's business and your products more seriously than you take yourself.

It should have blood running through it. A twinkle in its eye. A grin on its face.

To create this kind of engaging, human personality, look for three intangible elements in every creative execution:

1. Relevance
2. Emotion
3. Surprise

# Look like a leader

Leaders package their communications in certain subtle ways that identify them as leaders.

Give someone a fish and they'll eat for a day. But teach someone not to run a bass lure through their testicle and they'll be deeply indebted to you for the rest of their life.

Of course the touching moral of this story is that leadership has a lot to do with educating customers and prospects.

## **How you say it counts**

And companies that do it well package their communications in certain subtle ways that identify them as leaders.

First, they only say important things. (Things that are important to their prospects.)

Second, they say them importantly.

## **We're talking dominance here**

In direct marketing, for example, that means searching for ways to make mailings physically involving. If you can get people's hands into your message, their minds will follow.

But before they can get their heads into it, they have to get their hands on it. Which means it will have to make it through corporate mail clerks, executive administrators and secretaries who are so mistrustful they make Lawrence Harvey in the "Manchurian Candidate" look like Papa Smurf.

So your piece will have to stand out in size, shape, color or dimension from the rest of the mail delivered to your prospects' offices. Or it will never make it through all the screens corporations have invented to insulate their executives from junk mail.

## **Don't be a little scatter-brain, now**

In print advertising, it may mean concentrating high impact ads with large or unique space units in the dominant magazine in your market, rather than scattering them over a number of publications with low space rates.

It means running a few big ads, rather than a lot of small ones. It means dominating the magazine with design.

In fact, we believe in presenting only one idea in each ad or each page of a brochure. We think a single visual element should dominate a layout. There should be an obvious point of entry for the eye.

## **Run for your life...it's white space!**

We are not afraid of white space. And you shouldn't be either. It has the power to focus your viewer on your message. No matter what medium its in.

Illustrations and photographs should be created for the concept they are trying to support, rather than lifted from a file or a stock photo site. Effective visuals grow out of strong benefit messages. Not the other way around.

## **Put cyber in your space and space in your cyber**

On the Web it means creating destination sites that provide a lot of interactivity, diagnostic tools and communities of fellow users. Simplifying content and layout to allow the user to focus on what's most relevant to them. In other words, the cyberspace equivalent of white space.

# Dominate the medium with relevant concepts and powerful design.

It could even mean a Twitter strategy that points your audience to usable, enlightening information in a memorable voice. Or blogging with a specific, aggressive point of view instead of just dumping some bullet-pointed content.

## **There is a point to this**

If you want to be thought of as a leader, then your communications should dominate the medium you're in with relevant concepts and powerful design. So that in the context of its environment, your message looks more interesting, more useful, more memorable or more intriguing than everything that surrounds it. Including the editorial.

Do that one thing and you'll take a giant load off your communications' back and a big "kick me" sign off its butt.

## **Trust in tomorrow more than yesterday**

Your company's past is undoubtedly filled with glorious tradition and corporate heroes. But looking back at your history in your marketing and brand communications is usually a historic mistake.

If you think you can find a leadership position in this new age by turning to the company archives, you might as well look for rap or funkadelic CDs at Pat Robertson's house.

That's because your customers and prospects don't look back. For them, and probably for you, the greatest opportunities lie in the future.

## **There's no cliché like an old cliché**

Creative approaches based on historic figures, or that start with words like, "From the beginning of time, man has sought to (fill in the blank)," are not only clichéd ideas, they face the wrong direction.

Rather, we believe in modern, clean design and forward-thinking concepts. In other words, in communications that define your leadership in terms of your prospects' future opportunities. Not your past glories.

# Get attention

The guiding principle of attention always has been and always will be self-interest.

If you're going to go to all the trouble of listening to your customers and prospects to understand what's important to them and engage them in a dialogue, then you should spend as much time and effort figuring out how to engage them.

This is different than determining content and developing message platforms. Seldom does unadorned content engage anyone.

