

11 • Interactive Advertising and Social Media

The Internet is inherently seditious. It undermines unthinking respect for centralized authority, whether that 'authority' is the neatly homogenized voice of broadcast advertising or the smarmy rhetoric of the corporate annual report.

—CHRISTOPHER LOCKE,
from *The Cluetrain Manifesto*

Both *social media* and *interactive advertising* define themselves. "Social media" refers to those aspects of digital media that are user-driven, platforms in which people share things (ideas, information, entertainment, almost any kind of content). Companies can jump right into the mix. "Interactive advertising" usually means digitally based, company-sponsored messaging that encourages viewers to respond, participate, even help create it.

But the distinction between interactive advertising and social media often blurs. The Internet is interaction; it's social by definition: a community of users, all talking to one another. Interaction is the essence of both online advertising and the use by brands of social media.

Early, not-so-good Internet advertising simply transposed existing forms onto the Web: print ads and outdoor boards became banner ads, and TV spots were dropped in, straight-up. People were still just watching. But Burger King's Subservient Chicken, to name one game-changer, was built on people typing commands to the man-in-a-chicken-costume and finding it uncanny that the Chicken could do what they said. This new, bizarre thing was fun to play with and more fun to pass along. As the Chicken demonstrated, interactivity begins when consumers opt in.

Digital vs. print-based thinking

The power of interactive advertising and social media might best be demonstrated by contrasting them with another medium, print.

I recently saw a magazine ad for a car whose headline was "Wipe that smile on your face," accompanied by a smiling, happy driver. The headline is a nimble enough reversal of the cliché, but the ad asserts something without proving anything. It has that empty cleverness associated with so much advertising copy.

Interactive advertising and social media, however, can prove that line true or false. The car company can find out if people really do wipe a smile on their face by giving trendsetters a car for a few weeks and letting them blog about it, smiles or no smiles. Or the company can film these people as they go about their driving lives and post their experiences online. Or it can sponsor a road trip, an obstacle course, a treasure hunt, a cross-country expedition, or any number of other driving experiences. The company can encourage site visitors to help direct these adventures, interact with the drivers, or comment on what makes them, the visitors, smile. In short, "wipe that smile on your face" can become a line with many meanings and ways to be put to the test. The brand can *prove* its "smile" claim by letting people enact it, debate it, interpret it, and assume control of it themselves.

One-way messaging, like that magazine ad, pales in impact with interactive approaches. It's not that a company shouldn't write such a headline, but that writing it doesn't do enough. The ad could, however, invite people to prove the line by visiting the car company's website and taking a virtual test drive (or involving themselves in other online options).

11.1. A magazine ad that overcomes the limitations of magazine ads.

WHAT'S YOUR CARFUN FOOTPRINT?

» At MINI, we believe the letters RPM can play nice with the letters MPG. That it's possible to hug freers and corners at the same time. And that adrenaline is a renewable resource. We believe having fun on the road is not only still possible, it's responsibly attainable.

It is our MINIMALISM philosophy of doing more with less that has led us to what we like to call the Carfun Footprint.

» Your Carfun Footprint is a measure of how fun your car is versus how much impact it has on the environment. Determined by using a real equation and real math, it is, in fact, a real number. And the 17-MPG MINI Cooper has the best Carfun Footprint on the road.

» See how you compare and calculate yours at CarfunFootprint.com

YOUR FUN SCORE
A measure of how much fun you have in the car.

YOUR GREEN SCORE
A measure of how much impact your car has on the environment.

YOUR CARFUN FOOTPRINT
A measure of how much fun you have in the car versus how much impact it has on the environment.

MINI

This MINI magazine ad (fig. 11.1) addressed the same issue as the “Wipe that smile on your face” ad: how much fun is this car? But instead of just talking about it, the ad tried to *prove* the fun claim. It gave consumers a way to determine how many smiles they were likely to have in a car by, if you can believe it, quantifying happiness—or, rather, quantifying the relationship between fun and environmental responsibility, an important criterion for any car.

Prospective car buyers could go to a MINI microsite and use a legitimate analytical method to determine a car’s “carfun footprint,” the ratio between having fun driving a car and taking care of the planet. This do-it-yourself idea had the MINI whimsy about it, and, more importantly, it made a kind of sense that puffery never will, while inviting viewers to interact digitally with the brand. It was a solid print ad that was also a

portal. Excellent, smart work, and very much a lesson in one page on how to move beyond print while not abandoning it.

What’s an idea in interactive copywriting?

“Just making better ads won’t get it. Marketing has to move beyond ad-making.”

—CHRIS WIGGINS, interactive creative director, Crispin Porter + Bogusky

Wiggins’s comment applies to many areas of advertising but especially to interactive media because consumers can choose to involve themselves—or not. Unless a brand is interesting, even compelling, it is ghosted and gone. There are few captive audiences online.

Given people’s disinclination to suffer through one-

way advertising pitches, what to do? Here are guidelines for new media and the new consumer. Think of them as different ways of reaching the same goal: getting beyond one-way advertising.

1. Don't make ads; make "cool things." If people dislike advertising, give them something they do like. They'll be grateful.

2. Fit the message to the medium. Every medium wants to be used a certain way; the Internet is no different.

3. Make the cool thing a useful thing. Utility trumps all.

4. Synch the cool thing with the brand. Don't be interesting but commercially irrelevant; be interesting *and* relevant.

5. Synch the brand with people's behavior. Instead of going outward from the brand, go inward from consumers. Track back to the brand from what people are up to. What *are* they doing? What *do* they want or need?

6. Make social responsibility central to the brand. If your client's brand isn't helping make things better, why not?

7. If you do make ads, make cool ones. This has always been true, but it's true with a vengeance now.

DON'T MAKE ADS; MAKE "COOL THINGS"

The two largest obstacles you face trying to communicate with consumers are clutter (your message blends in with other messages) and fragmentation (people can be anywhere). Further, with interactive media, you start in a hole if you try to stop people from what they want to do. So broaden your ideas of advertising and communication. The best advertising is increasingly *not* advertising, but something else.

For advertising agency Crispin Porter + Bogusky, masters of new media, that something else is a "cool thing," something with legitimate value that people will seek out and pass along to others, that they'll find useful, entertaining, or both. A "cool thing," according to Chris Wiggins, can be a service, a physical object, an entertainment, or a practical, useful thing. "If there *are* ads, they're for the cool thing, *not* the brand's product," he advises.¹

One of the early non-ad ads (2001) was the BMW film series, *The Hire*, eight short films directed by major filmmakers and starring Clive Owen as The Driver, a man pushing BMWs to the max. They weren't great ads; they were great short films. And that made all the

difference. They knifed through clutter because they weren't ads at all; they solved the fragmentation problem because people were pulling them in, *choosing* to watch them. They generated buzz because people talked about them; they weren't BMW talking to consumers explicitly, just eight short movies with an air of mystery and a lot of adrenaline-soaked BMW action.

Consider branded content

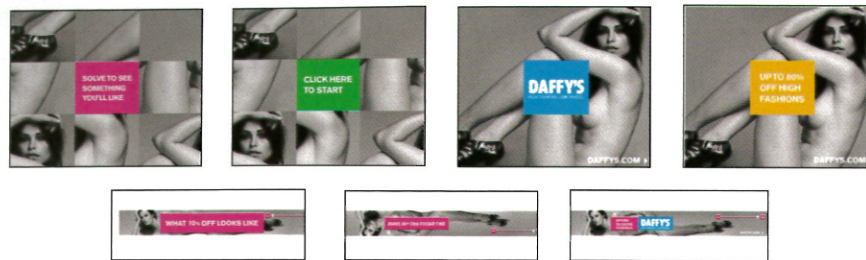
The Hire is an example of *branded content*, another term that defines itself. Something—it can be almost anything—that people find useful or entertaining is brought to them by a brand. Thus "content" is "branded." Many of the non-ad ads that I'll discuss are branded content. The great virtue of all of them is that they circumvent people's unwillingness to sit still for advertising. Marketers hammering away about their wonderful products has become too dreary to be endured. If, however, a brand brings people what they really want, all is forgiven. More than that, the brand becomes associated with the positives of the thing delivered.

