

Interactivating your messages in the face of business communications change

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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Introduction

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 books on interrelated subjects.

the new paradigm series

*Interactivating Your Messages
in the Face of Business Communications Change*

*Hugging Your Customers
in the Face of Business Communications Change*

*Integrating Your Communications
in the Face of Business Marketing Change*

*Maximizing Creative Impact
in the Face of Business Communications Change*

*Measuring the Return on Your Marketing Investment
in the Face of Business Change*

*Leveraging the Paradigm Shifts That Are Changing
the Face of Business Communications*

*Increasing Your Brandwidth
in the Face of Business Communications Change*

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.

If you'd like a copy of any of the other books in the series, just call 1.866.2MOBIUM. Or visit us at 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.

Interactivate your messages

Building awareness of your products is one thing. Problem is, it's an old thing.

And in this new paradigm of over-communications, over-choice and time famine, it will get you about as far as Kathy Lee Gifford singing "You Light Up My Life" at the Apollo Theater.

Talk to the hand

The same goes for interruptive, one-way monologues that tell people what it believe.

They're the refuges of communications dinosaurs. Those traditional ad agencies who call themselves integrated communications companies these days to hide the fact that they're frantically trying to locate Mr. Peabody for a quick spin in the Way-Back Machine.

Getting attention is something else. It will get you farther.

And attracting attention to your unique value offerings will take you even farther in a world that doesn't deal in pure products or services anymore.

Attention counts

But in a speedy interconnected world, you have to get people involved in your information, messages and brand before you'll see direct financial returns on your communications.

In fact, in this environment, sending out more and more passive, interruptive messages is the informational equivalent of the guy at the office who has to look like he's constantly doing something while accomplishing nothing. Kind of like Vanna White in a power tie.

That's why interactivity is such a powerful tool. It does something. It's active.

It involves. It transforms vague awareness to attention.

It makes immediate dialogue with customers and prospects possible. If you're willing to use it as a mechanism to listen and learn and respond.

I've been interactivated

It does all of this by empowering your customers and prospects. By allowing them to go wherever they want to go in your information. Whenever they want to go there. However they want to get there.

Of course, they're already in control of information and communications now. Technology and connectivity have already empowered them.

The issue is, will you use interactivity to empower them through your value offerings and brand?

Because the overarching power of interactivity is its ability to bind you and your customers and prospects together in a special kind of empowering relationship. One in which their experience with you, your offerings and your brand make them better at what they do. Make them better professionals. Make their jobs easier, more efficient and more productive. Make their businesses more successful.

It's built on the premise that we're all just human beings stumbling around in the dark, trying to find the bathroom and kicking the heck out of our shins on the way there. We appreciate a little help and insight.

The WD-40 in the gears of relationships

Interactivity is a powerful metaphor for this kind of teacher-student or doctor-patient relationship. You describe your symptoms and situation. The doctor diagnoses your problem, prescribes a remedy and gets you in touch with fellow sufferers as a support group.

That's the kind of interactivity that's possible today. And that's the kind of thought leadership and guidance it can help you build with your customers and prospects.

In fact, it has the potential to fundamentally change and deepen your relationship with your customers and prospects. And as such, it goes beyond the Web into all media.

Don't salivate over technology, salivate over your customers

It's a tangled World Wide Web we weave, my friend. Despite its awesome communications and branding potential, somehow we've managed to turn interactive media of all kinds into one humongous barn door that everybody's throwing their communications cowpies up against to see what will stick.

Danger, danger, Will Robinson

The problem with interactivity is the technology behind it.

It's all so new and cool, it's more distracting than Marge Schott in a G-string.

And there are a lot of people being distracted out there.

To make things worse, there are the "interactive agencies." A new breed of techno-geeks who insist that interactive media are so unique it takes a special kind of organization to deal with them.

Interactive is unique. But these guys use more smoke and mirrors than a tire fire at a brothel. Mostly because all they know is the technology. Asking them to be the steward of your brand communications is like asking Moe Howard to baby-sit a colicky infant.

Now, we don't want to burst your bubble, Sparky-dot-com, but before you go off the deep end with your interactive buddies strapped around your neck, you might want to get a grip on reality. Even if it's only virtual reality.

Reality bytes

And whether you like it or not, if you don't factor your customers' and prospects' reality into your interactive plans, it will byte you in the butt big-time. So swallow your pride, put on the flimsy little examination gown of objectivity that's open in the back so the chilling cold breeze of truth can blow freely. And cough.

1. Examine your users.

Are your flashy doodads helping your users understand your message or obscuring it? What's that 360-degree VRML panorama of your corporate cafeteria have to do with your selling messages or brand? Are these kinds of fireworks tightly integrated into your customers' and prospects' interests and needs? Or are they a gratuitous flash akin to an "In-a-Gadda-Da-Vida" drum solo?

2. Check your bandwidth.

Will the enhancements make your site slow and clunky? Despite the rise of cable modems and DSLs, some portion of your audience may still be surfing at a creaky 28.8 kbps, Bucky. At these glacial speeds, a 50K animation adds about fourteen seconds to the download. Load up your pages with them and your site will be as quick, involving and responsive as Strom Thurmond on a NyQuil drip.