#### **Go ahead, I'm not listening**

Because you have to get their attention to begin to engage them. And you have to engage them before they will sit still long enough to listen, read, watch or interact with your content.

If you don't, it doesn't matter how on target your content and brand messages are. They'll get cut off more frequently than the late Ted Kennedy bar-hopping on St. Patrick's Day.

#### **Enough about you, let's talk about me**

But if you have indeed listened, and in your listening learned the things that your customers and prospects are concerned about and what they value, then you've cleared the first hurdle in getting their attention. You have discovered how they see the world.

The guiding principle of attention always has been self-interest. What's in it for me. In fact, recent studies indicate that our collective narcissism is growing each day.

#### **Your product doesn't count here**

This is especially true in business communications. All that matters is my concerns. Not your product features or your company's glorious history. All that counts to me is what you can do to help me solve my problems or make my business and me better.

To the degree that if your customers and prospects view the information you give them as having been created for them, they are more likely to attend to it. So personalization to whatever extent you can structure it is worth the effort.

#### **Make me happy, make me sad, but make me feel something**

The second most important factor in attention is whether the message provokes emotion. We tend to gravitate to messages that will make us happy or those that anger us or even make us feel a little uncomfortable.

Another important characteristic of attention-getting information is its source. People pay more attention to messages from trustworthy and respected companies. Even over sources that they consider to be influential and charismatic.

#### **Tell me a brand story**

And when it comes to content, attention first goes to concise messages that tell a story. Then it goes to information that is engaging and unique.

Proving once again that content is not engagement. Engagement is making content compelling enough to get attention. And telling a short, interesting narrative about how the brand helped someone like me can get attention.

Even more. If it is structured right it can get told and retold. Passed along to others until it becomes viral.

And in this day and age, viral is a good thing.

## Information that gets attention

**message content**

- personalized—direct to and about me
- about a group I belong to
- related to a question or issue I'm concerned about

**message delivery**

- concise, direct or story-like structure
- engaging to my senses
- new, unusual or unique

**audience effect structure**

- emotionally moved by the message (makes me feel happy or angry)
- convinced the message is important to me and my work
- able to consider the message's implications or consequences to me

**message source**

- trustworthy or respected
- influential or powerful
- charismatic or appealing

# Keep attention

People are not waiting to hear from you. They just want to get home in time to watch Charlene Tilton's salute to porcelain clowns on the Home Shopping Network.

It's tough enough to get someone's attention momentarily in this new media-saturated, message-fragmented world. But it's much harder to hold it over minutes and hours or long enough to get your message across.

Because when you get right down to it, no matter how engaged your audience is in your brand they're not waiting on pins and needles just to hear from you.

Hey, Skippy, they just want to get home in time to watch Charlene Tilton's salute to porcelain clowns on the Home Shopping Network.

## **Looks like a job for an attention structure**

Attention structures are used to keep involvement in information over extended periods of time. Which means more than three minutes these days.

They're also used to move attention from one topic to another. To do that, they move the user through a series of attention-focused experiences to influence the flow of the audience concentration over time.

## **Linear or non**

Most traditional attention structures, including books, movies and plays, are linear. They start at the beginning, go to the middle and end with the ending. What a concept.

Linear structures work because they take advantage of inertia. Once they've gained your attention it requires some degree of effort to stop paying attention to them.

The problem with linear structures in a world of over-saturated communications is that they typically require a high level of initial attention. A level that is becoming more unrealistic to expect from audiences all the time.

## **I'm in control**

Nonlinear structures such as hypertext, diagnostic, highly interactive websites, catalogs, blogs and highly scannable magazine and literature formats as well as the use of factoids and sidebars make it easier for your customers and prospects to enter the information stream and leave.

They create a sense of control and familiarity because it's so easy to access them whenever you need to, for as long as you need to. And because of that, they are more likely to be a continuing part of the audience's work life over time.

## **Tell me a story**

People watch two hour movies and finish 300-page novels because they want to find out what happens to the story line and the characters. A powerful way to maintain attention over time or create more powerful brand involvement is by giving your audience brand stories.

