

How financial paperwork can build your brand

Bank statements, proposals and call-centre scripts are the unsung heroes of financial marketing. **Irene Etzkorn**, Siegel & Gale, explains how to make them work for you

EVERY FINANCIAL SERVICES firm is concentrating on improving customer touchpoints – redesigning bank branches, adding free coin counters and, in the US at least, working on Sundays. Ironically, they could still have Sundays off if they had not overlooked a crucial category of touchpoints.

These unheralded touchpoints are both repetitive and important to customers, yet are often dismissed as paperwork. When viewed as branding's unsung heroes rather than as necessary evils, contracts, proposals, instructions, applications, correspondence, statements and call centre scripts take on new significance.

While not the driver of purchase intent, paperwork can be simplified and clarified to express brand attributes and given a new place of prominence in the company/customer relationship. With applications that are easy to complete, bills that are simple to understand and contracts that are written in plain language, you will not have to tell customers you are easy to do business with, they will experience it for themselves.

Finding a path through the maze

For companies who do recognise the importance of functional communications, the dilemma is where to begin. Mountains of forms, hundreds of variations, reams of legal requirements and intractable systems make the task seem daunting. Here are some tips for finding a path through the maze.

1. Look for patterns Create five to ten typical customer profiles and gather documents based on these customer scenarios. That way, you will keep focus on frequently-read documents yet cover a range of circumstances. Create a war room and pin up the documents in the order in which customers receive them. Typically, this will mean starting with sales illustrations and moving through applications, bills, account maintenance

forms, statements and correspondence. This organisation will help you to see both patterns and areas of disconnect from the customer's perspective.

2. Audience analysis The profile of your company's target customer will dictate what type of simplification is appropriate. Novice or less-educated customers may require extra education during the sales process and over time. Sophisticated audiences can also benefit through greater customisation of content, graphic depictions of complex topics and the refreshing breeze of plain language.

3. Seek input from diverse sources

The disciplines needed to create a clear, user-centred document often cross divisional lines within a company. It can be useful to assemble an interdisciplinary team to represent the various areas that will be affected by the document. Often, this means bringing together marketing, legal, systems and product development.

4. Bake the cake before you ice it

Long before writing begins, you need to determine what the content should be, how often and when the information should be disseminated, and what medi-

‘While not the driver of purchase intent, paperwork can be simplified and clarified to express brand attributes and given a new place of prominence in the company/customer relationship’

um would make the most sense based on your business objectives and audience needs. For example, a year-end investment statement will often be issued around the same time as tax-reporting documents. Although the documents may be generated by two different areas within a company, there is a common recipient who is likely to compare them and want to understand their differences.

5. Don't let the tail wag the dog

A compulsion to cover every circumstance obscures the real substance of a document for the majority of readers. If there is a diverse range of circumstances to be addressed, determine whether two versions of a document might be better. The tiered system of US Federal income tax forms is a good model. Taxpayers with simple tax situations can use a single-page form rather than the multi-page option, saving time and expense.

6. Consider real-world practicality

Sending a disclosure document that consists of numerous replacement paragraphs is impractical. People can rarely find the original document that is being amended and if they can, will find it unwieldy to do a line-by-line comparison. If you are sending a revised version, write a standalone, complete document.

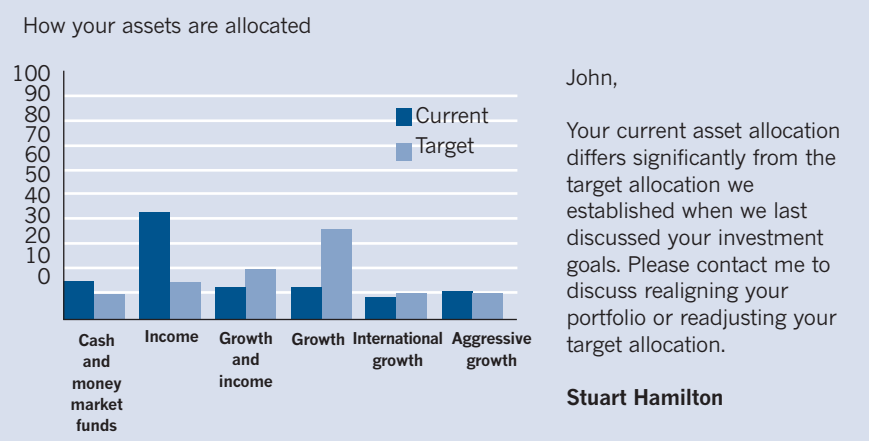
If the structure of a document is intuitive for the reader, it is more likely to be read and understood. Clear writing and good design are wasted if there is not a logical framework on which to hang them. This step is very often overlooked; zealous authors jump to write before they have categorised the information and considered a sequence that reflects the real-world context in which it will be used.