Branded content has often been, however, a clunky, obvious, boring thing in its own right, especially *product placement*, wherein the brand just plops itself down in the middle of things. Everyone has seen movies and TV shows with the camera lingering over a succession of brand names (James Bond movies are notorious for this). By show's end, viewers are as worn out as if they'd been marched through a mall.


Do better:

Be entertaining or useful, not pitch-heavy

AEG-Electrolux, European makers of household appliances, sponsored a series of long-form, Web-based videos, each of them about a craft practiced to perfection: "the best butcher in London," "the oldest bakery in Berlin," "the perfect apple strudel," and so on. Nothing is said in the videos about AEG-Electrolux, but, as each artisan demonstrates his craft, the brand becomes associated with excellence and care in how things are prepared. The videos are not quite shows, certainly nowhere near infomercials, with their relentless repetition and hard sell; rather, they're a third thing: compelling, useful nonfiction documentaries demonstrating, in each case, perfect technique. These often surprising stories about excellent craftsmanship serve as metaphors for AEG-Electrolux's own craftsmanship, a sensible claim since AEG has been a pioneer in industrial design (AEG's slogan is "perfekt in form und funktion"). Very watchable, winning work.



11.2. Viewers can move things on the Web. A selling argument that's fun to fiddle with.

 Watch the puzzle and slider banner ads in action at [fig. W-11.2](#).

FIT THE MESSAGE TO THE MEDIUM

CP+B “loathes” banner ads on social media like Facebook, says Wiggins. Instead, he and his agency suggest, do something connected with why people are there and how the medium works. Don’t just stick an idea on the medium, like a Post-it note. Build it in (fig. 11.2).

CP+B tapped into one perplex of social networking—the disparity between the quantity of one’s “friends” and their quality—by creating for client Burger King the Whopper Sacrifice, a Facebook application that allowed users to remove ten friends for a free Whopper hamburger; they even got to “flame broil” the friends in a motion graphic. CP+B used a human truth as a starting place, as their point of tension.

Another truth is that people create personae in social media, representing themselves to others in many, often joking ways. Why not take advantage of that? One such non-ad ad CP+B created, again for client Burger King, was Simpsonize Me. People could Simpsonize their faces, have them transformed into personal versions of the cartoon characters, then use them however they wanted—as their Facebook images, for example. The revenue stream came from things people could buy with their face on them: hats, aprons, T-shirts, etc. CP+B wrote memorable theme lines for Simpsonize Me, too: “Turning the world yellow one Simpson at a time” and “Eat. Drink. Be Yellow.” (Here is a link to a Burger King ad promoting Simpsonize Me: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_3RQe_zg1A)

Use the characteristics of the medium to create the “cool thing.” Since people create personality profiles on Facebook, MoMA (The Museum of Modern Art) in New York designed a website that worked with them. It analyzed a user’s profile, then matched those preferences with exhibits at the museum, thus tailoring

a visit to MoMA for just that person. Given the size and scope of art museums, these recommendations helped people make the most of their visits. Facebook users were able to share this information with network friends, save it, and adapt it, too.

Since search engines direct so much Internet activity, what can be done with them? In a creative understanding of how people use search engines, Alec Brownstein, a fellow looking for a job in advertising, set up his own résumé as a top hit for six advertising heavyweights when vanity got the best of them and they Googled themselves. He landed interviews with most of them and was hired at Young & Rubicam. Again, the idea comes from within the medium’s characteristics, not from outside them. (See fig. 11.3 for another Web ad that takes advantage of the medium’s characteristics.)

All these ideas are fresh and fun. They aren’t ads, but they do marinate consumers in the brand, so they’re not commercially irrelevant. They fit their messages to the medium. And best of all, they connect consumers to the brand (more precisely, consumers connect themselves) without a heavy hand. With the Whopper Sacrifice, for example, Burger King didn’t force-feed consumers some burnt-up advertising line like “Flame Broiling: The Special Way A Whopper Satisfies.” They let consumers do the flame broiling themselves.

MAKE THE COOL THING A USEFUL THING

Most people need all the help they can get. How can your client’s product or brand help them beyond whatever it’s doing already? For example, running shoes help people run. The product is already doing something for people, or it wouldn’t exist. But regard that something as insufficient, way insufficient, and you’ve begun to think outside the running-shoe box.

Nike did so by creating Nike+, a Web-based brand extension that embodies usefulness (nikeplus.com). Runners can get customized training programs, challenge friends to races or invite them along for a run via Facebook, download maps of routes, time and measure their runs, find out about marathons, get advice from specialists, follow Nike Run Reporters around the country, and do a zillion more things besides just taking shoes out of a box. In fact, NIKEiD encourages people to customize those shoes *before* they take them out of the box, and the NIKE+ GPS app helps runners keep track of their workouts. With “PowerSongs” and voice feedback during the run, the app makes sure that no runner is alone.

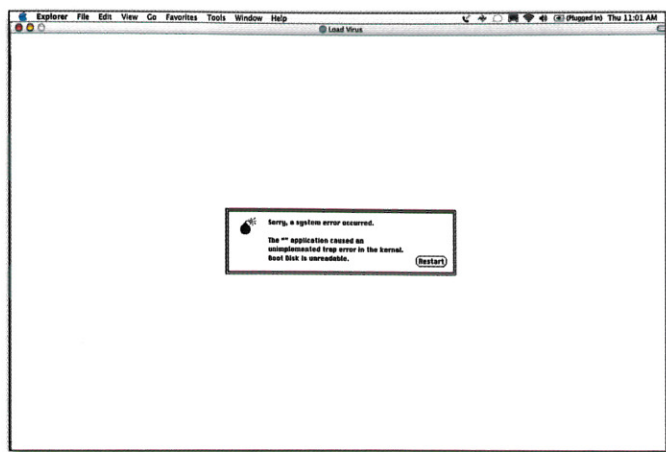
In short, Nikeplus.com is a community surrounding that shoebox, a network of fellow runners, and a host of branded, buyable, downloadable things (often in concert with Apple gear) wrapping the runner in a world nearly without end. By extending the brand’s meaning to consumers, Nike+ puts in play the multiplying power of interactive advertising and social media. Nike is doing what your client’s brand should be doing: following the ripples out from the stone.

Here’s another instance of moving beyond product. Best Buy discounts electronics. That helps people, certainly, but it’s not enough. In the bewildering category of electronics, people need advice as well as discounts. So Best Buy created TwelpForce (the name is a portmanteau pun: “Twitter” plus “help force”), a collection of employees ready to answer consumer questions and deliver technical advice, one tweet at a time, every tweet free of a sales pitch. It’s a truly useful non-ad ad: help without a catch.

Best Buy even posted online its instructions to employees who wanted to join TwelpForce so that anyone could read them. Doing this dissolved corporate walls; there was no inside or outside. Consumers couldn’t feel tricked by some marketing scheme.

Let’s listen to part of Best Buy’s instructions to its employees:

Why customers might want to talk to you on Twitter? The promise we’re making starting in July is that you’ll know all that we know as fast as we know it. That’s an enormous promise. That means that customers will be able to ask us about the decisions they’re trying to make, the products they’re using, and look for the customer support that only we can give. And with Twitter, we can do that fast, with lots of opinions so they can make a decision after



11.3. If you saw the first screen of this Web ad, chances are you uttered a few of the words this book addresses. No matter what the medium, the principles of good advertising always operate: create awareness of a problem, announce a solution, and make getting it easy.

weighing all the input. It also lets others learn from it as they see our conversations unfold.

When you start, remember that the tone is important. Above all, the tone of the conversation has to be authentic and honest. Be conversational. Be yourself. Show respect. Expect respect. The goal is to help. If you don’t know the answer tell them you’ll find out. Then find out and let them know.

