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Style Vs. Substance In The World Of Marketing



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Photo: GETTY

In 2013, a woman named Frances Quinn competed on *The Great British Bake Off*. Her regular job at the time was designing children's clothing, and being a designer, all of her bakes had some sort of concept or visual theme.

Unfortunately, in the beginning, some of her bakes suffered for it because, even though they looked beautiful, what they had in style they lacked in substance. In one episode, judge Paul Hollywood even concluded his evaluation of one of Frances's bakes by staring at her and simply stating, "Style over substance."

Unless you're working in an industry that is, by nature, creative (advertising, design, etc.), creative roles in the corporate world are few and far between. Marketing and communications is one area in which a creative person can really spread their wings. However, one of the pitfalls of being a creative person in the corporate world is falling into the corporate-speak habit of saying a lot without saying anything at all. Style over substance, indeed.

As marketing and communications professionals, we are the heralds of our firms, spreading the messages of why our firms have value to potential clients. Our jobs are to add meaning to the message. Empty words are like empty calories — at first glance, they look tasty and filling, but they ultimately leave you unsatisfied.

What Are We Saying, And To Whom Are We Saying It?

A commonly heard piece of advice is to “know your audience.” As the deliverers of messages, it’s important to remember where these messages are going and how they might be perceived. We want to provide easily digestible — but still delicious and satisfying — food for thought.

When we are targeted as potential customers, we want to know what we’re being offered. How many times have you watched the Super Bowl, laughed at an ad and then thought afterward, “OK, I have no idea what they were just trying to sell me”? Since we are the ones who do the offering, it’s our responsibility to make clear:

- What “the thing” is.
- Why “the thing” is important.
- How we can help with “the thing.”

Do We Hear Ourselves?

In *The Elements of Style*, William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White talk about avoiding fancy words in Reminder 14, one of my favorites: “There is nothing wrong, really, with any word — all are good, but some are better than others.”

Personally, I’m not fond of using fancy words, but as a marketing professional, I’ve often felt pressured to *like* using them. Some fancy words are fine, but they’re not always appropriate. We need to put ourselves in the shoes of the people who will hear the words. Will they understand the point we’re trying to get across? Or will they just hear fancy words?

One of my other favorite reminders is Reminder 16: to be clear. In it, Strunk and White remind us, “Clarity is not the prize in writing, nor is it always the principal mark of a good style ... But since writing is communication, clarity can only be a virtue.” While clarity and style are not the same things, they do go hand in hand. (This explains my affinity for the Oxford comma, but that’s a story for another day.)

A Feast For The Mind

Marketing messaging can be both informative and beautiful at the same time (“beauteous,” to use one of Strunk and White’s fancy words). In his book *Beautiful Evidence*, statistician and artist Edward Tufte wrote, “Evidence is evidence, whether words, numbers, images diagrams, still or moving. It is all information after all.” With that in mind, let us continue to do our jobs and deliver our messages with finesse.

Frances Quinn ultimately won her season of *The Great British Bake Off*, and one of the reasons it was so satisfying to watch was that we got to see her learn (more than any of the

other skilled bakers competing that season). She learned that you can have style and substance in equal measure, and that one doesn't have to suffer for the other.

As it is with baked goods, so is it with words and pictures. Substance and style together create a winning combination.

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