## **Me, me, me**

If the story is about me, I'll pay more attention to it than anything else around. If it's about someone I would like to be (a professional icon, industry leader or someone who has the kind of status I'd like to have) then I'll still give you my rapt attention. But that's just me. And everyone else.

# The most successful structures make it easy to change the informational context.

Good old self-interest still remains the guiding principle of communications and attention.

## **Make it real**

Informational messages that are lifelike and realistic are more likely to keep attention than those that aren't. Film tends to be more engrossing than television partly because the image is more dominant in your visual field. The resolution of the image is higher. So the effect is more real.

In the same way, strong, seemingly real characters make novels easier to read and stay with.

## **Change tempo**

One way to keep attention over time is to provide a change in content, format, tone and involvement level. The effect on attention is similar to cutting from one scene to another in film. It nudges your mind ever so gently to refocus.

## **Ins and outs**

Even the most compelling information can't keep people riveted to it forever. So you have to build in convenient exit and entry points for your audience's attention. Books use chapters. Web sites use navigation points. Serial television programs are broadcast weekly instead of back-to-back.

## **But don't interrupt**

People need exit points, but you should minimize major interruptions in the stream of information if you want to keep attention. The longer the interruption and the more discontinuity it has with the meaning or intent of the information, the more likely people are to disconnect their attention completely.

## **Provide goals**

It's easier for people to maintain a high level of attention if they're trying to achieve a specific objective that's meaningful to their life or job. You can tap into these triggers by using information hierarchies that bring these goals to the forefront.

## **Change channels**

The most successful structures try to hold attention to a given message, but also make it easy to change the informational context. One big reason TV, radio and the Web are successful is that they make it easy to change channels or alter the flow of the attention stream. This is also why integrating marketing messages throughout different media increase overall attention and brand recognition which builds engagement over time.

## **Interaction**

Passive media such as television most easily attract at least a surface level of attention. But active media like books, the Web, computer games and CD-ROMs engage a higher level of attention. They are more physically and mentally involving and provide immediate feedback and response.

# Be a creative hypocrite

We believe in temporarily not believing any one of our beliefs, if we believe our disbelief will increase the impact of the communications we create.

In other words, rules (the hows) will play an important role in the future of business communications.

## **Role of the rules. Or rules of the role.**

Basically, rules will exist to be broken. Because when you break the right ones, it will have a tremendous impact on your sales curve. And when you overturn the conventions it will make you a leader.

So we don't view the beliefs we've stated in this e-book as rules that cannot be changed.

In utter defiance of our own beliefs, we've written headlines that don't contain explicit benefits. We've temporarily lost our humanity by picturing a mountain of machinery without a soul in sight.

## **So what the heck are they, already?**

They are principles. Overriding principles that we believe in. They exist to remind us how communications take place. They remind us how to think about communications.

That's the value of having beliefs in a new, changing, uncertain age of business marketing. When you don't follow them, you do it for a good reason. A well thought-out reason.

And ultimately, we believe that how to think about your brand and how to think about marketing communications is a lot more important than thinking about the "how to's" of communications.

## What's a Mobium?

It would be nice to say we're an agency. Or brand consultants. Or a research firm. But we can't. Because we're not.

We're mutants.

We're none of those things. And we're all of them. We're a squishy blob of media agnostics united by brand and communications principles, paradigms and processes, and focused on helping business marketers turn change into a competitive advantage in their markets.

Instead, Mobium is the product of revolutionary information and technology changes that are creating a new age of business communications. In fact, we're part of a revolution to change the very nature of work. To do work that really matters. That makes a difference.

We're not traditional in any way. Including the way we're organized, the way we work or how we relate to one another. We do virtually everything together. As collaborative colleagues.

### **We're change freaks**

So we're always evolving. In fact, we've been altered more times and in more ways than Louie Anderson's tuxedo. And we're proud of it.