This sounds so consumer-directed that, as a reader, you have to keep reminding yourself that it’s the company talking to company employees. Inside voice and outside voice have merged. Alex Bogusky and John Winsor put what’s at stake with customer service this way: “Would you rather make how well your company communicates with customers a part of why people

trust you, or a part of why they *don't* trust you? That is the only question left.”² Any company interested in survival now enters into dialogue with consumers. Figure 11.4, for example, shows Comcast's Twitter help center, where Bill Gerth, the company's social media leader, nimbly fields questions, one by one, from consumers.

SYNCH THE COOL THING WITH THE BRAND

Don't do something unrelated to what the brand is about. Use digital advertising and social media to demonstrate that.

Best Buy wants to be seen as the big-box electronics retailer with a genuinely knowledgeable staff, and the free technical advice from Twelpforce helps prove that position.

If your client makes tires, go past them to why people buy tires in the first place. Talk about travel, not tread patterns. BFGoodrich, the tire brand, extended itself in just this way by creating The Nation of Go, a web community for people who love cars and car trips, a site on which to post favorite drives, videos, photos, and such. “It's part social network, part user-generated content and part Web tool, built on the Google Maps platform and integrating data from the EveryTrail powered mobile app,” explained Odopod's Matt Jarvis, the agency's chief strategist.³

Let extensions like these suggest ones you could undertake for your client. Determine the core expertise of the brand, then think how you might spread that out to other media and venues, how you might express those skills in new ways.

If possible, appeal to consumers, not by making them listen to a message, but by letting them help create it. For Playland amusement park, known for its death-defying rides, advertising agency Rethink

created the Scream-O-Meter, which invited people to scream into their computer (to gauge how ready they were to handle the rigors of the rides at Playland). Those who screamed loudest got discounts on Playland tickets. This “cool thing” communicated the brand's core benefit by encouraging consumers to communicate it themselves.

The “cool thing” may well be an app

Since apps can be so specific, they continue to replace big, clunky websites as ways to interact digitally (fig. 11.5). The future is mobile. As a writer, you'll be asked, more and more often, to “language” an app. Writing for mobile apps is an exercise in wayfinding. You're helping people find their way through a place but doing so a few words at a time; you're giving directions, ever so briefly.

Some fundamentals:

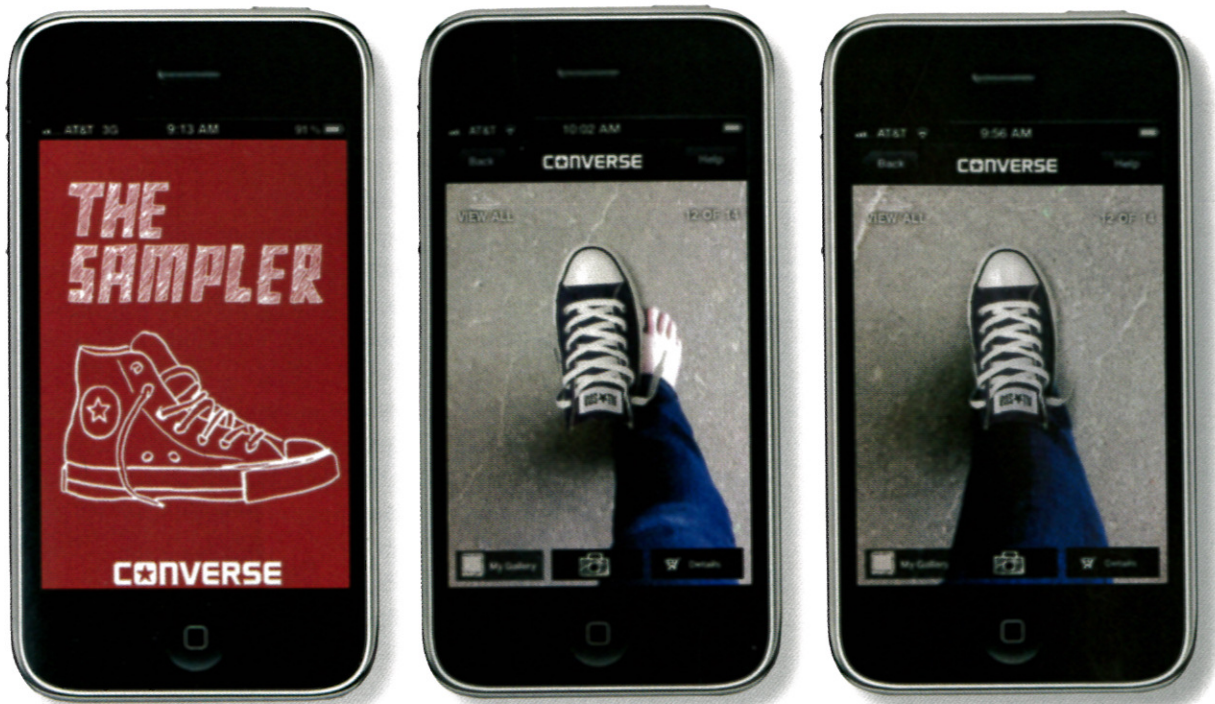
1. First things first. Know what you're trying to do: find out who your audience is and what they want. What are the possibilities? What are the sequences? Create a brief for this app just as you would for any advertising problem.

2. Write so tight you squeak. Take to heart every piece of advice in this book about tightening and sharpening your sentences. Your words will have no room to turn around. None. Look again at chapter 10, Words II: Writing Well, and its suggestions: write with nouns and verbs (strip out unnecessary adjectives and adverbs), write straightforward sentences (start with subjects and get right to their verbs), be precise instead of fuzzy, and so on. Brevity demands clarity; when you're writing at your best, they become one.

3. Be a friendly wayfinder. Help your users navi-

11.4. Free technical advice, and who couldn't use some? By being helpful, the communications technology company Comcast creates good advertising for itself with every tweet. (<https://twitter.com/comcastcares>)





11.5. Try on shoes without leaving the house or opening twenty boxes.

gate the experience without being frustrated by it. People want to feel in charge, so keep things simple, unambiguous, and positive. Being brief doesn't mean being curt. Use contractions and the second person ("you"). Pull your reader/viewer/user close. Command forms of the verb speed users along: "Search flights," "Swipe for more results," "Find gas near me." Remember, the app is an extension of a user's hand and mind; it should feel like it.

4. Speak plainly. Your audience may well be international, so the English you use should be accessible to all. Don't talk down to your audience, though. Assume their intelligence and respect them.

5. Craft it. Once you've got the language tight enough that dimes bounce off it, do the usual: rewrite it, again.

SYNCH THE BRAND WITH PEOPLE'S BEHAVIOR

We're back, as we so often are, to the principle of features and benefits. Don't put a pretty face on what you already make; find out what people want and then make that. Begin from the benefits end. If your client makes pizza, don't start with pizza; start with pizza lovers. What's true about them? For one thing, they can't wait for delivery, and, for another, they'd like to create their own pizza, not just choose it from a list. Domino's wanted to be the brand that solved those

problems. To help consumers gain control and reduce waiting-for-the-pizza anxiety, Domino's (with Crispin Porter + Bogusky) created the Pizza Tracker, a Web-based timeline pinpointing just how far the pizza had journeyed from oven to front door (this descended from an early brand promise to have pizza delivered in half an hour or less). Additionally, Domino's set up a way for consumers to build their own pizza, name it, and save it to their online Domino's shopping cart, ready to re-order anytime they wanted.

So track back from people's needs and wants to things your client's brand might make. What are people looking for that they can't yet find? What habits lie unaddressed? Help your client's brand come to the aid of the people.

MAKE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY CENTRAL TO THE BRAND


"What we're starting to see being borne out again and again is that good service, social responsibility and sustainable practices aren't just for Vermont ice cream makers; they are a collective economic imperative for every kind of company."

—Teressa Iezzi, editor,
Advertising Age's Creativity

Ask what capabilities and social concerns ripple out



11.6. Use the brand's past to move it forward.

 Watch the train run through Time in fig. W-11.6.

from your client's brand. What does the brand believe in? What possibilities for social good are implied by the things it sells? Here are some suggestions for expanding a brand's meaning.

