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The Tree of So-So? Or the Forest of Effective.

A better path for your next communication problem.

by JANE PELLICCIOTTO

Few businesses these days can afford to throw dollars at any communications unless they see some value—value being the relationship between cost paid and results achieved. Nonprofits especially can't afford to, with budgets and staff strained as they are. Why then do so many organizations approach projects in ways that hinder their ability to be effective?

Designers often get requests in this form: A brochure (or annual report, poster, website) is needed, the copy for which might already be written, perhaps long ago, maybe by committee. The driver is a program or initiative to promote or a requirement to fulfill.

The designer asks (among other questions):

• What is the purpose of the project (the main goal, the hoped-for result, the call to action)?

• Who is it for?

• What is the budget?

But the answers are not specific enough to effectively:

• Change a behavior

• Inspire an action

• Challenge an opinion

• Humor a reader

• Teach a concept

• Offer a solution

• Provide education that is sought after by the reader

A communication piece should have at least one of these goals. Otherwise, the designer becomes an ineffective but costly decorator. Even *with* goals like these, there is still the work of how to communicate changing a behavior, for example. But many projects start without specific goals, which would imply unlimited budgets to test all possible solutions. Costs are often viewed narrowly as the *design fee*, followed by printing, but less often as avoidable extra charges, how client staff time is used, or an ineffective communication piece.

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The Tree of So-So *continued*

Large companies with deep pockets can study customer behavior, test approaches and move on to a different solution if that one didn't work. But nonprofits must be savvier than many businesses, because the same dollar has to work harder. It doesn't have to take much effort to be effective though, and designers can and should help in that process.

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Individuals and organizations alike favor day-to-day tasks over clarifying purpose and goals. We all do it! The harder, more thoughtful issues go unaddressed. We have a loose grasp of goals but they are not top of mind, posted on a wall, always in sight. Or else they are too multifaceted to do us much good, like the person who strives to be liked by all but has no real friends.

But even organizations that do have clear a who, what, and why (in general) don't always address how an individual project fits into the larger scheme.

Why is this a problem?

Because limited funds, combined with limited attention spans of audiences, means that too many dollars are wasted, often telling the wrong story to the wrong people. It's a little like being at a cocktail party and believing your every word merits rapt attention. It's true that there is always someone willing to listen (like the drunk guy in the corner). And certain information must be published. But it's also true that we ignore much of what comes across our desks because it is not compelling, actionable or useful enough.

It is difficult to see the forest for the trees. The forest being:

• **Who really cares.** Who are they *really*, and how do you make sure they're listening? Even if you have to address the sort-of-cares people, you can reach the really-cares in ways you might not have considered. Not all moms or citizens or community organizers are alike.

• **What you want to accomplish.** Beyond giving readers the information *you* think is important, what do you want the piece *to do*, or more importantly, what does the reader *want to know*? Often what is presented and what is desired by the viewer are in direct conflict with one another.

• **What form it takes.** Do you have more clarity on the form you want the piece to take than the message to be delivered? Form follows function. Figure out the big picture and let the form flow from there, rather than the reverse.

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The Tree of So-So *continued*

Keep the forest alive.

- **Build a relationship with your creative person/firm.** It's tempting to skip around but there are costs every time you hire a new creative. Your consultant carries your organizational *who, what and why* into each project. The trust and familiarity you've built allows the designer to challenge you towards effective solutions, instead of being a yes person.

- **Define who and why.** Without a specific picture of *who* (what they care about, what they read, what they fear), the content and design will be too generic to have much effect. "Women" is not a who. Women, 30–50, self-employed, who shop at farmers markets and want health insurance for all is a *who*. The designer can design for her. The writer can write for her. As to the why: that list at the top is a great place to start. Check your content and assumptions against it.

- **Focus less on the form and more on the message.** The form (medium) will reveal itself. It might be two pieces instead of one. It might be half online, half offline. The message might be carried by a pigeon, whispered into people's ears or worn on a tee shirt. The *vehicle* is only important as the best mode of message delivery. Many organizations start with mode, often forgetting message altogether.

- **Keep your already-written content flexible so the designer can shape words for better impact.** Words look very different in manuscript form than they do in designed form. You miss opportunities to tell your story in the best way if the content is too rigid. For example, if a report requires technical information but the intended audience is not technical, you must be open to defining terms in a user-friendly way, or creating two separate pieces, or rewriting copy to match your newly defined audience. Your audience will love you!

- **Tackle organizational issues that prevent great work**—difficult people, cumbersome processes, approval by committee, alienating jargon, etc. It's hard to change entrenched practices but most likely no one will lose their job trying! The good results will be obvious and any boat rocking you did will be overlooked.

- **Focus on benefits, less on features.** Every successful communication piece is persuasive in some way. To be persuasive a piece should focus on *benefits* at least as much as, if not more than, it does on *features*. Features are flat; benefits go deep. The challenge in communicating *benefits* is that it often requires letting go of information you hold dear.

Your organization exists for a reason—to affect positive change in people or for the planet. Let your message travel the path of most effectiveness.