

A Diversity of Specificity: the cure for bland content

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The cure for the disease of bland content: specificity

Mature, successful companies tend to commission or create bland marketing content for their products. There are notable exceptions to this, but on the whole, the more mature the company, the blander the content.

Word Lions has some ideas about how mature companies can improve their content without getting in trouble with the legal department. But first, some background.

The two things

Recently I read a blog post entitled *The Two Things*. The idea is, “for every subject, there are really only two things you really need to know. Everything else is the application of those two things, or just not important.”

The two things about innovation

Here’s what a contributor to that blog post said are the two things about innovation:

- Innovation is inversely proportional to organizational strength.
- Organizational strength increases with time.

The two things about persuasive content

Here are the two things you really need to know about persuasive content:

- Readers must see themselves reflected in the content.
- To accomplish #1, you must make your content specific.

We'll expand on these two things later, but they really are the foundational elements of creating good persuasive content.

The disease of successful companies

The disease of successful companies is generality in communication. Content that is overly-general fails to accomplish item #1 on the Word Lions two things list. Readers don't see themselves or their real-world needs reflected in overly-general content. Because of that, they don't respond to it, they don't feel affinity to the story you are telling, and ultimately it just bores them.

Overly-general content reads more like a statistic than a story.

The tendency of some companies to create overly-general content seems to be related to number 2 in the innovation two things list above: organization strength. Over time, as companies become more successful, their organization strength grows.

The Symptoms of the Disease

In most companies, this increased organization strength tends to manifest in several content-watering-down ways:

- Fewer people in the organization have direct contact with customers. If you're trying to make content that customers can see themselves reflected in, this is a problem.
- Lawyers become more involved in making sure mistakes don't turn into expensive litigation. This can lead to conservative, overly-qualified content.
- The team that commissions, consults on, and reviews content becomes larger and more heterogenous. This leads to the "too many cooks" dilemma because a single piece of content is asked to reflect too many viewpoints.

Because of these things, successful organizations tend to design content that does not reflect the desires and pains of a single, well-defined customer. Instead, they tend to produce content that tries to speak to a mythical average customer, but fails to speak convincingly to real-world customers.

Curing the disease: a diversity of specificity

If you're used to creating or commissioning overly-general content, you might ask: "Isn't making specific content going to alienate or exclude a lot of potential customers?"

You bet it will. The customer who sees themselves reflected in specific content will respond well, but other customers will not.

You solve this problem by doing one or both of the following:

1. Being specific about something that appeals to many customers.
2. Designing your content strategy to include a diverse range of specific content pieces. That way, there is specific content that resonates well with each of a diverse range of readers.

If you take approach #2, you have to figure out how to get the right specific content to the right potential customer, but that's

a different discussion.

Diversity of specificity done right

Next let's look at some examples of content that does a great job of being diverse and specific.

Diversity of specificity case study #1

Meet prtln.com.

What we think prtln.com has done really right is:

- Beautiful, simple visual design, with a diverse array of appealing, clickable photos that encourage engagement

with the actual content, which is..

- Specific self-generated profiles, portfolios, etc. for each individual listed on the site
- Prtlnd.com is a diverse showcase of specific things: individual creative professionals.

What Prtlnd.com lacks is the information design elements of layering, tagging, or search. These elements make it easy to scan a large collection of information (layering) or navigate directly to a category (tagging) or simply search for content.

Diversity of specificity case study #2

Take a look at Google's product description page for Google Apps, especially the Medium Business and Enterprise descriptions. Notice that rather than producing a single, monolithic piece of content describing the features and benefits of Google Apps, Google has listed the specific features that they believe will be most appealing for each size customer.

Here's Google's list of features for medium size businesses:

Medium Business List

- Customized email addresses
- Mobile email, calendar, and IM access
- No additional hardware or software
- Industry-leading spam filtering
- 24/7 email and phone support
- 99.9% uptime guarantee

And here's their list of features for enterprise businesses:

Enterprise Business List

- 24/7 email and phone support
- 99.9% uptime guarantee
- SSAE 16 Type II certification
- Integrated into your existing infrastructure

While the uptime guarantee and phone support features appear on both lists, other features are unique to the customer size. This shows that Google is thinking—just like you should be—about how to be specific when talking to customers.

Why it works

The study of cognitive biases and distortions provides a lot of possible explanations for why more specific content is more persuasive. The domain of human cognition is still developing, so our ideas about this stuff are necessarily a bit tentative, but the list below identifies some of the more likely explanations of why specificity works better.

The availability heuristic

The availability heuristic is a phenomenon in which people predict the frequency of an event, or a proportion within a population, based on how easily an example can be brought to mind.[1]

The availability heuristic suggests that people will be more readily influenced by your marketing content if they can easily bring it to mind. We believe that specific content is more easily brought to mind than generic content that reflects the needs of

a committee rather than an individual!

One important corollary finding to the availability heuristic is that people asked to imagine an outcome tend to immediately view it as more likely than people that were not asked to imagine the specific outcome.
[2]

This suggests that if your marketing content engages with readers in a way that stimulates their imagination, your content will be more persuasive. This may sound difficult to do, but it's not. Simply providing specific, vivid examples can be all it takes to help your reader imagine themselves having already purchased and enjoyed the results of what you are selling.

Reduce ambiguity to help readers make decisions

The ambiguity effect is a cognitive bias where decision making is affected by a lack of information, or “ambiguity”. The effect implies that people tend to select options for which the probability of a favorable outcome is known, over an option for which the probability of

a favorable outcome is unknown.[3]

The ambiguity effect is well-known in marketing circles. When creating content marketing, fill it with specific, clear information. Don't say most users love it. Say 78.9% of users love it. This approach will reduce the ambiguity effect and increase the persuasive power of your content.

Provide details to help focus attention

Attentional biases can also influence what information people are likely to focus upon. For instance, patients with anxiety disorders and chronic pain show increased attention to information representing their concerns (i.e., angry and painful facial expressions respectively) in studies using the dot-probe paradigm. [4]

The takeaway here is when you are describing the pain points that your product addresses, be vivid and realistic! Doing so will help increase your reader's engagement with your content.

Provide details to set the anchor where you want it

During normal decision-making, anchoring occurs when individuals overly rely on a specific piece of information to govern their thought-process. Once the anchor is set, there is a bias toward adjusting or interpreting other information to reflect the "anchored" information.[5]

The idea here is that you should choose what you are specific about with care, because vividly and specifically describing a problem or a solution will anchor that problem or solution in the decisionmaking process. Subsequent thinking will be relative to this anchor. So anchor things that are favorable to your goal through specific and colorful stories, measurements, or arguments.

Conclusions

Does creating diverse, specific content take more resources? It does, but only fractionally more than the alternative. But it's far more effective than overly-general content, especially if your goal is to persuade readers!

Because your audience sees themselves reflected in specific content, they are able to feel affinity for your product. The emotional power of this affinity is a great ally in making your case for why someone should spend money on your product.

Even large, successful companies can employ this strategy in their content. All it takes is shifting focus from overly-general, monolithic content pieces to smaller, more specific content. This shift in focus will also drive other process changes, like having sales and customer support more involved in content creation.

Word Lions can help you with content strategy. Send us a note about your challenge and we can start a conversation about how specificity can improve your persuasive content.



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