Enact the brand's position

It may be in the slogan, and if it is, start there. Pepsi, for example, has consistently positioned itself as the "new" cola (as opposed to their antecedent and main competitor, "old" Coca-Cola), identifying with young people and those who like to think they are. Slogans have included "The choice of a new generation," "Generation Next," "Be Young, Have Fun, Drink Pepsi," and, recently, "Refresh everything."

Taking this idea of renewal out of talk and into action, Pepsi created The Pepsi Refresh Project, a social media extension that embodied the brand's positioning and grew out of the campaign theme line: "Every generation refreshes the world. Now it's your turn." People were invited to propose socially valuable projects (using Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr to help promote their cause); these projects were posted on refresheverything.com, and visitors could vote for the

ones they liked best. Winners received major money (up to \$50,000) from Pepsi to go forth and do what they had proposed. "Every Pepsi Refreshes The World" and other such lines transcended adland hoo-ha by actually meaning something.

Coca-Cola has extended its slogan "Open happiness" in a similar way. One project, Expedition 206 (the number of countries in which Coke is sold), canvassed the world to document people's differing ideas of happiness and where to find it. Coca-Cola created the theme line "Where will happiness strike next?" and found inventive ways to answer the question. Trucks dispensing free Cokes and other goodies appeared around the world, and, in a socially conscious effort, Coke helped reunite Filipino workers away from their home with their families.

Use the brand's history

The slogan for Evian bottled water is "Live young," and for some time the brand has been doing things with babies like creating hugely popular videos of baby ballet and roller babies and launching a YouTube Evian baby channel people can participate in. All this may seem a long way from bottled water, but actually it's part of the brand's history. In the 1930s, when safe drinking water in France wasn't a sure thing, Evian produced bottled water known as "the water for feeding-bottles" because it was bacteria free and didn't need boiling. Evian was about babies in 1935, and it's about babies today. Part of the brand's history has simply been pulled forward.

Coca-Cola has done this by taking one of its advertising icons, polar bears (they date back to 1922), out of advertising and into the real world—Coke teamed with World Wildlife Fund to help preserve habitat for the now-endangered polar bears in the Arctic. Consumers could help make the idea a reality in several ways: each text message they sent, each Coke product they bought, added money to the cause. The campaign created special packaging and websites with which to carry out the project—all of it a smart example of giving a brand's past new relevance, new meaning. (In fig. 11.6, see how Union Pacific Railroad makes the most of its 150th anniversary.)

Address the brand's biggest weakness

What do people or the culture itself have against your client's brand? Don't try to talk your way out of it; enact your way out. Address the problem in a real-world way. Walmart, for example, has been criticized for

destroying communities with its giant-sized commercial footprint and price-driven power. So the brand is working to become the eco-friendly big box. If it succeeds in changing consumer perceptions, it will have mitigated its cultural negative.

Snickers knows what everyone knows: candy bars are not on the short list of health-giving foods. So Snickers has attacked that weakness by getting into the let's-get-healthy business with a website encouraging people, especially young people, to live and eat more responsibly.

You may think these are cynical gestures, and since I can't analyze corporate motives, perhaps they are. But doing good is doing good. Many people came to see Pepsi, to name one brand, as an *idea* as well as a drink: "refresh everything," which could have been puffery, instead became a cause. Similarly, Coca-Cola appears serious about exploring the dimensions of happiness.

IF YOU DO MAKE ADS, MAKE COOL ONES

"On the Internet today, advertisers don't merely compete with other advertisers, they also have to compete with anyone who has a video camera. A traditionally clever TV spot stands no chance against a ten-second video of grandma falling off a stepladder."


—JOE SHEPTEK, *Communication Arts*

The guiding principle of the new advertising is this: Don't interrupt entertainment with your ad; be entertaining yourself. As Yash Egami, editor in chief of *One. A Magazine*, puts it, "The age-old argument has finally been answered with an almost Zen-like proposition: People will pay to see commercials if the commercials are what they are paying to see."⁴

One way to be interesting is to be surprising. This banner ad from BMW (fig. 11.7) breaks the "rule" of brevity, but does so with such wit that people, once they start reading the copy, probably continue. Do they read it all the way to the end? Hard to say. But no


11.7. In a "short-form" digital world, exceptions will always have their place as antidote, which is why this long-form BMW banner ad works so well. It's got so many things to push against. I can show you here only a few hundred of the 5,500 words that unfurl when the banner box is rolled over: the entire text is 20 feet long. But if you have time for a fun read, roll over the ad on the book's website and settle back.

Ⓢ For the actual, nearly infinite ad, go to fig. W-11.7.


BMW X3
Driving is a pleasure

The Ultimate Driving Experience™

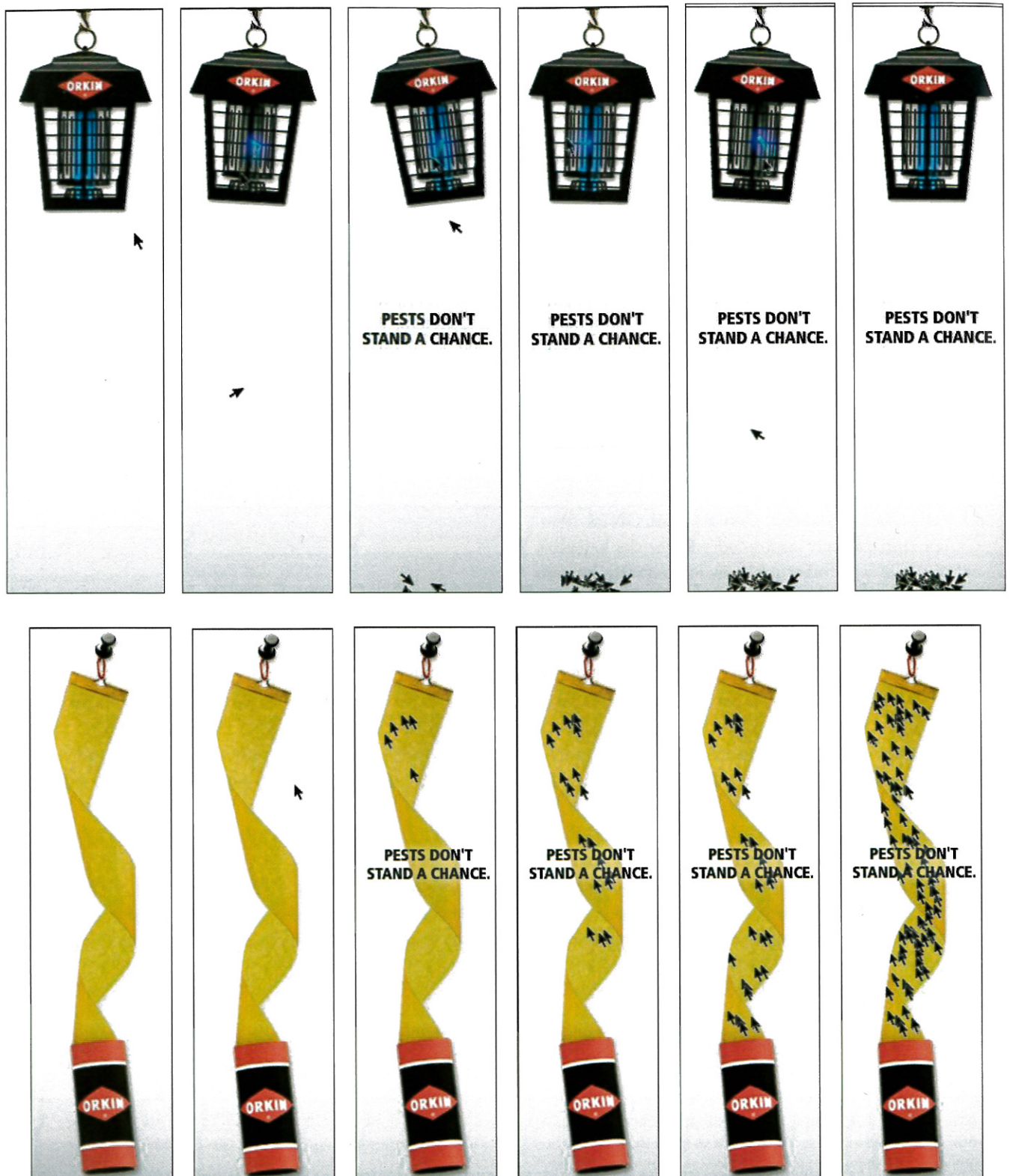
INTRODUCING THE ALL-NEW BMW X3.