3. Contemplate your compatibility.

Now that you're on the cutting edge, are you cutting out a significant portion of your audience? Which portions? Do you care? The fact is, you can't assume that all your users will have the right machine, the right browser, the right browser version or the right browser plug-ins. So the next time someone wants to add a feature that won't play nice with some visitors' platforms, demand to know who won't be able to view their masterpiece. Or at least demand a work-around.

Find the focus, keep the focus

But the problem is much bigger than gewgaws gone amuck. Interactivity is turning into one gigantic communications cliché that companies are simply dumping their raw information into like so much raw sewage.

Annual reports presented in all their unedited, non-interactive, mind-numbing glory. Or how about the sales VP's navel-gazing keynote speech from last year's golf scramble? The Web is becoming a bigger catchall than the front of Drew Carey's shirt after an all-you-can-eat nacho blowout.

Beware the digital dump

The new mantra seems to be, "It's all good." Whatever content exists, flaunt it. Just open that PowerPoint file and save as HTML. Why not?

We can tell you why not, Zippy.

Every scrap of corporate puffery and nonrelevance distracts and defocuses the user from the really important things worth communicating. In fact, when your company's interactive presence loses focus on your customers' and prospects' self-interest, it's no longer a marketing tool. It's just the corporate library's lost-and-found department.

Whose interactivity is it, anyway?

The fact of the matter is, interactivity, whether on your Web site or in an ad, should be more about your customers' and prospects' business than about your own.

Of course, this focus on content relevance instead of corporate belching and interactive metaphors will make some people in your organization as nervous and jerky as Kramer on a triple latte.

But it's worth it. Because you'll be different. Everyone else is making interactive decisions the way the Archies used to pick their vacation spots. Blindfold the Jughead, give him a dart and spin the globe. Or they're hiring undirected Web development companies. Because darting and spinning is what those Jugheads do for a living.

Get a clue, Lou

Believe it or not, the basic principles for making raw information interesting, relevant, human and memorable apply to interactive media too. Although it doesn't appear that too many people are applying them right now.

And the first one is to get a strategic plan for what the heck you're doing, for whom (hint: your prospects and customers) and why.

Build on to your plan, Stan

Or even better, incorporate an interactive marketing plan into your existing integrated brand and communications plan. That means taking a look at where interactive components can fit into your prospects' purchase process and tailoring different messages and interactions to buyers, influencers and deal-killers at the appropriate stages of the sales seduction.

If you have a truly integrated plan, then you already have a unique position, a brand strategy and a compelling creative selling idea that ties all your other communications together. That should be the starting point of your interactive media plan. Including its creative execution.

Don't start from interactive scratch

The trick is not to reinvent the wheel.

It's to find the things that interactive media can do to enhance, deepen, and most importantly, get your audience physically involved in that already invented brand message better than any other medium can.

Define what interactivity means in real terms

Advance your brand and empower customers in ways that go beyond buttons, blips and passwords—all by giving them more control.

It's the principles of the thing

The term “interactivity” has been passed around more than a goatskin flask at a Blue Oyster Cult concert. It's undergone more mutations than Phyllis Diller during a long weekend on Dr. Moreau's island.

But some things don't change. Even if the technology behind them is more fluid than Peter O'Toole's lunch tray.

There are some overriding principles of interactivity that you can and must understand. Even if to you, “Ram” will always be McCartney's last good album. And a hard drive will remain a long trip in the Chevy to your in-laws.

Some principles

Interactivity is not about navigation per se, or the ability to select from a menu, or analogies, animation, rollovers or canned content.

It's about empowering your customers and prospects.

In fact, the secret to brand communication on the Internet is your ability to present your brand in such a way that customers and prospects can interact with your key messages.

That interaction creates brand experience. And if done right, it can be used to empower your customers and prospects around your brand. To help them do their jobs better, faster or more effectively.

And that brings us to interactive principle number one.

Principle one: People want to be better

Ask what enabling or empowering interactive tools you can provide to help users serve their own self-interest better. Of course, you have to listen to them to know what their self-interest is, from their point of view.

Then you might want to provide them with tools like interactive need analyzers, configurators and calculators. Or message boards to help them talk to other people who share their business issues and who can supply insights and answers.

You can create a variety of interactive forums that make it easy for them to talk to your brand advocates who use your offerings to solve the same problems they're concerned with.

And if you've got the guts, you can put them directly in touch not only with your immediate support staff, but also with experts deep within your organization. The people who engineered and conceived the offerings you market.

In this new connected world, they probably already have contact with your people. You just don't know about it.

Principle two: They are in control

Forget all the rules you were taught about controlling information and its delivery.

Those days are over. Customers and prospects control not only the information they want but also the sales process itself. Technology has given them the power to look at whatever they want to look at. Whenever they want to look at it.

They are doing it everyday.

So the issue for you is whether you want to participate in their process.

If you do, then you have to give them control in your interactions. They have to be able to get to where they want to go. Whenever they want to get there. At their own pace. In their own order.

