

NAKED DESIGN

Are your words working? If good design is about effective communication, it's only one half of the equation. There's another equally important consideration – the words you use to convey your message. While most designers are primarily interested in the visual elements, we believe that truly powerful communication can only be achieved when words and visuals work together.

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Getting your words to work is just as important as getting your design right – neither great design nor compelling words alone can give you the results you're looking for. Truly powerful communication is achieved through the right combination of words and visuals.

Writing is something that most of us have to do almost every day, and these days we have easy access to all the tools we need to write, design, print and distribute materials...and that's not always a good thing!

Anyone who's ever struggled with trying to find just the right words to get their point across knows that there is a world of difference between being able to write something and being able to truly communicate. Great writing is one of those things that everyone can recognise when they see it, but not everyone can do it – that takes a special set of skills, talent and experience – it's not something that most people are ever taught

how to do, and there aren't many organisations that have professional writers in-house to help with the daily communication challenges. While hiring a professional writer, editor or proofreader to work alongside your design team is a great investment, there are also a number of things that you can implement in your organisation to help everyone approach the job of communicating with more confidence.

In issue 1 of Naked Design we talked about the process behind the creation of a brand, and while much of that involves the development of a visual look and feel, the creation of a 'brand voice' is equally important and should be done simultaneously. If your ultimate objective is to have your customers form a relationship with your brand, then the way it expresses itself through what it says and how it says it are central to the creation of a brand personality that people can connect with.

Deciding on issues such as the right tone of voice (conversational or formal?), communication style (quirky and humorous or factual and no-nonsense?) and language set (do you say fees and charges, price, rates, cost, contribution or investment?) are central to the creation of your brand voice. These all need to be consistent with your brand values and appropriate for the type of business you are, the target audience you are speaking to and the visual elements of your brand. For a fantastic example of the creation of an appropriate brand voice, next time you pick up a bottle of nudie juice take a moment to read the label, even the fine print. It's probably not like any product label you've ever read before, but it is a brilliant example of a completely appropriate and consistent brand voice.

WRITING

SIMPLE SECRETS TO BETTER WRITING

Writing is something that some people are better at than others, but there are things that everyone can do to make the challenge of sitting in front of a blank computer screen a little less daunting. While you still might decide to bring in the experts, these steps will help you to get better results from any communications you have to produce yourself, and help you to better assess the effectiveness of communications that are presented to you.

Let's begin by understanding what we're trying to do when we write. Writing is about communicating; communicating is about creating a shared understanding between you and your audience – and that is about packaging your message in the right way and doing whatever you can to avoid 'noise'. Noise is anything that interferes with the communication process, we can minimise or avoid some types of noise but others we just have to try to overcome as best as possible.

These days, information overload and lack of time are two huge sources of noise, just getting people to stop and spend the time to read your materials is challenging enough. Think of all the brochures, annual reports, websites, letters, catalogues and newsletters we receive every day – and what a small proportion of them we actually take the time to read. But noise can also be caused by using words that people interpret differently to the way you intended (which can result in

misunderstandings or offence), it can be caused by choosing the wrong tone of voice for your audience or for the purpose of the communication, by using poor grammar or having spelling mistakes that distract people from what you're trying to say, and it can even be caused by poor design that makes it difficult for readers to find the information they need. So what can we do to lessen the impact of noise on our communications?

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

Most people sit down to start writing by thinking about what it is they want to say – which is entirely the wrong approach. If writing is about communicating, and communicating is about creating understanding then we should begin by asking ourselves about our audience and what they need in order for understanding to be achieved.

“ People have writer's block not because they can't write, but because they despair of writing eloquently. ”

ANNA QUINDLEN

So, the first step in good writing is to ask yourself:
Who is my target audience?
What do they already know about this topic?
What do I need them to know by the time they finish reading this material?
What do I want them to do when they finish reading this material?

The answers to these four key questions will help you approach everything you write from a different perspective – and they'll tell you almost everything you need to know about the right tone to take, how much and what type of information to provide, and even how to structure your communications.

WATCH YOUR TONE

Many people find it difficult to get their point across in writing because they try to write in their best 'telephone voice' – you know that faux-posh voice that lots of our mums in particular seem to put on to answer the telephone? It doesn't sound natural, it stifles communication because you become so conscious of sounding 'right' that you struggle to get your point across, and it can't be sustained because it's not who you really are.

If you're writing for your organisation you need to be mindful of both the established brand voice as well as the type of communication, which means having some flexibility. Even if your brand voice is informal, quirky and humorous there's a right time for that



style and it's not when responding to a customer complaint! If you're writing for yourself, a warm and conversational approach is usually more effective than a cold, bureaucratic tone. It doesn't mean you can't sound firm or 'official' if that's what the communication calls for, but remember, your ultimate objective is to create understanding and the chances of achieving that through bureaucratic-sounding double-talk are very slim. Effective communication is achieved with elegant simplicity not grammatical gymnastics.