ROLL OVER TO SEE HOW ▶



We bet that you hardly ever read ads. Yet for some reason, you're reading this right now. You must have sensed that this banner was something special. And you were right. Not only is this an ad for the all-new history-making BMW X3, but it's also the world's longest web banner, ever. Now you're probably very tempted to just scroll down to the bottom to see how long it is. Resist the urge. We thought this could be a great chance for us to spend some quality time together. Think of this ad as a metaphor for a journey in the all-new BMW X3 – we bet when you clicked on this ad, you didn't realize you were actually clicking on a metaphor. And the best part about a journey is that you never know what will happen next. Watermelon! See? You didn't think we would just suddenly scream out watermelon. Granted, shouting watermelon isn't really much of a surprise. We just thought of it on the spur of the moment. But we can assure you that there are a lot of much better surprises to come below that we put a lot more thought into – and none of them involve us screaming out random words. So sit back and enjoy the ride because this BMW X3 ad can take you anywhere.





11.8. Each banner ad catches the cursor—the sticky paper stopping it, and the light zapping it. Very clever ways to show through metaphor what these products do.

See the fly paper and zapper in action in fig. W-11.8.

matter how far they get, they'll remember this ad more than all the ones that, by taking no chances, made no impression.

In another surprise, a banner ad created by Vancouver ad agency Rethink releases a monitor that follows a person's cursor as it moves around the screen. If that person clicks on the monitor, he or she is sent to the security company's site. A clever and fun way to link the ad—and the potential consumer—to the brand.

In figure 11.8, two more banner ads from Rethink use the medium's characteristics to enact the brand's promise.

Fun doesn't have to be the only draw. Make your ad helpful and interesting enough that it becomes a go-to resource. As Keith Byrne advised in *Creativity* magazine, "Whenever possible [on the click-through idea] give the opportunity to relate directly to users' lives."²⁹ For example, web ads for Parentsoup.com invited people to enter their child's name and find out its etymology or enter her age and find out what her college education would cost. Ads for CondéNet's Epicurious.com website invited people to enter their favorite ingredients to receive recipe suggestions.

Even when you're selling, write about the brand's values at least as much as the things for sale. Nikeplus.com sells lots of things, but those things emerge from a worldview that sees running as not just healthy, fun, and social, but also somewhere near the meaning of life. The website seems less like a retail outlet (although it is certainly that) than a great big running club full of true believers. Nike has carried its meaning way beyond the box. No brand should be just an assortment of things, even persuasively described things. Thingness is inert, and brands, like friends and groups of friends, do far more for the people they care about.

The Purina Cat Chow site (fig. 11.9) shows how to rise above product and also how to use interactive, digital space: make it alive with possibilities. Create a series of things that can't just be looked at; make every moment a clickable moment. No matter where on this page a visitor looks, there's something to do.

The designer, Resource Interactive, explains the site: "A social widget gives users on-demand access to the newest Flickr photos, YouTube videos, and Facebook and Twitter posts on every page. The Stories page continues the website's personal feel, highlighting . . . stories and pictures from brand fans."³ There are videos from experts and a searchable compendium of articles and tips, the "Catipedia," to answer questions about

cats. The site has been search-optimized to help it become a go-to source for cat lovers. And all the articles, stories, and videos can be commented on, tweeted, or shared on Facebook and Twitter, so users can network with friends and fellow cat lovers via the site.

In short, Resource Interactive has created a full-service, online cat-lovers community, as well as demonstrated what a website is supposed to do: involve its viewers actively in substantial, useful content. If someone loves cats, this site is determined to hit as many of that person's hot buttons as possible. And hit them in a visually oriented, click-here, watch-this, tell-your-story, send-your-photo, ask-a-question way.

How to write for the Internet

Once you've found a "cool thing" or a strong ad idea and start putting words to it, you'll see that the principles of writing well still apply. But like the leap from college football to the NFL, the game gets faster and more precise. Speed and clarity matter more than ever.

What follow are principles for interactive, digitally based prose. While much of the advice assumes that you're writing a website, these guidelines concern quick, clear functionality, so they apply nearly everywhere in digital space.

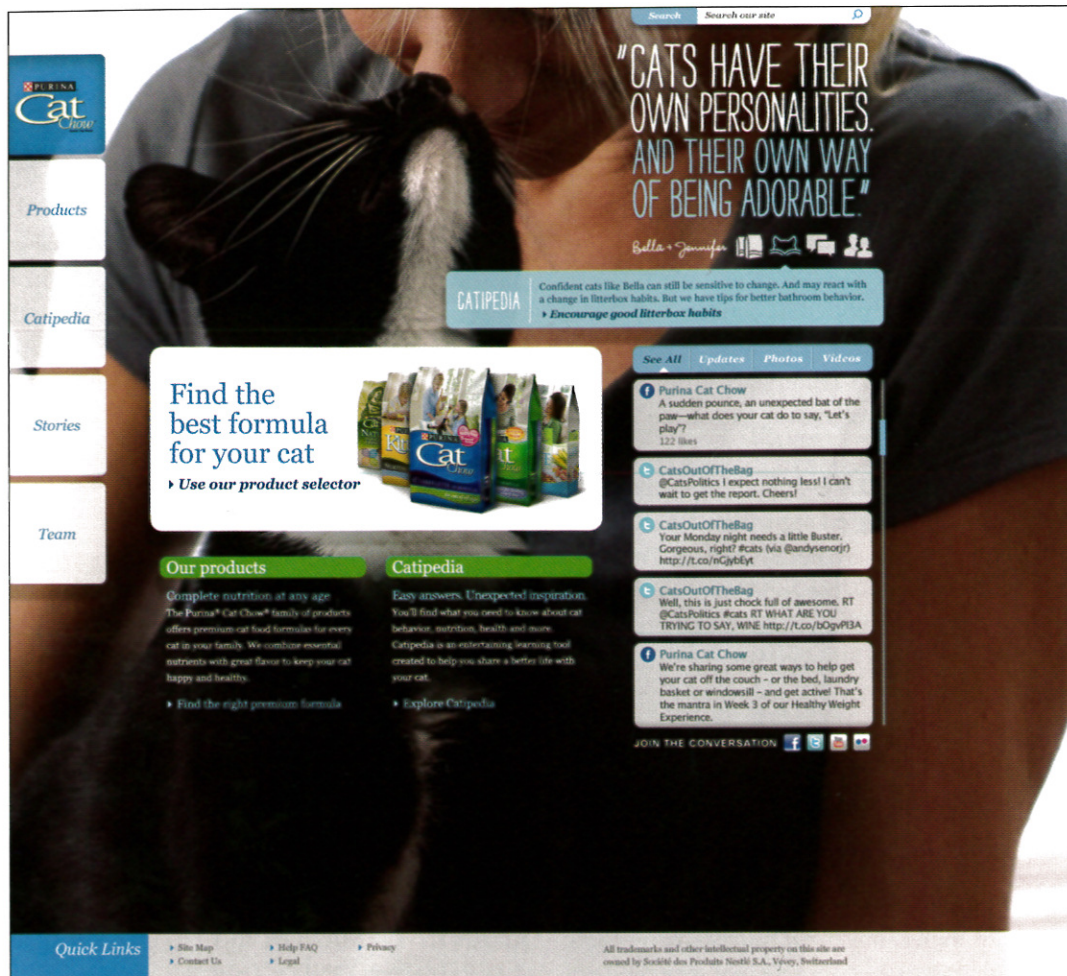
BE AN INFORMATION ARCHITECT FIRST, A WRITER SECOND

Reading online still differs from reading offline: people are scanning before reading, if they're reading at all, in the sense of word-for-word. To orient themselves quickly, they look for headlines, subheads, dominant type, dominant images.

