

Don't Mind the Gaps

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it's what you leave out
that counts

Creating and managing
brand value™

Interbrand

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When it comes to stories, it's what you leave out that counts

By Paola Norambuena and Charles Pringle

After Twitter crashed the social media scene at the South By Southwest Festival in 2007, one thing that kept getting everyone's attention – besides celebrities sharing their every thought every minute of the day – was the 140-character limit. Keep it short, the developers were saying. How sweet is up to you.

Short has always been a golden quality when it comes to written communication. (Entertainment, like the novel, is a different beast altogether.) And in the digital age, it has become only more so. With the barrage of electronic messages fired at us every day, it's simply beyond human capacity to read everything in depth, and still have time to brush your teeth.

Cognitive science, the study of how people process information, pops up frequently in trending lists today, but it doesn't take a researcher to make some well-founded assumptions on how people absorb what they need and want to know.

While Twitter codified brevity with its character limit, copywriters have long been exploring minimalism and have discovered a few things about the human attention span all on their own.

People think fast

When many of us learn to write, we're told about the importance of each letter in a word and each word in a sentence. But what

if you leave out a letter or a word and no one notices? Or if they do notice, what if they don't care because they still understand?

The thing is that we're all conditioned to do this. Our brains often scan text rather than actually reading it, looking for the important ideas and skipping the stuff that isn't, like articles, conjunctions, and other connective words.

Since we're treated like consumers essentially from the moment we're born, our brains are well trained to filter out the fluff by the time we have any buying power. With so many companies trying to convince us to want and to buy their products, we become very adept at navigating the content of their messages swiftly.

People are smart

Many brands, nonetheless, adhere to the rules learned in composition class.

- 1) Assume the reader doesn't know anything.
- 2) Always establish context to give them all the information they need.

The reality, though, is that consumers know a lot. They don't need to be told everything, and that you're speaking to them in the first place is most of the context they need. In fact, a surefire way to miss that all-important connection with the consumer is to give them too much information.

For example, let's say you're a bank and you want to get the word out about the 6% APR you're offering on your savings account. Then why not make your message about the 6% APR? If your message is numbers, let your words play along and help people only get the emotional benefit that comes with your numbers.

Don't shy away from what counts, simply anchor it smoothly with a benefit, and let the small print – or the actual experience – provide the details. There is no need for the clutter of context. The consumer knows you're a bank and that's all the stage setting they need.

Of course, this takes confidence. The brand has to be sure that the message will be understood and that the recipient will know who sent it.

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For some of the most well-known brands, a logo – on its own – is more than sufficient messaging, and marketing campaigns sometimes don't mention the product or the company at all: They know the consumer will fill in the gaps on their own and link the message to the brand.

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Certainly not every brand can get away with this sort of strategy nor should they even attempt it. Nike can launch a logo-only campaign because of year after year of consistent messaging and top-shelf brand experiences.

Even if your brand isn't a consumer juggernaut, your messaging may benefit from a focused, less-is-more approach. Besides making it easier on the reader, you are, ultimately, paying them a big compliment, one that won't necessarily go unnoticed. You're recognizing their brand intelligence rather than insisting on holding their hand every time they cross the street.

Executed well over time, your economy of information could become as recognizable as your logo, and because you talk to people like they're equals, they're much more likely to become your customers.

People are busy

It goes without saying that time is a commodity that no one has enough of. There are so many demands for our attention, one risks insanity trying to absorb everything that's thrown at us. As a marketer, when you keep a laser-like focus on what people want to know, you're providing a courtesy and showing respect for their time, which is something everyone deeply appreciates, even if they are mostly unaware of it.

Time deprivation is not a novel condition, and online content – from the most prestigious websites to the most obscure blogs – is largely structured by condensing the most essential or the lead information into bite-sized chunks, usually as a preview of the expanded content.

This gives people something they crave and increasingly insist upon, especially from their brands: choice, the choice to pursue additional content or to move on to the next item.

Of course, this puts extra pressure on the copywriter to put together a sharp hook that'll convince the cursor to visit the hyperlink. But just like a great invitation is certain to get an RSVP, a great preview will get clicks.

And if the content is good, if it looks at the world from the reader's perspective and keeps the important things front and center, they'll stay for a while. They will be quite content to spend some of their valuable time with your brand.

People push back

Given time, people will eventually push back, especially when it comes to the marketplace. For example, take a successful consumer product like desktop computers: for a period of time, it appeared that there was one way they operated and one type of design.

Finally, after years of hulking big beige boxes, someone, we won't say who, asked, can we add a little color, style, and mobility?

Communication styles aren't any different. While Tweets and Facebook posts will continue to keep people's attention for wisps at a time, the longer form continues to make a comeback. It just has to be worth it.

Don't shy away from what counts... let the small print – or the actual experience – provide the details.

For as much as short-and-sweet is important, it has made story-telling that much more delicious. Isn't it a thrill to be able to sit and take in a well-told tale? Isn't it decadent to have some time to read and get into the details?

So behind every short post, think about your story. And tell it well. Think about it visually, not just verbally.

After all, people like to read. You just have to prove they've got time to do it. ■



Paola Norambuena

Paola Norambuena is Interbrand's Executive Director of Verbal Identity, North America. She is passionate about language and believes it is a powerful tool that impacts behavior and helps brands create an emotional connection with customers, employees, and key stakeholders.

Combining her experience in communications, brand strategy, and ideation, Paola helps her clients harness the power of language in compelling new ways, through naming, voice, messaging, and creative writing—verbal identity strategies that help bring brands to life.



Charles Pringle

Charles Pringle is a writer and editor within Interbrand's Verbal Identity group. Beginning his career in book publishing, Charles has long believed that words are capable of great things when they are put in the right order.

Working closely with strategists, designers, creative directors, project managers and other writers, he develops carefully targeted, finely tuned verbal assets to help clients in a broad range of categories reach their brand objectives.

Paola Norambuena
Executive Director of Verbal Identity, North America
T: 212-798-7590
Paola.norambuena@interbrand.com