Learning to be more conversational can be difficult and a little confronting. We tend to get a sense of security from using official-sounding language. There's something almost too simple about plain English that can make people feel like it's not professional enough. That was exactly the concern that staff of an insurance company client had after their materials were transformed from jargon-laden, impersonal, bureaucratic double-talk to friendly, conversational and simple to understand. Their customers loved it because they understood what was being communicated, but staff were concerned that it didn't sound professional enough. Again, begin with the audience in mind – it's not about what you want to say it's about what you need them to know, and in most cases simpler = more effective = greater understanding = mission accomplished!

DON'T BE AFRAID TO GET MESSY

Another thing that stifles many people's ability to write is that they feel the need to get it right first time. Real writing doesn't work that way – it's a messy and many-phased process. Don't be afraid to begin with a complete 'brain dump' – get all of your ideas, thoughts and points onto a piece of paper, jot down key words, phrases and messages, maybe try out a paragraph or two, create some headings, and generally exhaust yourself of your thoughts and ideas on the topic. Don't worry about the words you use, or what it looks like, just get your ideas down, this process is about clarifying your thinking. You might end up working on three or four drafts – moving content around, deleting, adding and transforming what begins as an unstructured mess into a thoughtful and considered document. Get comfortable with the idea of drafting and you'll find your end product improves dramatically.

PROOFREADING – WHY IT'S ESSENTIAL

Proofreading is done for the purpose of spotting errors. It is virtually impossible to write and proofread something yourself because as we become more familiar with a document our ability to read what is really on the page – as opposed to what we think is there – becomes impaired. Professional proofreaders are expert in grammar, punctuation and spelling as well as identifying inconsistencies within documents. If you are producing an important document or one that will be widely published it is definitely worth investing in the services of a proofreader. It's not a very costly process

nor a very time-consuming one – especially compared with the costs of reprinting a document because of mistakes. Our proofreaders can often turn documents around in as little as 24 hours. At a minimum, you should give your document to a colleague that has not been involved in its production. With 'fresh eyes' this person will help to spot the more obvious typos or mistakes that have become invisible to you.

LAYOUT MATTERS

This is where words and design meet – they need to work together to help communication, to give elegance to simple statements, and to structure lengthy text in a way that makes sense and leads the reader through what it is they need to know. Don't be afraid of using dot points or numbered lists, headings and sub-headings, pullouts, boxes and so on to help attract readers' attention and make it easy for them to find the information you need them to have.

“...at the end of the day, effective communication materials are about getting people to ‘yes’: yes, they agree to spend time to hear about your product or service...”

DEBORAH HUTCHINGS, TECHNICAL SERVICE DIRECTOR
GLOBALTECH SOLUTIONS

HOW LEARNING TO SPEAK YOUR CUSTOMERS' LANGUAGE CAN HELP YOU TO GROW YOUR BUSINESS

Scope Design Group client Globaltech Solutions is one organisation that has a firm appreciation of the importance of choosing the right words, not just the right design, to create a truly differentiated message.

“We wanted the decision makers within organisations to understand that we have a substantially different service offering,” explains Globaltech’s Technical Service Director, Deborah Hutchings, “which is why we knew we had to tell a different story as well as look different in our marketing materials”. Key to Globaltech’s approach is speaking about its services from the point of view of what they can deliver to potential clients. “Pick up any IT organisation brochure and it’s usually overwhelming – full of jargon and a level of detail that many decision makers don’t need. We knew that we had to begin with our audience in mind, and speak to them in terms of the solutions they’re looking for to make their organisations operate more efficiently.” According to Deborah, at the end of the day, effective communication materials are about getting people to ‘yes’: yes, they agree to spend time to hear about your product or service; yes, they can see that you have something that will solve their problems; and yes, they want to become a new client of yours.

DO YOU STRUGGLE WITH THE TEN MOST COMMON WRITING MISTAKES?

Simply send us your suggestions for topics you’d like to read about in future issues of Naked Design or tell us what you thought about this issue and we’ll send you the ten most common mistakes that people make when creating documents – and tell you how you can improve your writing by avoiding them – absolutely free.

Of course, we’d also love to learn more about your design and writing challenges and talk about what we can do to help you get the best from your communication materials.

Email nakeddesign@scopedesign.com.au

RECOMMENDED READING

Writing

- The Penguin Writer’s Manual
Authors: Martin Manser and Stephen Curtis
- Style Manual
Revised by Snooks & Co
- On Writing
Author: Stephen King
- Mother Tongue
Author: Bill Bryson

Inspiration

- You Don’t Have to be Born Brilliant
Author: John McGrath
- It’s Not How Good You Are It’s How Good You Want To Be
Author: Paul Arden

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