If you're writing a brand website, microsite, or app, decide what these big things should be. Let the outlines you created for essays in high school and college be your model, boring though they may seem. Digital architecture, the words part, *is* outlining. Maybe like me, you wrote that outline *after* you wrote the essay. That's okay. Maybe, also like me, you have to write a lot before you can even think to outline. That's okay, too. But eventually you'll need to organize the scrum, so either start by creating a scratch outline or keep sections-to-be in your mind as you write.

Here are questions to help you organize. Notice that they're like those on an advertising creative brief, but with a web sensibility:

1. Who are you targeting? How wide or narrow is the audience for this brand and site? Make that list



11.9. I dare a cat lover to stop here only briefly.

See fig. W-11.9 for more selected screen shots.

of users and uses and then design the site and its language to fit that list.

2. What are you trying to accomplish? How many needs should this site or app serve? What do you want people to *do* with it? Will they learn about the brand, from mission to history to products to personnel? Buy from it? Find nearby restaurants with it? Define what a successful visit to the site or use of the app would be.

As you're organizing, remember these practical matters:

- **Put the most important stuff in the most important places:** at the top of the page, in headlines, subheads, boldface type, links. Since people are scanning, they'll notice these first. Be search-engine friendly. SEO, search-engine optimization, is a science unto itself, but it entails putting key words in key places, so that search engines using such keywords will return your client's site high on the hit list.
- Provide a slogan, tagline, or theme line on the home page, so that visitors will know immediately what the site, app, Twitter account, or blog is about. Let's say they stumble upon *stumble-upon.com*. What is that? Its descriptor, right below the logotype, tells them: "Discover cool stuff personalized to you. Explore the best of the web with a single click." And that's accompanied by a simple flow chart that shows how the site works.

Twitter encourages those who tweet to give themselves a brief bio, right up top, to serve as a tagline, a brand statement for visitors:

@Etsy says this about itself: "The world's handmade marketplace."

Susan Orlean's Twitter bio makes its point: "Writer, writer, writer: Oh, I also write."


Nike gets right to it: "If You Have a Body, You're an Athlete."

Old Spice puts product line and brand image into less than a sentence: "Drop-kicking dirt and odor, doing a clothesline on them and then slamming them with a folding chair."

- **Make every screen clear about what and where it is on the site.** Since you can't tell where people will first enter a site, repeat header information on every page.

- **Write captions for everything:** pictures, graphs, tables, embedded videos. A visual without a caption is just floating decoration. Label anything that comes from somewhere else (users' comments, external reviews, republished material). Let visitors know who is behind any chunk of text.
- **Invite people to get involved.** You want visitors to *do* something: vote, chat, choose, tell their story, add a comment, play the game, see the floorplan, take a virtual test drive, tweet a link, retweet a comment, jump to the brand's Facebook page or Twitter account. If they're just watching or reading, you're not involving them enough. (The Purina Cat Chow site, opposite, is a model for many of these guidelines.)

3. Find the right voice. People will often say that they're reading Malcolm Gladwell or Sarah Vowell before they'll think to name the book. They read novelists, essayists, and other writers because they like to listen to them. When you're writing for the Web, you want people to like to listen to you—and your brand—too. You just face a less patient reader than do Vowell and Gladwell and other long-form writers.

See fig. W-11.10 for banner ads whose voice— straightforward, encouraging, and funny—makes people want to listen.

So, no matter how briskly you need to say things, speak with a voice worth listening to, and make it congruent with the brand. As online writer Nick Osborne points out, "Not only will a personal voice help your company connect more easily with your customers online and hold their attention and loyalty for longer, but it will also represent your best defense against the competition. Competitors may be able to duplicate your products, services, pricing, and offers, but they won't be able to duplicate your voice."⁶ (For more on brand voice and how to create it, see chapter 9.)

4. Make site navigation consistent and intuitive. Plan a strategy to pull people into the site and then through it. Just as you can write copy by asking what would persuade you to buy a product (using yourself as a test consumer), so too can you and your colleagues organize a site by asking what you'd want to know at each point along the way. What questions would you have? What would you like to be able to do or find out next? What leads to what? See figure 11.11 for a website home page whose organization makes giving easy.

11.11. Here's a very stripped down website, clear and quick. The site's organization and visitors' options are apparent at a glance. (This screen grab looks empty, but go to the site—dontalmostgive.org—to see it fill: the home page begins, "Don't almost give," replaced by "Give," as images of need replace one another.)



5. Get people to come back. Devise ways to get people to return, regularly, to your site. Change what's up there, often. Ask viewers to help build the site themselves: to tell their story, rate the products, comment on the blog, and so on. Be useful: provide information, if you can, that people will rely on, day to day, week after week. Be a go-to site, the way news sites are. Make news of your brand; provide services to your visitors.

How to wordsmith in the digital world

After you've organized like a demon, write like an angel. The following truths become even more true in digital space:

1. Write tight. Don't lead to the point; begin with it. Anything tight enough for print must be tighter still online. Many writing coaches suggest using half as many words as you'd use in print.

And print itself seems to use half the words it once did. In explaining why his newspapers were increasingly using graphics and charts to explain complex ideas—and writing less copy—the chairman of Knight-Ridder newspapers, Alvah Chapman, said, "We are not in the business of manufacturing paragraphs. We are in the business of moving ideas into the minds of people."⁷

You're in that business, too.

So keep paragraphs short. Start them with topic sentences. Develop only one idea in each paragraph. And be specific whenever possible. Keep sentences short, putting the subject and its verb up front, so readers will get your point right away. You and I have been told such things by English teachers since grade school. That's fine: some things *need* to be repeated.

Don't think in phrases; think in words. Writing teacher John Trimble says, "Good writing really begins with a profound respect for words—their precise denotations, their connotations, even their weight

and music, if you will."⁸ Ask of each word whether it's necessary; hold each one up to the light. Also, look more closely at the subject. Clichés often show up because the writer hasn't gotten beneath them. All circumstances have their own particulars, their own specifics, and if you look more closely at whatever you're writing about, you can often see beneath the patina of cliché to more interesting material.

2. Be fun to read without being obscure. Clarity and cleverness don't have to be enemies, but if there's a conflict, clarity must win, especially in headlines, section heads, and other prominent places.

Which is the best headline?

"What's up with hot air balloons?"

or

"It's all hot air"

or

"Hot air balloons rise in popularity"

While they all offer little jokes, only the last header says clearly what it means. You'd know why to click through. The first two headlines pun at the expense of meaning. You can't know what they lead to, so you'd click through only if you had nothing else to do. But when is that the case?

With links, make what you want people to do clear and, if possible, irresistible. "Click here" makes people wonder why. "Find out how" or "Start now" or "Download the app" are stronger, yes? And why say, "Click to see my picture" if you can say, "I had hair once. See?"

Even wacky ideas need to be clear and straightforward in their presentation. Jeff Benjamin, interactive creative director at Crispin Porter + Bogusky, said this about writing the Whopper Sacrifice, that idea of trading in one's friends for a hamburger:

We looked at that copy over and over again. People think, oh just make a thing where you delete a friend—but it had to be funny, it couldn't be mean, and it had to be clear what you had to do because Facebook apps were complicated to some people. Those were big challenges for a writer to take on.⁹

If your working model for Web prose (even in a blog) is the essay, you're in trouble. Essays meander; one thought suggests another. That's their beauty. But on the Web, no one is looking for a stroll through whatever beauties come to a writer's

mind. Be on point, be pungently interesting.

Read only the headline and subheads of a blog entry and see if you get the point of the piece. If you don't, then the writer (who could be you) is leaving too much slack in the lines, letting the thesis drift.

3. Invert the pyramid. When you write copy, use the journalist's principle of beginning with the conclusion and working backward. This way, you help scanners get the who-what-when-where-why of a story immediately. You also keep everyone else's mind on the central idea, while letting people interested in the full story read down into it. Since most people won't read big chunks of text, nor will they scroll, make it easy for them to ca-chunk their way through material via links.