Principle three: You are in their way

You have to get out of their way. If you want to play in this new paradigm, you have to help them do what they want to do. And that requires extreme usability and user freedom engineered into your interactive architecture and design.

On the Web, that means interactive navigation tools like search engines and direct search pallets. Clear signposts and menus. A logical hierarchy that scales easily to hold the information people need. And abundant links both within your site and outward to other communities and other information sources.

Help them by getting out of the way

When you put it all together, true interactivity focuses on some pretty pragmatic factors. Deliver these things interactively in real time to your customers and prospects and you'll develop an empowering, interactive relationship with them.

- Let users give you instructions and respond with the information they asked for in whatever form they requested it.
- Give users additional information based on their original query.
- Give feedback through user tests, diagnostics and answers to "what if" scenarios.
- Encourage users to add their own information to the interaction in a way that builds community with other users and the brand or value offerings.
- Make complex pricing calculations and other data evaluations faster, simpler and more effective for users.
- Diagnose user situations, business issues or problems, and help them find remedies.

Enter the market conversation

Right now, on message boards, rogue Web sites, email lists and industry forums, your customers and prospects are talking about your company, your competitors, what makes them angry and what makes them buy.

They're gossiping, sharing advice, laughing, smearing reputations and offering raving recommendations.

The best thing is, they want you to participate. They want you to respond to their questions, to their opinions and to their advice.

They're waiting for you

They don't want your monologue about what they should believe about your product and services. They want a dialogue. They want you to learn about them as individuals and what's really important to them.

All you have to do is have the guts and insight to join the conversation. To respond. To converse in a real human voice. To discuss. To help. To contribute to the community. That's what interactivity really is.

The Web changes everything, the Web changes nothing

Of all the seismic communications changes, perhaps none has shaken things up like the Internet.

In fact, the Web is fundamentally changing the way we build, position, communicate and integrate business brands. Not just on the Internet. Across all media.

Because the Web changes everything

For the first time in history, your customers and prospects control the amount, flow, source and speed of brand and product information. For the first time, you can learn about individual customers' and prospects' needs and perceptions and understand what's really important to them. And how your products and services can help them from their point of view. For the first time you can connect directly with their heads and respond to them in real time.

And as a result, some business marketers are more rattled than a cocktail shaker in a Noel Coward play.

Because for the first time, business communications is all about listening and responding. Not about sending things out. Not about pushing carefully edited, censored, tailored, prepackaged messages down a channel. It's about dialogue. Not monologues.

For the first time...well, except for a few thousand years ago when markets were truly markets...

Now it gets really bazaar

You remember markets? When traders returned from faraway places with spices and silks and precious magical stones. When people woke early and went there for coffee and vegetables, eggs and wine and Doric columns, bloodletting leeches and soothsaying. For pots. For toys. For love. For rope. For soap. For wagons. For bleating goats and evil-tempered camels. They went there to look and listen and marvel, to buy and to be amused.

But mostly they went to meet each other. And to talk.

That's because the first markets were filled with people, not abstractions, demographic profiles or statistical aggregates. They were the places where supply rubbed up against demand. Where buyers and sellers met, laughed with each other, yelled at each other and shared information and connected.

The first markets were filled with talk.

Some of it was about goods and products. Some was news, opinions, gossip and advice. But all of it was straightforward, direct and real and very human.

And guess what, Sparky. We're shifting back.

Because the Web changes nothing

For thousands of years markets were essentially conversations between people who sought out others who shared the same interest.

And they're about to be the same again. We are coming full circle. Only this time the marketplace is the world.

Technology is making markets conversations again. And that will require us to change those steadfast rules of branding and marketing. And rethink how we communicate with customers and prospects in all media.

The Internet isn't only about information or communications. Rather, it brings one totally unique and transforming thing to both those functions that nothing else ever has.

Interactivity is the thing

Interactivity is the defining characteristic of the Web.

In fact, in the future, if you can't interact 24/7 with all your customers and prospects, you'll net about as much as a Philly cheesesteak concession at a k.d. lang concert.

Interactivity will define what works on the Internet and what doesn't. The future of brand communications on the Internet revolves around your ability to present your brand in such a way that customers and prospects can interact with it. Engage in a give-and-take with its key product/service offering messages.

That interaction creates brand experience. And, if done correctly, it can be used to empower your customers and prospects around your brand. To help them do their jobs better, faster or more effectively through your offering.

And it's even bigger than the Internet

But despite the Web's awesome potential to bring people together, to connect, to talk directly, to ask questions, to reply, to respond, to empower, the business community has managed to turn it into one clichéd, irrelevant metaphor of themselves after another.

Unfortunately, this technology gives any business marketer with a PC and some cheap software the sudden power to speak to the world and populate their communications with all kinds of irrelevant contents and digital gewgaws. And because they can, they do. You've got your streaming video. You've got your 7,000 PowerPoint files. You've got your "lobby cam." You've got your rollovers. You've got your live audio streaming. You've got your Flash-animated mission statements. You've got trouble. Right here in Cyber City.