7. Anticipate circumstances of use

Many homeowners' insurance policies are presented with claims procedures at the end of the document. In reality, most people only consult their policies when they experience a loss. In that circum-

FIGURE 1

Customer touchpoint: how your assets are allocated



stance, they want to find claims information quickly.

Plain language writing

Three fundamental writing tips will help to simplify your message:

1. Eliminate jargon.
2. Use active verbs.
3. Write in shorter sentences.

In addition, make the abstract concrete. Financial and legal concepts are often unfamiliar and complex. Using examples and scenarios with specific amounts can make the unfamiliar accessible to the reader.

Similarly, remove conditional language wherever possible. Do not pose questions that immediately require the reader to leave the text in search of the answer. Too many sections that begin with 'if' are a telltale sign of trouble. 'If you have a golden platinum titanium account,' or 'if your average daily balance is XXX but not more than YYY,' stops the reader in their tracks.

Content should be customised to reflect the specific circumstance. Figure 1 shows an investment statement. This shows both the target allocation and current allocation for this specific customer and mentions that they are no longer aligned.

Unfamiliar terminology 'Annual Percentage Rate', 'Daily Periodic Rate', and 'Grace Period', are a few of the many terms which appear on credit card statements that are not well understood. Use plain language equivalents whenever possible. For example, the phrase, 'You will have a minimum of 25 days' is more simply put as 'You will have at least 25 days'. And instead of referring to a 'Grace Period' this can be simplified to 'The number of days you have to pay your purchases in full without triggering any finance charges' or 'If you didn't pay last month's balance in full by the beginning of the new billing cycle, finance charges will apply every day.'

2. Awkward sentence construction

A typical finance-charge summary box on a credit card statement reads: '2.99% APR (.00819% daily periodic rate) on purchases and advances until the first day of the billing cycle that includes the 6-month anniversary date of the opening of your account.' Without an example, this calculation remains abstract and confusing.

Calculations should be explained in the order in which they would be performed. The calculation cited above is not explained in the order in which you would figure it out. For example, the first piece of

information you need is the date you opened your account, then you can calculate the six-month anniversary, and so on.

1. Information design techniques

1. Alignment A fitting analogy is to think of each message or module of information as a flag (with the wind blowing from left to right). Do not have each flag flying from its own pole. The hierarchy and relationships of the modules are much easier to understand if there are fewer points of alignment. Placing multiple flags on fewer poles instills some order because there are fewer places for the eye to start.

Also, use adequate white space. White space makes a document less cluttered and forbidding. It also helps the reader locate specific information more easily.

2. Emphasis Every change in size, style, position, or alignment indicates a shift in emphasis and implies meaning, whether intended or not. Minimising these differences and strictly adhering to a manageable, planned hierarchy can help avoid the annoyance of over-emphasis.

3. Typography

Typography is a vast topic with many nuances to be considered. Here are just a few basics to consider:

- ▶ Select a typeface that is easy to read
- ▶ Try to limit type to no more than three sizes or weights per page
- ▶ Use bold or italic type for emphasis
- ▶ Avoid using only capital letters
- ▶ Choose a type size and line length that is comfortable to read
- ▶ Use flush left, ragged right margins for better readability.

Simplification principles

1. Primacy of user needs Keep an eye on the document's primary purpose because most documents serve a multitude of purposes, their primary purpose can be obscured. Regulatory disclosures, marketing messages, account data and informational content often vie for ▶

attention. This leaves the reader bemused or annoyed and there are significant costs associated with annoyed customers. Annoyed customers call customer service more often. They pay later. They don't expand their relationships. Annoyed customers even leave.