4. Use lists to deliver information. If sentences get too full or too long, break them out into lists instead. Like outlines, lists:

- Get attention
- Save eyestrain (the joy of white space)
- Reduce copy
- Aid comprehension
 - No lengthy sentences
 - No buried points
- Show relationships among ideas
 - Parallel entries for equal ideas
 - Indentation for subordinate ideas
- Enable quick scanning
 - Bullets for lists
 - Numbers for sequential entries

5. Write long—a little at a time. The Internet has infinite depth—some sites feel as though you could read down into them for miles. So, when you do write long, get in the habit of making depth available rather than compulsory. In other words, don't lay down long skeins of copy. Break it up. Give people a short version, then let them click to get more information, then click again to get yet more information, should they want it. Create links to help people rappel down into the text.

Here's an example of a basic difference between print and web prose:¹⁰

BEFORE:

[This chunk of text could be from a company's printed brochure]:

Resource Interactive, founded by Nancy Kramer in 1981, was a digital marketing firm before such

a thing existed. From the beginning, the agency thought and worked in digital media. Its first client was Apple, and since then RI has collaborated with many Fortune 500 companies to open their brands and advance their interactive marketing. RI has grown significantly in the past 30 years, but its goal has always been to combine consumer insight, e-commerce innovation, and technological skill to address, even anticipate, the new marketplace and the new consumer. . . .

AFTER:

[How that same information, and a little more, might be handled on the company's website]:

Text:

Since 1981, Resource Interactive has been a pioneer in digital marketing. Its first client was Apple, and RI has collaborated with many Fortune 500 companies since then. Its principles remain constant: develop consumer insights, innovate in e-commerce, and stay on the leading edge of technology.

Links:

- Follow a timeline of RI achievements
- See RI leaders speak
- Explore case studies
- Sample RI's books about the new consumer and e-commerce innovation
- Watch videos of RI-sponsored iCitizen symposiums
- Tour RI offices in Columbus, Cincinnati, Chicago, and San Francisco

In addition to putting links like these below a copy block (or instead of doing so), you can make any word or phrase in the copy a link itself (for example, "consumer insights," "e-commerce," or "Fortune 500 companies"), inviting readers to jump immediately to whatever interests them most.

You can see how, for the Web, the writer took the copy back toward outline form rather than continue the essay-like structure. Also, the Web version inverts the pyramid: the copy starts with the biggest idea, then divides the rest into subtopics. Each link lets readers bypass the linear sequence of print copy—a major distinction between the Internet and print, one that determines so much of how to write for it. Another obvious difference, as we've seen, is the Web's ability to weave in other kinds of material (in this case videos and an



11.12. This site for the United Methodist Church knows how to keep things simple and how to use the command form of the verb to invite action.

interactive timeline), options unavailable in print. Web prose is more outline- and link-driven, as well as being video- and motion-enabled.

Everyone intuitively accepts these differences between the Web and print, but they're easy to forget when it's time to write a website. Use interactive media the way they want to be used. Take advantage of their possibilities. (See fig. 11.12 for a website's home page, crisp and focused, that helps viewers get where they want to go.)

How to write for social media

"The market started out as a place where people talked about what they cared about, in voices as individual as the craft goods on the table between them."

—DOC SEARLS AND DAVID WEINBERGER,
The Cluetrain Manifesto

When you work in social media, you're a copywriter, but you're not writing copy; you're having conversations. Whether you're writing for your client's Twitter account or Facebook page, creating and sustaining a

blog on its website, or entering social media in some yet-to-be-determined format, your skill as a conversationalist is what's for sale.

HOW HARD CAN TALKING BE?

It sounds easy enough, but real conversation is rare. If I monitor my "conversations" for a day, I see that often I'm doing all the talking or someone else is—and it's unclear whether either of us is really listening. Genuine conversation, in which each person thinks about what the other has said and responds to it, is so rare that many people are surprised when they encounter it. I usually am.

Your goal in social media is to be that surprising. Listen and reply without resorting to scripted shtick: "Thank you for your interest in our products. Your message has been forwarded to the appropriate department." No one is home, and it's audible.

HOW TO TALK BETTER

"A conversation, like dancing, has some rules, although I've never seen them stated anywhere. The objective of conversation is to entertain or inform

the other person while not using up all of the talking time. A big part of how you entertain another person is by listening and giving your attention. Ideally, your own enjoyment from conversation comes from the other person doing his or her job of being interesting. If you are entertaining yourself at the other person's expense, you're doing it wrong."

—SCOTT ADAMS, creator of the comic strip *Dilbert*

Here are suggestions for improving your conversational chops:

Start by listening

Open yourself to what the other person is saying, a skill few of us can say we've mastered. Work on it. Remember: the best way to get people to listen to you is to listen to them. Which leads to this:

Find out what people want to talk about and talk about that

What kind of dialogue do consumers want to have with your brand? Make a short list of topics that your brand can "own." What's your brand's point of difference, its point of view? What useful knowledge can your brand share with people? Start sharing. You want to get people talking about your blog or tweet or website or Facebook page. If you don't get that bounce, rethink what you're talking about.

Don't be boring, part one

How do you get people to want to talk with you and tell their friends and associates about you? By being interesting. What kind of people are interesting? Friendly ones, smart ones. People who are helpful, funny, surprising. Nicke Bergstrom, a creative director at Mother, New York, encourages writers to imagine that they're dating the customer.¹¹ Make it a good date.

Bring news, assistance, and insight to the conversation—and mind your manners. Ask real questions rather than fake ones. For example, ask what you're doing badly and how you can do it better; ask what people want from your site or blog or brand; ask them if they think the new app is crummy. Be genuinely curious about things said to you and things you notice. Don't be a huckster (remember, it's a *social* medium first, not a sales medium).

Don't be boring, part two

If you speak or write badly, you're boring. Lots of times people tune out not because the subject bores them but because its treatment does. Say whatever you're saying well: hit the ground running. Be organized. Shape your message for your audience. Tighten and sharpen. Create pictures. Speak truth.

Design your message for your audience

You evoke responses from a set already inside your listener; you don't "inject" him or her with your meaning. As branding consultant Tom Hinkes points out, "Consumers choose brands they agree with. . . . A successful brand's message has to be consistent with and confirm the consumer's map."¹²

So say things in terms your audience already uses; reinforce their point of view (their values, beliefs, ideas, and interests) when you talk with them. Attach your idea to something your audience already believes. That's the only way you have a chance of persuading anyone of anything.

In *The Good Listener*, Hugh Mackay provides this example of working with an audience's mindset. Range Rover created an ad campaign whose theme line was "Write your own story." (This now seems like *every* brand's mantra, but the campaign predates the cliché.) Mackay says, "They were not persuading people to change their attitudes: they were persuading people who *already dreamed of escape* to focus those dreams on Range Rover. Their purpose was to change people's behaviour by tapping into an existing attitude."¹³

Interactive copywriter Nick Osborne says it this way: "Don't write about the thing you're selling. Write about the people to whom you're selling it."¹⁴ Cast everything—especially what matters to you—into terms that matter to your listener.

If you say, "Let me explain our wonderful new solar panel," that's you talking to yourself about something you find interesting. Why should anyone else care? Recast it:

"Looking at your heating bills this winter, maybe you've started to think about solar panels. We've been thinking about them, too . . ."

Better, yes?

If you say, "New distribution methods are coming," what's that mean to anyone?

"We've streamlined shipping so you can get faster service."

Better:

How can people *do* something as a consequence of what you're saying?

Doing reinforces any communication, as people realize whenever they're asked to put an idea to use. They can read about how to play baseball, but nothing replaces a sharp grounder hit right at them.

If people don't have to do anything with a message, they might not even listen to it. Create responsibility by encouraging a response. The simplest thing is to use the command form of the verb. "Play the game now." "Choose your favorite color." "See all the podcasts." "Learn more." A command is exactly that.