Conventions in the birth canal

What's really frightening is if you listen closely you can hear a lot of business marketers and communicators settling into these conventions like a fat guy in a hammock after Thanksgiving dinner with double-dip yams and Baskin-Robbins mega-gutbuster pumpkin pie parfait sundaes.

"The Internet is just another medium like direct marketing or TV. You integrate it into the mix like you do any other channel," they yammer.

It is not

The Internet is a place. We buy books and tickets and pneumatic drills and computer chips "on" the Web, not over it, beside it or through it. To call it a medium or distribution channel or a platform denies its fundamental human hospitality.

What happens on the Web is more than commerce, more than content, more than push and pull and clicks and traffic and e-anything.

The Internet is a real place where people go to learn and to talk to each other and to do business. It is a bazaar where customers and prospects look for wares and advice. Where merchants present goods and services and ideas for display. And where people gather around topics that interest them.

It's a whole pile of shifts

As a matter of fact, it's a fundamental shift in how we gather, use, evaluate and communicate brand information. It is a conversation. And that goes much deeper than technology, technique or media.

For example, brand positioning has traditionally been an expensive sojourn into corporate chest-beating, backslapping and aspiration spinning. And the resulting brand communicates no more than a big sloppy corporate belch.

Consultants spend time with one company leader after another, listening to the company line, the corporate wish list, the market commands from on high and basically perform the role of corporate shrink. Based on this incestual information, an inward looking positioning statement is written about what the brand will become. No matter what people already think.

Bend over and kiss your aspiration goodbye

In the new world, brand positioning is about discovering who you, as a business, are. Discovering your identity, not inventing a new one. In the Internet age, positioning should help a brand become what it is, not something it is not.

And if you want to know what that thing is, there's an easy way to find out. Shut up and listen. Listen to what your market says you are.

They decide now

So if the market's view of you is not to your liking, think long and hard before you assume they're wrong. That they're a bunch of deaf, dumb and blind dunderheads who don't understand the inner you.

If you don't like what you're hearing, then the branding and marketing task is not to change the market's idea of who you are, but actually to change who you are.

That's because the real power and potential of the Internet is not technology. It's not a message delivery system. It's not banner ads or click-throughs.

It's about empowerment

It's like the invention of the automobile. It changed the world because it empowered individuals. For the first time, people could go wherever they wanted to go, whenever they wanted to go there, however they wanted to go there.

Because of its unique interactive quality, the Internet lets us do the same thing with information and communications and brand experience. And most importantly, with relationships.

It's about them

It invites your individual, unique and diverse customers and prospects in to talk, to laugh with each other and to learn from each other. Connected together, they reclaim their voice in the market. But this time with more reach and wider influence than ever before.

In order to do that your brand must be real. It must deliver what your customers are looking for in the way they're looking for it. Your brand must be more about them and their perceptions of the world than it is about you.

It's about being real

To be successful in this new environment, your brand is going to have to be customer-centric enough and real enough to empower your customers and prospects. Help them do what they need to do faster, better, cheaper or more effectively. Empower them with tools that make them better at their jobs. Make their professional lives more compelling or just more fun. Which in turn means you'll have to empower your customers around your brand in all media.

Check it out. Because Pandora's box has been opened, my friend.

And it's not about sales pitches anymore. It's about two-way conversations. It's not about sending messages. It's about listening and understanding and responding to people's needs. It's not about selling a market. It's about becoming part of the community. It's all about making your contribution in your brand's unique voice to make the community's job easier.

Creating interactivity

Design messages and information for customer/prospect interactivity, not technology. Because no matter what structure you develop for delivering information interactively, you're going to have to engage your customers' and prospects' imaginations.

You don't think so?

Then the next time you have several hundred press releases to share with business prospects, go ahead; just shovel them onto the World Wide Web.

And watch as the whole worldwide world yawns, world wide.

You'd do better to rewrite this stuff. Interactivate it, instead of "repurposing" it.

And then dish it up using a creative concept that encourages people to come on in and browse awhile. One that promises timely, fresh information, implies an audience benefit and gives a clue that this is not yet another example of corporate shovelware. One that talks about your prospects' business—not yours.

It's about relevant originality, not irrelevant metaphors

But whatever your approach, you'll need to employ a little artistry.

Between the techno-dorks, the IS departments and the Web developers with their irrelevant games and omnipresent analogies, the flow of truly inspired interactive creativity makes Strom Thurmond's urethra look like Splash Mountain.

So before Wes the Webmaster from DigiWorld begins to construct that virtual refrigerator, virtual information cafe or other clever but virtually irrelevant interactive metaphor, ask yourself a few crucial questions:

- Does this creative brainstorm hold intrinsic interest to your prospects' needs and business problems in and of itself? Or is it as self-serving as an Ikea store?
- Does it say anything about your business? And does it say it from your audience's point of view? Based on what's important to them (not you)? Or is it just one big kiss on the corporate butt?
- Can you own it? Is it firmly linked to you and your customers' and prospects' needs and what you're all about? Or could it just as well apply to Larry's Gasket City?

