

Simplicity, Communications & Human Behavior: A Path to Reducing Complexity

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The path to simplicity is hard.

As communicators, we discuss with clients the importance of conveying simple messages that will break through the clutter of a complex world. We distill stories into press releases, headlines, or social posts that convey ideas we believe will resonate. And, we work to create clear and simple brands that help corporations, and ourselves, stand out in a crowded world.



We know that simple makes sense. Our experience underscores this. When messages are too complex they arrive with a thud and a scratching of the collective heads of audiences. What were you trying to say? Why should I care about this?

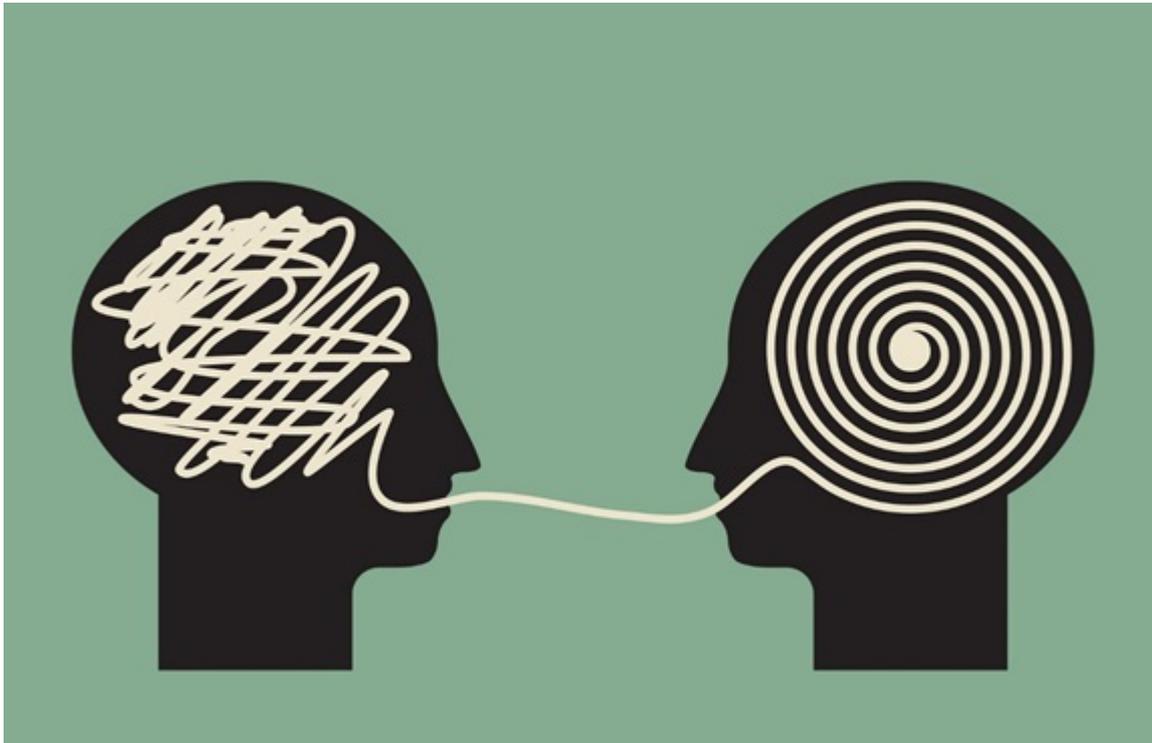
The challenge faced by communicators is to reduce complexity into simplicity. The idea of “keep it simple, stupid” (KISS) provides a guide to practice but doesn’t address: Why is simplicity so important?

A deeper understanding of human behavior, of how we process information and the world around us, provides a foundation for the path to simplicity that is more likely to resonate. When we go beneath the surface, we are more likely to go the extra mile to change behaviors to achieve it.

Why bother? In the same way data reveals the business benefits of diversity, research by Siegle+Gale, a global branding firm, shows 55% of consumers are willing to pay a premium for simplicity, and 64% are likely to be more loyal. At the recent Columbia Business School’s Center on Global Brand Leadership **Brite’19** marketing conference, Margaret Molloy, CMO, noted that brands may be leaving \$98 billion on the table if they don’t simplify.

The value of this research is that it highlights the financial benefits of simplicity and the reasons for working at it. A brand is the sum of communications about and perceptions of a company. We may not be able to evaluate the financial benefits of each press release, blog or social post, but the principle applies to every communication. Investing time to hone messages, documents and materials clearly has a payoff.

Let’s turn our attention to the behavioral underpinnings for simplicity. As a starting point we need to consider the volume of information we process as human beings. Here’s one way to think about it: As we look out on the world, imagine that a picture on a cellphone is 8 megabytes of information and a three-minute video is about one gigabyte of data. Then, add in the additional layers of meaning we apply to what we are seeing. The bottom line? We have to manage huge amounts of information.



Our brains use shortcuts to deal with this information overload, creating mental patterns that make the world around us easier to process. Language is the perfect example of how we reduce complexity – an individual tree is hugely complex, but the word “tree” turns it into a simple idea to share with others.

Creating simplicity is an imperative. We’ve all experienced the moment when our brains “hurt”, when we face complex challenges. Too much information or too many choices and our brains slow down – like an over-taxed computer – and we are forced to narrow our focus on what’s important.

The point here is that communicators are asking audiences to process information on top of everything else they have to deal with. The simpler the message the better chance an audience will find the capacity to process it.

And, there’s an additional dimension we need to think about: Audiences have to make choices or be overwhelmed. The harder the work required to process new information, the less likely they’ll make this investment. Research shows that even small hurdles may have an outsized impact on behaviors. But, if the

perceived value is high and benefits outweigh the effort, engagement is more likely the result.



When we think about communications in this context, the importance of simplicity, of brands that can be summed up in a few words and writing that is direct and clear come into sharp focus.

It also reminds us of why we need to start with the interests of audiences, rather than what we want to communicate. Ego often prevents us from seeing the world as others see it. Incentives may drive us to “sell” to make money. All too often both get in the way of our ability to articulate simple, audience-focused messages. (Read: [Tunnels & Funnels: Why We Make Bad Decisions & How We can Make Better Ones](#))

Understanding this is the key to navigating the path to simplicity and its rewards. It provides a lens to view our communications and what it takes to engage others.

In many respects, a focus on behavior reflects a return to the public relations industry’s roots, when it was viewed as an “applied social science”. In a digital world, transactional technology-driven communications tools and practices mean that it is easy to lose sight of the human drivers of the

communications process.

Communications is not about pushing out messages, but about two-way engagement. Seeking simplicity is about reducing barriers to communication and delivering value. By incorporating human behavior as an additional layer into our thinking about the value of simplicity, we are more likely to work harder to find it, and, realize its benefits.



About the Author: *Simon Erskine Locke is founder & CEO of CommunicationsMatch™. CommunicationsMatch offers communications & PR agency search, RFP, opinion survey tools and resources that help companies find, shortlist, and engage communications, digital marketing and branding agencies, consultants and freelancers by industry and communications expertise, location and size. Prior to founding CommunicationsMatch, Locke held senior corporate communications roles at Prudential Financial, Morgan Stanley, and Deutsche Bank, and founded communications consultancies.*