More than saying things at people, you're encouraging them to have an experience. Think that way.

For example, people like to enter contests, accumulate points, and gain rewards, simple as these things are. If you're Ace Hardware, maybe you can, with your rewards program (points given for purchases), have categories of participation: when a person first joins the program, he or she is a "do-it-yourself-er." After so many points, that person rises to "craftsman" or "craftswoman" (with extra benefits), and so on. Let people in; reward them for participating; encourage them to advance. These are universal human needs.

Make an emotional connection

"Brands are like people. They have to have a heart."

—BOB THACKER, senior vice president of marketing and advertising, OfficeMax

How do you do work on behalf of the brand without turning it into a shameless—and counterproductive—pitch?

"Look for the emotional lever," advises teacher and online writer Larry Asher. "People don't buy beer, elect candidates, or order stock photos for rational reasons. Figure out what emotional fuse your product lights and talk about that—whether the topic is fine French perfume or used dump trucks."¹⁵ This is an honorable way to be authentic while still intersecting the brand. Be yourself, but be the parts of yourself interested in what your client's brand evokes in consumers.

What feelings are connected with your client's brand or products?

Copywriters used to try to *persuade* people (sometimes they still do). But now, especially in interactive media, they try to *engage* people enough that they'll persuade themselves. To do that, make an emotional connection:

At Goodby, I learned how you build brands, how you make people feel something, which is, ironically, maybe the most primal of interactive things. When we say interactive, you think, oh, I got someone to do something, but a more basic part of interactive is to make people feel something.

—JEFF BENJAMIN, interactive executive creative director, Crispin Porter + Bogusky¹⁶

Take the conversation somewhere

You don't have the same circling conversation with friends every day. If you do, they're not really friends, just people you ride the elevator with or meet at the mailbox. Friends take their relationship out for a walk. A relationship is a journey. A brand's fifth contact with a consumer shouldn't sound like the first one. The relationship will have developed; talk like it has:

One of our philosophies is to think of a campaign as a continuing conversation or correspondence. It should always be bringing you [the consumer] something new, something you didn't know already. Whereas most advertising is like the same Xeroxed letter that gets sent to you over and over again.

—ALEX BOGUSKY, co-founder, Crispin Porter + Bogusky¹⁷

Create a persona

"Authentic persona" isn't a contradiction. Be yourself or some version of yourself, not just Universal Nicey-Nice Person #38. Create, by how you talk, a character, an individual.

Here's an excellent example, from *Time* columnist James Poniewozik, of how to be someone instead of no one, this time within the confines of Twitter:

Twitter is pure voice, an exercise in implying character through detail and tone. [Comedy writer Justin] Halpern's inaugural @shitmydadsays tweet is so economical that it should be taught in writing workshops: "I didn't live to be 73 years old so I could eat kale. Don't fix me your breakfast and pretend you're fixing mine." Instantly, we know how old Dad is; we know he has

a fine-tuned b.s. detector; we know he is fond of pleasure and not of rabbit food; we can infer that his breakfast-fixing adult son has moved in with him. All in fewer than 120 characters, including quotation marks.¹⁸

Tweets by journalist and food expert Michael Pollan wrap links in Pollan's distinct point of view.

 See tweets by Michael Pollan at fig. W-11.12.

Learn from print

Tweets—to name just one of the tight spaces in which digital copy lives—are studies in being succinct. Twitter's great virtue is its quick, of-the-moment nature, and many tweets are brief utilitarian comments, replies, or links. If you're tweeting for a brand, you may assume that maintaining the customer base—answering questions, routing problems to whoever can solve them, slapping high fives with happy consumers—limits you to quotidian exchanges without stylistic polish. Clarity, yes. Pizzazz, not so much.

But print headlines are studies in brevity, too, and the best headline writers keep their wits about them. So, if you wish, study chapter 16's advice about headlines to see what might make a tweet last longer than an M&M.

Which of these are tweets and which are headlines from the archives of print advertising?

Ever want to shower but don't feel like getting wet?

Studies find top three most stressful moments in people's lives: death, divorce, and properly pronouncing "Worcestershire sauce."

Napping at work can boost productivity.

Where is it written that rain falls only on men?

If you really want to see great creative [work], let me do your taxes.

Contrary to popular opinion, enough grapefruit *can* make you fat.

Hard to tell which is which, isn't it? For the record, the first three are tweets, the last three are print ad headlines.

Forward into the past: learn from old-fashioned direct mail

Another genre by which to learn how to write compel-

ling lines is direct response advertising. The Internet is direct response, of course, but I'm talking about old-fashioned direct mail, the kind that used to stuff mailboxes before e-mail stuffed inboxes instead. Direct mail practitioners, many dead and gone, often lie outside the awareness of young writers. If you're working on, say, a Twitter headline or a promotional headline at a retail website, you want to pull in traffic. The masters of direct mail had exactly the same problem: write a line that compels action.

So they did. Consider, for example, the following headlines from the now defunct Sharper Image catalog, a compendium of upscale, urbanite accessories. Imagine these lines as Twitter headlines linking to offers or other content. Notice how each headline pinpoints product and benefit:

For an electronic, pocket-sized Spanish/English translator: "5 lbs. of Spanish on a microchip."

For a teensy, clip-on reading light: "Marriage-saving light for bookworms."

For a 2-in-1 travel product: "Hair dryer elopes with the travel iron."

For a car cover that automatically gathers itself up: "Self-retracting instant garage."

For a talking scale: "Your weight, well spoken."

Each headline is succinct yet intriguing. Go back to the work of the direct mail copywriters; their techniques still apply.

Be specific

Details are another way to say something instead of nothing. Here are two of the abundant Twitter comments when Steve Jobs stepped down at Apple in 2011: "Steve Jobs is the greatest leader our industry has ever known," wrote one Tweeter. "It's the end of an era."

"Funny how much emotion you can feel about a stranger," wrote Susan Orlean, the author. "And yet every phone call I make, every time I'm on a computer, he's part of it."

Susan Orlean's comment lingers, the other one fades. Why? Because she's giving readers moments to visualize, tangible moments, with emotions attached. He's being general and clichéd. They're saying similar things, both things are true, but the key to entering the brain long enough to get remembered or retweeted is being valuable. Specifics have value.

Can there be too much of a good thing?

There's a backlash to all this socializing, of course: too much muchness. How long and how often do people want to talk about laundry detergent or toothpaste or spark plugs? How many times a week do they need updates from their hardware store? People's interruptions are now being interrupted, their digressions digressed upon, every moment up for digital invasion, revision, or augmentation. People are prodded into sharing their every half-thought with the rest of planet earth, invited to comment on each single thing, engage in unending dialogue with all the brands that can get at them. "Tell us! Right now! What you think!" the brands implore.

Enough already.

Word of mouth is the oldest advertising channel on planet earth, and the truest one, too. That's why social media have become so ubiquitous: when real people say what they really think, they don't set off what Hemingway claimed everyone had: a built-in bullshit detector. Social media speak the people's truth, which is a lot more reliable than what passes for truth from many public relations firms, media conglomerates, and advertisers.

But too many words from too many mouths too

often is a working definition of cacophony. It gets too noisy to hear anyone.

Even Bob Garfield, former ad critic for *Advertising Age* and an evangelist for new media, especially social media, confessed in a blog post:

There's no bigger proponent of the Relationship Era than yours truly; I can talk the talk as well as anyone. As you know, in books and lectures and columns and consulting, I make a living at it. But, when push comes to shove, do I really walk the walk?

Oh, sure, I have a Twitter account. But @bobosphere doesn't hit send very often. I follow people who ovulate more than I tweet. I have a Facebook page, though it mostly gathers dust. I haven't looked at my own radio show's Facebook fan page in six months. You can put jumper cables on my privates and I still won't join FourSquare. I don't want you to know where I am ever, and I sure don't care where you're sipping chai, either. Have a scone. Go crazy, but leave me out of it.¹⁹

Garfield sounds fed up enough to head for the Montana mountains, but I'm betting he's just worn out and cranky. He needs a little silence. As do we all.