- Does it provide value to your audience? Does it give them usable information that can help them make better decisions? Or is it just cyberhype? Another one of those rhinestones on the jumpsuit of mediocrity that catches everyone's eye and makes us think, "Hey, maybe the Spice Girls don't suck."
- Or is it all just another insipid interactive convention to throw against the old cyberbarn? Splaaaaat.

The truth is that creating interactivity is different than designing ads or art-directing TV spots or conceiving a literature system. Way different. But it doesn't necessarily require metaphors to drive interactivity.

Get your priorities straight

Relevant, compelling information that empowers customers and prospects can do that. Without any virtual cafes or castles.

All you have to do is get your priorities straight.

1. Focus first on designing the place, not the graphic design of the place.
2. First design the:
 - Interactions
 - Functionality tools
 - Experience
 - Integration

3. Then design the look of the place.

Creating interactivity is all about perspective and point of view. Concepts, design and structure emerge from seeing things through the eyes of your customers and prospects and the lens of interactivity.

Voice shift

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 drone coming from most b-to-b companies around the world.

Old-world belching weasels

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.

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

What belching weasels smell like

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 hierarchies that are more top-heavy than Anna Nicole Smith 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 good 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, belching weasels smell like all the stuff that Web-empowered, networked customers and prospects can see through in an instant because technology has enabled them to know more than you do, faster than you do. Especially about their choices.

Check the Net

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

In contrast, this new voice offers people the pure sound of the human voice, not 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, unlike the packaged corporate messages aimed at presenting what we could generously call the best-case scenario.

Survival of the humanist

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 and legal machinations.

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, 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.

Dialogue communications: Listening, understanding and responding

Use interactivity to develop dialogue with customers and prospects, rather than simply showcasing your products and services in a zillion self-serving ways.

A little honesty, please

Let's be brutally frank. That's always fun and appreciated.

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.

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

Repetitious, interruptive, self-obsessed messages about your products as opposed to customer problems are about as popular as Marla Maples at a benefit screening of "The 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, mega-shifts in practically all market dynamics are redefining the game.

In fact, business marketing is being altered more dramatically than John Popper's cummerbund.

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

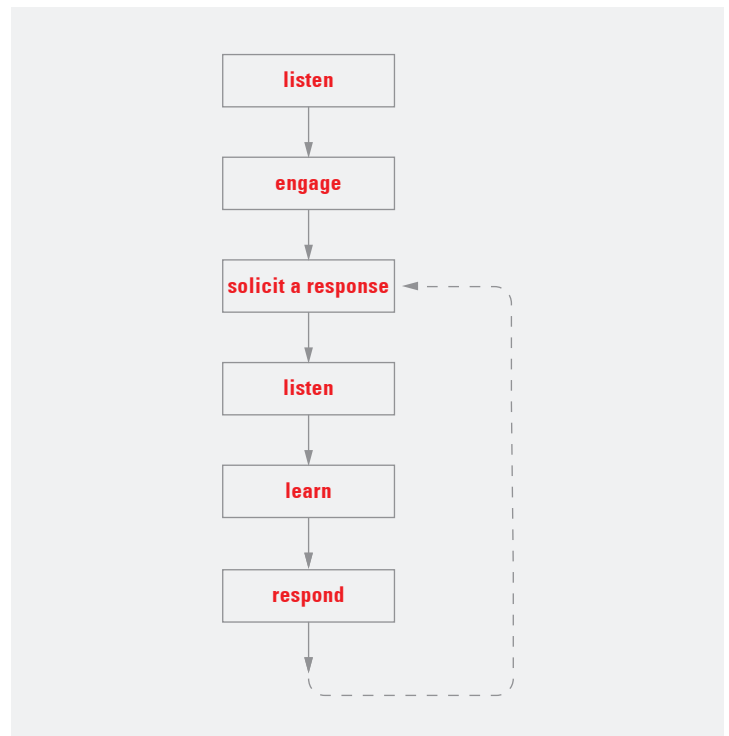
Listening, understanding and responding to customers' and prospects' information and value offering needs is the means by which business marketers will establish their value positions with customers in this new market order.

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 will grow so large in this new paradigm, it'll make the Grand Canyon look like the space between Japanese rail commuters.

What's dialogue communication and why is it important

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



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 initiate communication so that you understand what's relevant to them and how they'd like to be communicated with. That's the shut up part. Listen before you initiate.

In our experience, this initial listening is not difficult to do. You ask (through research, Web surveys and other means). 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.

Personal experience 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" kinds of messages have conventionally been called brand messages. Of course, we don't believe you can separate brand messages from any other kind of message, because 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.

Personalized or not

At this stage of the dialogue, engagement messages don't have to be personalized.

But 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 ask them questions, get their opinions, involve them in your products through 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 imbedded 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 acts, asks a question, answers a question, asks for more information or responds to your engaging solicitation, the hard part begins.

Because 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.

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.

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 requirements.

Requirement one: 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. 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 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.

Requirement two: Access

An essential aspect of dialogue communications is making it easy for customers and prospects to contact your company at any time, 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 relationship.

