

Less is more

Geoff Dodds takes a slightly tongue-in-cheek look at how this mantra can benefit branding, marketing, selling and life in general.

This article originally appeared in *PM* magazine. For further details go to www.pmforglobal.com

Did you catch the last ever episode of *Foyle's War* a few weeks ago? Foyle's driver, Sam, who is expecting a baby, is walking through a cemetery with Foyle. She asks Foyle (gushingly) if he would consider being a godfather. He replies with one word "Honoured". She is effusive in thanking him for being so kind. He replies with another word "Pleasure". With these two well chosen words the series ends.

I was struck at the time by how appropriate an ending it was. Foyle, played by the craftsman Michael Kitchen, is a master of understatement. A quality frequently associated with the English and one that is, rather ironically, an endearing and powerful differentiator.

Think Bond, Beckham, John Lewis, Stuart Lancaster, Huw Edwards (well, not quite English...). In a sea of hyperbole, the understated stands out.

And along with understatement come brevity, simplicity and clarity, three characteristics in short supply in our over-communicated world.

Tell me more...

I suppose that working in branding for so long has made me a little obsessive about these qualities, so forgive me if I get too excited about them and go on for too long. By rights, this article should end here....

I've discovered that novelists tend to fall into one camp or the other. I almost lost the will to live recently when reading *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt. Great book in so many ways but where was it going in the middle? And surely it could have been half the length without losing any meaning?

By contrast, following up with Ian McEwan's *Sweet Tooth* was a welcome



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relief and a lesson in elegant brevity. *War and Peace* is still on the to do list...

The idea behind Twitter's 140 characters is brilliant. It's just such a shame that it has become an outlet for so much inconsequential drivel and that its users don't stop after one pithy tweet.

Social media is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it provides a valuable channel for free communication to those who are interested. On the other, it magnifies verbosity and creates even more noise.

Verbal and visual: Of course, noise isn't just verbal or written. We are assaulted daily by visual noise. Much of which can be categorised as 'graphic pollution'. In this context, simple, elegant, understated design is a source of joy. Think Apple, Nike, Audi.

There is an entertaining video on YouTube of an Apple product being re-designed in the style of Microsoft. Just Google 'Microsoft re-designs the iPod packaging'. It really demonstrates how easy it is to destroy clarity.

Losing the meaning: On the other hand, it's equally easy to destroy the meaning and emotion of something by being brutally brief.

This is an extract from a report by a well-known firm of management consult-

ants sent to the chairman of the London Symphony Orchestra.

Re Schubert's Symphony No.8 in B Minor

After attending a rehearsal of this work, we make the following observations:

- 1 We note that the 12 first violins were playing identical notes, as were the second violins. Three violins in each section, suitably amplified, would seem to us to be adequate.*
- 2 Much unnecessary labour is involved in the number of demisemiquavers in this work. We suggest that many of these could be rounded up to the nearest semiquaver, thus saving practice time for the individual player and rehearsal time for the ensemble. The simplification would also permit more use of trainee players, with only marginal loss of precision.*
- 3 We could find no productivity value in string passages being repeated by the horns; all tutti repeats could also be eliminated without any reduction in efficiency.*
- 4 In so labour-intensive an undertaking as a symphony, we regard the long oboe tacet passages to be extremely wasteful. The notes this instrument is called upon to play could, subject to a satisfactory demarcation conference with the Musician's Union, be shared out equitably amongst the other instruments.*

Conclusion: if the above recommendations are implemented, the piece under consideration could be played through in less than half an hour, with concomitant savings in overtime, lighting, heating, wear and tear on the instruments and hall rental fees. Also, had the composer been aware of modern, cost-effective procedures, he might well have finished the work.



Tell me how...

In the world of branding, understatement can be very powerful and brevity is much prized. Done well, they communicate with simplicity, clarity and elegance. Executed quickly and badly, they can lead to superficial, 'shouty' marketing speak.