For example, the primary purpose of a bill is to confirm a transaction and make sure payment is made in a timely fashion. Customers not only understand that, they demand it. But with fewer and fewer personal interactions between service providers and customers, bills and statements are continuing to grow in importance as a customer touchpoint, and marketing to customers through bills and statements is therefore an increasingly common practice.

2. Balancing competing needs

► **Account Data vs. Marketing Information.** From the customer's point of view, the most important difference in a document is transactional or account information and marketing information. It is the difference between 'what I need to know' and 'what you would like me to know'. Customers are clear about which category they think is most important, but the business reality is that disclosure, account and marketing information need to share limited real estate.

► **Difference and parallelism** Customers understand there are multiple messages competing for space on a document. Clarity is achieved not simply by eliminating information (even if that were a viable option), but by minimising the apparent number of message categories, and making the differences between those categories and the hierarchy within each category more apparent. This creates chunks or layers of information that are more digestible and ultimately more useful.

Make the differences between transactional, marketing, payment, disclosure and processing information more apparent by making each category visually distinct and giving it an appropriate degree of emphasis.

► **Use Design to Signal Differences and Similarities** Design factors such as size, font, alignment, isolation and colour (both in terms of hue and relative value) impart visual cues quickly. Line quality in the logo or illustrations, tone of voice in text messages, grammatical style in

8 criteria for evaluating communications

- 1. Adherence to brand values** Is the tone and look of the information consistent with your brand attributes?
- 2. Customisation** Is content based on what you already know about the customer?
- 3. Structure and navigational ease** Is the purpose of the document readily apparent?
- 4. Educational value** Did you take the opportunity to anticipate unfamiliar concepts or terminology?
- 5. Loyalty support** Does the communication thank customers for their business or in some way reward them for extending their relationship with you?
- 6. Visual appeal** Does the document look inviting and in keeping with a company of X's stature?
- 7. Marketing potential** Does the communication seize the opportunity to cross-sell products in a meaningful, informed way?
- 8. Utility** Is the document well suited to its function?

descriptions and directions, even the repetition or elimination of certain data, give clues about the relationships of information on the document. Managing points of difference is the key to presenting dense information and multiple messages clearly.

Common, erroneous assumptions

1. Better customers deserve more detailed information Because providing more information and more analysis often costs companies more, they try to determine which segment of customers should receive more detail. Companies latch onto the idea of providing their most valuable customers with the most detail. However, this seemingly logical approach often backfires because individuals' appetite for information rarely correlates with how much money they have or how often they make purchases. Rather, an individual's penchant for detail is a personality trait. The only way

to determine it is to ask them how much information they want to receive and how often.

2. Readability formulas gauge ease of use Readability formulas measure number of words, number of syllables per word and other mechanistic factors and translate the result into a reading grade level. For the most part, they are worthless because they do not account for context, audience familiarity with the subject matter, or true comprehension. Text run backwards through a readability formula will get the same score as it does run logically. Don't fall into the trap of scoring your document to tout its ease of use.

3. All uppercase, large, bold type provides emphasis When a company or government regulatory authority wants to make sure a section will be read, they often put the text IN ALL UPPER-CASE LETTERS AND MAKE IT BOLD AND USE VERY LARGE PRINT.

Unfortunately, this practice usually backfires. Instead of drawing a customer to read it, the text becomes a dense, visual block that acts as a stop sign. Type size and weight must be determined in relation to other visual cues. Colour, placement and variation in type size are more likely to achieve the desired emphasis.

Evaluating communications

To ensure that documents are the best they can be, it is useful to evaluate them against several criteria, [see box](#).

Of course, consulting checklists will not replicate the information that can be gleaned by testing the communication with actual users. It is important to ask participants how they feel about a document: 'Is it easy to find the most important information?'; 'Is the overall appearance of the document in keeping with what you would expect from a company of X's stature?' Have them perform tasks that will reveal whether they actually understood the document: 'What is the total amount due?'; 'What is the due date for payment?' The distinction between perception and comprehension is important because people are often reluctant to confess their confusion. They view it as a personal failing rather than as a fault of the document. ■

ietzkorn@siegelgale.com