Easy accessibility, particularly at the time when a buying or use decision is being made or when there's a problem or need for information, is an added value to customers and prospects.

Requirement three: Human attention

Merely providing customers with an 800 number, Web address or email contact so they can easily contact the company 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.

Requirement four: 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.

Requirement five: Brand reinforcement

If you have the impression that a dialogue with a customer or prospect 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 have 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 customers and prospects want them to occur. Because they're in control.

That means two things. Dialogues need to be reinforced. And conversations should revolve around your customers and prospects, and their relationship to the brand.

The brand's the thing

The brand 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 awareness- and familiarity-building communications (some people call it brand communications, we don't) is its ability to reinforce relationships with people who have already bought your product/service offering. In fact, some studies have shown that in many cases, the majority of ad readers are current customers.

Reinforcement of brand image and promises as well as purchase decisions should be part of your dialogue strategy. It reduces "buyer remorse" and ties both customers and prospects closer to the brand to initiate dialogue.

Architecting your information

There's a school of thought among some business marketers and communicators that only two things are required to get your message across. Tell people what to think about your company's offering. Tell them with frequency. Over and over and over again.

Got news for you, Bucky

In this age of shifting communications paradigms, this kind of thinking is the intellectual equivalent of Cheez-Whiz.

The Cheez-Whiz dynamic will fool you into ignoring the truth about communicating in a new world where customers and prospects now exercise complete control over information.

And unfortunately, the truth is that your customers and prospects won't stand for being told what they should believe. They'll decide for themselves. Because they now control all the access to all the information they need to make their own decisions.

Your incessant interruptions and repetition only makes things worse. If they're not ready for your informational revelations or already interested in what you have to say, your constant yammering won't make much difference.

So stop your yammering

Because they decide when they want information. And how much they want. And when, where and how they want it delivered to them.

Yet companies keep yammering on. To the extent that there is so much marketing noise out there that brand messages aren't just getting lost, they're being disintegrated.

Entering this new age, the issue for business communicators is no longer providing useful information. It's helping audiences overcome the sheer volume of information so they can find meaning in yours.

Overcoming your information

It is no longer about serving up all the info you can. It's now about helping customers and prospects separate the wheat from all the corporate chaff. The important from the mundane. The overriding issues from the detailed support.

Things have gotten so bad that an Institute for the Future study says that when the average white-collar worker faces the average two hundred-message day, 71 percent of them feel stressed by the amount of information they receive. Sixty percent of them feel overwhelmed.

A different approach

Under those conditions, it's not going to do you much good to dump all your information on these stressed out, overwhelmed business buyers. That is, if you want them to retain any of it.

What's needed in this new paradigm, in our opinion, is information architecture. Setting things up so that your customers and prospects can find the information they need and want, focus their attention on it and come to their own conclusion.

Of course, if you architect it right, they'll come to your conclusion.

Introducing conclusion architecture

For that reason, we consider information architecture to have two interrelated parts. One part includes organizing information so people can find and act on the most relevant and compelling to them. The other is presenting that information in ways that people can and will pay attention to the key parts of it.

As Herbert Simon, a Nobel prize-winning economist puts it, "What information consumes is rather obvious: It consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention."

Structure and attention

Attention is different than awareness. Attention is harder to get. It's like trying to shoehorn Pavarotti into a wetsuit. It takes a lot of effort. But the result is quite memorable.

To us, attention means focused mental engagement on a specific piece of information.

So while a whole bunch of stuff may come into our awareness, we only attend to a particular one and let the rest pass through. Then we decide whether to act on that piece or not. That's attention.

So awareness comes before attention. But it only becomes attention when information reaches a threshold of meaning in our brains and spurs the potential for action.

'Cause it's a messy world

Sure, you can throw oodles of information into your customers' and prospects' awareness. But that's precisely the problem. It's all stacking up higher than the dirty dishes at Louie Anderson's house.

Nonetheless, everyone is still throwing all the information they can at audiences' minds and expecting it to stick. Like huge information cow pies splatting against a barn door.

In fact, there's so much throwing and so little sticking going on out there that messages, brand promises and brands themselves are being fragmented to the point of extinction.

In this new-paradigm world, awareness is too vague and general. It doesn't catalyze any action anymore.

On the other hand, attention is targeted and specific. It gets people moving.

So information architecture to us is the melding of both these disciplines. It's both the organization and presentation of messages to focus your audience on specific information that initiates attention and then makes it easy to drill down for more and deeper understanding.

Think of it as ergonomics for your aching communications

Through information architecture you can focus attention by identifying ways information naturally clusters and organizes itself. You can align those natural patterns with the user's unique needs, expectations, use patterns and self-interest.

Information architecture is designing for maximum functionality. From a single perspective—the user's.

Whether you're producing a Web site, a brochure system or a multimedia integrated communications program, when you design for attention, usability and clarity, you increase its communications value. And ultimately the return on your marketing investment.

What gets attention

It doesn't matter how on-target your brand messages are. If you can't get and sustain your customers' and prospects' attention, they'll cut you off more frequently than 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.

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

This is especially true in business communications. All that matter are 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.

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.