The difficulty with brevity, simplicity and clarity is that they take time. There is much truth in Churchill's statement, "I'm sorry I wrote you such a long letter, I didn't have time to write a short one".

The Pyramid Principle: Some years ago, Barbara Minto wrote her seminal text *The Pyramid Principle*. In it, she demonstrated how to construct a clear, convincing and robust argument, with unassailable logic. The application of relentless structure and discipline produces a 'messaging hierarchy' that is razor sharp and indestructible.

As you can imagine, mastering her system requires some application and considerable practice. But it's worth it. The only problem is that the book itself is really hard work. I believe there is now a 17-page version, which is not only a great relief, but also probably a demonstration of her principle in practice.

'Brutal simplicity of thought': M&C Saatchi have taken this concept to heart with their 'Brutal simplicity of thought'. This is both their approach to great communication and the title of a book, published by Ebury Press – a good (short) read. In introducing the idea, they say, "You will need a deep distaste for waffle, vagueness, platitudes and flim flam – a strong preference to get to the point. Your mind will become a threshing machine, sorting the intellectual wheat from the chaff."

They go on to explore multiple examples of where simplicity has changed the world, including a quote from Picasso: "It took me a whole lifetime to learn to draw like a child".

TED talks: This series is another great example of communicating

in a limited time frame with outstanding impact. The restriction is that each talk or presentation must be delivered in 18 minutes, no more. This restriction is based on years of experience of how long an audience is capable of concentrating.

The TED talk rules make the point that shorter talks are not necessarily lesser talks, as evidenced by a quite entertaining five minute talk by Joe Smith on 'How to use a paper towel'.

On the same tack, some years ago, I attended a course on communications. At the beginning of the course, we were all asked to make a presentation in 20 minutes on a topic of our choice. By the end of the course, we had to make the same presentation in two minutes. We all agreed that the two minute versions were every bit as informative and far more inspiring.

The power of silence: Another aspect of brevity and understatement is silence. Most people are attracted by the sound of their own voice. In that context, the ability to allow silence to happen is precious indeed. The well-aimed question followed by silence can be so much more powerful than a series of statements.

Most sales people are inclined to over-talk. Those who use questions and silence are likely to have much more success.

And when it does come to presenting yourself or your organisation, it's a good idea to have in mind a pithy 'elevator pitch' that is intriguing enough to elicit further questions, but not so much that it is a turn off. I have had great success with helping people write an elevator pitch in no more than 20 words, using the following simple structure: "I specialise

in helping XXX to YYY by ZZZ".

My own version as an example: "I specialise in helping service organisations compete more effectively by clarifying their brand". Rather more interesting than "I'm a corporate brand consultant", even if it is still low down on the Richter scale of interest.

Permission to speak?

Another principle I have found helpful in thinking about communication is to begin by asking the question "Do I have permission to speak?". In other words, is the recipient of my communication in need of it and, having received it, will they have experienced value for their time (an increasingly relevant metric)?

To put it another way, two questions often posed in an advertising brief are:

- What is the need we are addressing?
- What do we expect the audience to do as a result of our communication?

This turns communication from push to pull.

Boil it down...

So, I've broken all my own rules and waffled on for far too long. Time to practise what I'm preaching. Here are my top 10 principles for brevity, simplicity and clarity. Well here are my top 10:

- 1 Start by asking "Do I have permission to speak?" ("what value will this give the audience?")
 - 2 Restrict your space or time (one page/20 words/five minutes...)
 - 3 Do it when you're fresh (a tired brain can't do succinct)
 - 4 Focus (get in the flow, don't allow distractions, take a break when needed)
 - 5 Use plain English (no hyperbole, jargon, repetition)
 - 6 Be structured and disciplined
 - 7 Iterate (be prepared for it to take time)
 - 8 Test on others (meaning, language, impact)
 - 9 Be relentless – brief, simple, clear
- Above all No 10 – keep the faith - believe that "Less is more".

PS you could have saved a lot of time by just reading the last paragraph...



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