We're hard to categorize because we're a new kind of thing. And if that's not confusing enough, we're always reinventing ourselves.

Right now, we're consultants who do everything to execute. We don't have departments. Our organization chart looks like a flower instead of a pyramid. We're strategy process freaks who only care about creative work. And all we want to do is change almost everything about conventional business communications.

### **Organized chaos**

In other words, Mobium is slightly organized chaos in the service of change. So it's difficult to compare us to what's already out there. And if you do, you'll become as disoriented as Woody Allen at a family reunion.

Developing comprehensive, integrated brand and communications programs to meet the broad range of our clients' business-to-business needs is what we do. Developing and creating these programs to turn change into a competitive advantage for our clients is what we do best.

Sometimes it's hard simply to keep up with the rapidly emerging changes in technology, marketing approaches, new communications techniques, creative options and unconventional media that are inundating us every day.

In fact, it's making people as nervous and jerky as Barney Fife on a triple latte. Why, we know business marketers who are more on the edge than Gary Oldman after drinking a pot of espresso and realizing he's out of cigarettes.

### **Hang in there, Bucky**

There are ways to not only deal with all this mind-numbing change but also convert it to a competitive advantage in your markets. We do it by applying many of the ideas you've read about in this little book. And by employing a whole variety of traditional and totally non-traditional tools.

In fact, we communicate in almost every medium you can think of. And maybe some that you haven't thought of yet.

We also do it by eliminating wasteful hierarchy within our organization. By working in flexible amoeba teams comprised of specialists, generalists and outside experts who can attack a problem quickly and creatively. And by ensuring that no matter how strategically focused our work may be, it's always, always driven by its direct connection to viewers' emotions and compelling creative ideas.

This New Paradigm Series of e-books is just one way we invite you to learn about how to cultivate the power of change. Our website is another. So join the revolution. And start taking advantage of change. Before change takes advantage of you.

[www.mobium.com](http://www.mobium.com)

## more mobium e-books

Change is ugly, freakish, hard to face and downright frightening. But paradigms are shifting all over the place. To the point that business marketing these days isn't just about change. It's like riding the bus. It requires change.

That's the purpose of this series of little books.\* To share a shiftload of what we believe you'll have to confront. Whether you want to or not. Because they'll dramatically affect the way you'll have to communicate in the future.

In our travels down these new roads, we've discovered that some of the communications guideposts have changed dramatically. Some have not. And probably never will.

As Bill Bernbach said, "It took millions of years for man's instincts to develop. It will take millions more for them to even vary. It is fashionable to talk about changing man. A communicator must be concerned with unchanging man, with his obsessive drive to survive, to be admired, to succeed, to love, to take care of his (or her) own."

The key is to make room for the things that change without tossing out the principles that never will. And then to integrate the two together. These, then, are the principles that we believe in, applied to whole new paradigms in business communications today.

To help make sense of it all, we've created a series of little e-books on interrelated subjects.

Actually, we believe these disciplines are more than related. They're inseparable. They are inter-dependent. You won't be able to excel in one without the others and still succeed. Especially in today's wacky world of change.

### the new paradigm series

#### ***Shift This***

***Leveraging the paradigm shifts that are changing the face of business marketing***

#### ***Brandwidth***

***Increasing the power of your brand to generate sales in the face of business marketing change***

#### ***Goosing***

***Integrating your communications to move customers and prospects to purchase in the face of business marketing change***

#### ***Interactivate***

***Developing digital dialogues with buyers in the face of business marketing change***

#### ***Hug Your Customers***

***Building strong relationships with the people who count in a world of business marketing change***

#### ***The Age of Engagement***

***The role of creative impact in a world of business marketing change***

#### ***Follow The Money***

***Measuring the return on your marketing investment in the face of business change***

If you'd like a copy of any of the other e-books in the series, just call 1.866.2MOBIUM. Or visit us at [www.mobium.com](http://www.mobium.com).

\*Beyond the obvious self-serving desire to get your work by demonstrating that we can help you turn change into a competitive advantage in your market.