Information that gets attention



What keeps attention

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

Hey, they don't have time for your message, Skippy. They just want to get home in time to watch Charlene Tilton's salute to porcelain clowns on QVC.

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-getting experiences to structure the flow of attention over time.

Here are some structures that we use to architect information for long-term attention.

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 shifting communications is that they typically require a high level of attention. A level that is becoming more unrealistic to expect from audiences all the time.

Nonlinear structures such as hypertext Web sites, catalog and scannable magazine 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 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 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.

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 than other kinds of literature.

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. 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 messages among different media increase overall attention to key messages and brand images.

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.

The information age has visited a terrible plague on business communicators. Information. Way too much information.

In fact, there's so much information and so little time to process it, that we can no longer take it all in. We've become more desensitized to it than Rush Limbaugh's butt after an twelve-hour bus ride.

Info up the wazoo

We're overrun with information. And it's getting in the way of our communications.

Communications bandwidth is no longer a problem. Human bandwidth is. The software magnates promised to put "information at our fingertips." Now we've got it. In vast quantities.

But no one will be informed by it or learn from it or act on it unless they pay attention to the important parts of it.

Here are six guideposts that we've learned along the way that can help you organize information for easier use and present it in a way that directs your audience's attention.

Guidepost one: Get empathetic

Whether you like it or not, mass culture and some major paradigm shifts have resulted in an inordinate desire for individual attention out there in businessland. Which is a nice way to say we have an almost unhealthy preoccupation with our own self-interest.

It's getting so bad we can't even carry on a decent conversation anymore because people only want to talk about themselves.

In fact, it now takes only one narcissist to change a light bulb. He simply holds the bulb and waits for the world to revolve around him. The question isn't whether we like this situation or not. We're in it. The question is how can you take advantage of this very human trait.

It's all about me again

If you want someone to pay attention to your information, that information has to be about that person. The theme pretty much has to be:

- What's in it for me?
- How does this information tell me what I need to know?
- How is it tailored to my situation?

In the same way, structuring and presenting your information starts by taking a human-centric attitude about the way it's designed.

That means putting yourself in the user's shoes, understanding what they're up against, and what's important to them. And then translating that insight into a portrait of their unique information needs and emotional and cultural mindset.

Part of the empathy thing is realizing that individuals approach your information with different needs and carrying different functional and emotional baggage.

The organization for the advancement of know-it-alls and the terminally lost

Some people know exactly what they're looking for. They know what it's called and they know it exists.

Others don't quite know what they're trying to find. They're interested in browsing and serendipitously finding things they didn't know they were interested in.

As a result, you need to design information-heavy pieces with both kinds of people in mind. Which means building a structure that supports multiple modes of finding and paying attention to information.

For example, your Web site should probably include search engines and pretty comprehensive navigation for people who know what they want and want to get there quickly. But you should also include scads of cross-references, guided tours and other devices that allow people to discover information in a less linear, more browse-friendly mode.

Guidepost two: Look deeper than looks

The problem with design is its looks.

If you're not careful you can equate how well something works with how good it looks. That's why a lot of shoddy information design looks pretty cool. It might even look artistic. Or cutting edge.

But then try to use it. It's so useless, frustrating, menial and dull it makes working the corn dog concession at the Ringling Brothers Circus sideshow seem like a stint in the double-0 sector of Her Majesty's Secret Service.

Here's a hint

If your Web architecture forces people to play a virtual game of Whack-a-Mole just to find what they're looking for, design is not functioning as your friend, Sparky.

Not that we have anything against experimentalism or groovy decoration as a signifier of your cool corporate 'tude. But only if it fits your branding and identity strategy. And your audience. And their needs and concerns.

The point is that appropriate design can add attention, interest, understanding, ease-of-use, credibility and powerful positive emotion to your messages.

That's because it supports and reinforces the information. It is appropriate to the need. It aids the user.

The question is, what's appropriate?

If you're not careful, inappropriate design can mess up everything.

In fact, inappropriate design has single-handedly given the world brilliant innovations like Jell-O shots, referring to Wednesday as "Hump Day" and the cosmic nightmare that was Vanilla Ice.

So here are a few simple questions to ask yourself just to be sure you don't unleash an information design catastrophe of that monumental scale on the business world.

- Will Joe Customer, Jane Prospect and Jerry Distributor be able to find what they're looking for?
- Does the design improve comprehension of the messages or obscure them?
- Does the design and structure capture and maintain interest?
- Does the architecture include clear signposts and indexing schemes to tell people where they are and how to get where they want to go?
- Does content lump together in ways that make intuitive sense to the user?
- Does the physical structure of the piece encourage fast and easy browsing and drill-down?

Design is not veneer

Unless you take care of these kinds of number-one priorities, the look frankly won't matter much. Because the information won't be delivered in a way that's useful to the user.

Point is, quality information design doesn't have anything to do with what's fashionable. And decoration that gets in the way of the information, instead of pulling people into it, doesn't qualify as quality design. No matter how great it looks.

Our suggestion: First focus on making the information and the experience of finding and using the information better. Then and only then, make the stuff look better.

