



Your Strategy is Showing.

Obvious strategy and pedantic execution will do more than just bore your audience. It may make them cover their eyes in embarrassment.

By Matthew Clark / [Applied Arts Magazine "By Design"](#)

"Pardon me, but I believe your strategy is showing."

Said in a plummy English accent, this is a quote from Vancouver's Hyphen Communications chief David Martin who, in turn, is quoting former colleague Richard Foster. As a believer in sound strategic design and branding over flimsy surface decoration, I have adopted this as my own mantra and a caution against ham-handed, strategy-heavy communications that ignore the elegance of intelligent design.

It's alive, but it's a monster

Intelligent branding, whether it involves design, communication, advertising or the like, always begins with rigorous audience and market understanding, in-depth audits, strategic planning and messaging. But when done without creativity, it can be still-born, a victim of not enough nourishment or care. At best, the strategy is fat-fingered and awkward, brought to Frankensteinian life by the designer who, with lightning bolts of creativity, tries to make it walk and talk. But it will always be too-obvious messaging, talking in marketing sound bites and headlines; not quite human and certainly not convincing. When strategy roars this "loud," consumers revolt with pitchforks and torches, and brands suffer an awful fate.

If you have to say you are cool, you most certainly are not

Cited often by Subplot partner, Roy White, this wisdom also holds true if you say you are sustainable, green, globally conscious, healthy, responsible, fun or innovative. It's not that you shouldn't communicate these things, it's just that putting your strategy into didactic language not only shows your pantyline, it reeks of self-conscious manipulation. We have all seen the bank that uses teen language to court the youth market. Or a recent soft-drink

theatre campaign that shamelessly tries to prove a green-loving-community-minded philosophy that seems contrary to high-fructose corn syrup. Live it, breath it, communicate it. But let it be organic—and true.

Poetry over prose

Not that I would advocate e.e. cummings as the right tonality for an annual report, but there is something to be said for the poetry of design over the often awkward prose of typical marketing communications. Poetry can say more in fewer words. It can evoke emotions and feelings. It can help a person come to realize something rather than being told it. It has sticking power and embeds itself in the brain. It often brings to mind visual imagery, which lends itself to the design process and craft. In short, poetry, on some level, can help strategy be something that is felt and imagined more than it is simply heard. By all means, be prosaic on a sell sheet, but don't forget the poetry that is at the heart of creative design.

Beware of the storytelling abyss

Ah, the story. A rich, lush tale woven with care and grace, talking more about the story of a brand than about the old-school, hard-core strategy of old. Proponents of storytelling would have you believe that sound strategy can live between the onion-skin leaves, and that the human need for mythology and the oral tradition is ultimately tapped by this approach to branding. Well, I have to admit, I have not seen it yet. I have read wonderfully written tales, with little to no backbone and next to no market relevance or brand justification. And while the clunky, strategy-heavy beast wielded by communications companies can scare little children, the bottomless story can suck you down like the mythological Charybdis whirlpool. You are drawn in, but there is just nothing underneath it all but perdition.



Don't overplay the post-modern card

I love the irony and referential quality of post-modernist advertising and design. This is when you craft your advertising and communications to admit to their manipulative goals, like "Our ad agency told us if we said 'dude' a few times, we could appeal to the youth market. So, c'mon, dude, like slide over and open a bank account. Sweet". Post-modernism is the perfect run-around: You get to declare your strategy right out in the open so unapologetically that your audience laughs along with you while they are being sold. But irony and sarcasm are dangerous tools in the wrong hands, and their arms-length nature, by definition, can be distancing to audiences in the long run.

Like tightrope walking, it's all about balance. Using intelligence and strategy to guide messaging, rather than to write it. And allowing design to involve rather than just to persuade. It's that elegance, after all, that makes intelligent design what it is.

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