Guidepost three: Test

If you have the instincts, experience and empathy necessary for effective information design, you're way ahead of the game. Most companies make information design decisions by subjecting it to more second guessing than schizophrenic's week on "Jeopardy!"

But if you want to ensure you've designed for maximum usability, you might want to do some testing.

That means building prototypes of different layouts and architectures and putting them in front of people for a test drive.

It also means shutting up and listening to what they have to say and watching how they interact with the information. See how they relate to the messages in different forms and formats.

Play with my prototypes

The most effective usability tests ask people to find or use information delivered in your prototype. You simply pose a question or challenge to them and see what happens as they interact with the information to reach their goal.

The real-life observation thing is crucial. You're not taking a survey or administering a questionnaire where people have a tendency to tell you what they think you want to hear.

In this case you need to do an imitation of Jane Goodall watching the apes pick cooties off each other and eat them. Put on your pith helmet, shut up, be still, take notes and enjoy the free lunch.

And speaking of apes, beware that the right people are doing the nit- and cootie-picking.

You should always test with the real end-users of your information. Namely customers, channel partners, and prospects.

Our experience has shown that sampling cost accountants pulled from the cafeteria, husbands, wives or significant others as well as mullet-headed dudes from the mailroom doesn't help much. Unless they're your audience.

Guidepost four: Become a cartographer

Architecting in a single medium, even one that uses large amounts of complex and stratified information, like Web sites and literature systems, is one thing. Dealing with truly integrated brand and communications programs that use a variety of media require additional architecture disciplines.

When you're spanning multiple audiences, stages, vehicles and messages, you've got to have a systematic way of lining everything up.

We call the method that we've developed to do this "content mapping."

A content map is a great way to help make sense of things from the strategy, media, design and writing sides. But most importantly, it helps you make sense to your audience.

Map your content

In order to map a little content, you simply rank-order information to create message groups. Then you distribute them in the appropriate places.

Sounds simple. But it's not.

For example, a major bank wanted to seed informative product/service messages throughout a series of educational financial planning kits.

Using content mapping, we matrixed everything and ranked each product's suitability for the kinds of customers and their financial needs addressed in each part of each kit. The resulting content map helped us to target the right message to the right customer at the right life stage.

Integrate your map and map your integration

Content mapping also comes in handy when you're planning an integrated branding or communications program.

Let's say you're targeting multiple types of buyers, all with different buying criteria and therefore requiring different kinds of buying appeals from different tactical vehicles. With content mapping you can chart it all out. You can see each group's interest for each message against each delivery vehicle used for each stage of the purchase process.

For a leading maker of PC memory boards, this approach helped us seed the right buying messages to c-level IT executives, while sending whole other sets of messages to resellers and yet another set to actual buyers and specifiers.

You might want to consider this approach the next time you need to create a little order out of chaos.

Guidepost five: Consider a whole new scheme, Jean

Speaking of creating order, Richard Saul Wurman, conventional information architecture guru, claims there are five schemes to organize information. Kind of like there are only seven basic movie plots, right Richard?

Anyway, we think they're worth memorizing. Not necessarily to follow them by rote. (Sorry, Richard.) But to use them to brainstorm more innovative and elegant solutions for structuring your information.

Here they are. After you've committed them to memory we'll talk about our way of using them.

1. You can organize things according to their physical locations.
2. Chronological organization arranges ideas in order of when they happen.
3. Alphabetical organization (that old standby) is used in everything from book indexes to CD racks at Tower Records.
4. Organizing by category lumps things into exclusive piles determined by any number of criteria (male vs. female, R&B vs. techno vs. rock, red vs. blue vs. green, urban vs. rural).

5. Organizing by hierarchy can best be explained by looking at Russian nesting dolls or the organizational chart of a traditional ad agency or bank.

Storm your brain, Blaine

With this chart as your guide, you can take your current scheme and brainstorm what would happen if you changed the approach.

You can experiment freely with various schemes, trying out possibilities you might not have thought of before. Possibilities that can lead to far more attention-getting, useful and usable ways through the information.

For example, technology literature systems are conventionally organized by product/service families. This approach reflects the tech companies' siloed corporate structures but often has no value or meaning to their customers or prospects. In fact, it can make things more confusing and harder to find for users because it's not intuitive to the way they view things.

Try chronology, Ollie

For one client we developed a chronological approach instead. This scheme aligned and grouped the client's diverse value offerings against the various life stages experienced by their customers. In this way we were able to create specific value offerings for each stage of the customer's evolving business.

Originally brainstormed and thought up as a way to organize a literature system, this scheme actually drove the structure of the company's larger sales and marketing organization.

So if you're chewing up pencils trying to come up with the best way to organize your information in this new age of paradigm shifts, we have a suggestion:

Swap out your traditional "that's the way we've always done it" approaches. Try some less conventional ones. You might find a breakthrough idea in there somewhere.

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. 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 books is just one way we invite you to learn about how to cultivate the power of change. Our website (www.mobium.com) is another. And a call to our offices is yet another. So join the revolution. And start taking advantage of change. Before change takes advantage of you.



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