

# Top of Mind

Perspectives and Commentary

## Make It Simple— Somebody, Please

**I** HAVE a simple request. Will marketers please put up or shut up about how simple they're making my life? Geico assures us that figuring out its rates is "so easy a caveman can do it." Citibank campaign pushes its "simplicity" credit-card program.

Kodak, California Closets, TurboTax, e-Loan, CapitalOne—everyone, it seems, is riding the simplicity bus these days.

Well, it's getting very crowded. And very tiresome.

It isn't that I'm opposed to simplicity. Nor am I oblivious to that fact that certain products really do, in fact, simplify our lives—and do so without talking all that much about it. Apple is a good example. So is E-Z Pass. FreshDirect, too. The fact is, when you really deliver simplicity, people get it.

My gripe is that the simplicity mantra has been relentlessly overworked, overexposed and oversold. And I say that both as a branding consultant and a consumer. Whatever it is you're selling—mortgages, power tools or frozen lasagna—please don't woo me with promises to make my life easier unless you're prepared to do it.

Ironically, the companies that bray the loudest about simplicity are the same ones that wouldn't know simple if it bit them. Philips is one of the most unrepentant simplicity abusers. Admittedly, a few of its products (notably a patient-friendly MRI machine that reduces the need for sedation) actually do have a simplifying effect. But study Philips' backlight televisions and battery-driven toothbrushes; I challenge you to identify what makes them uniquely simple.

Or consider Staples, which has built its brand on a guarantee to streamline the



By Peter Rogovin

**When you really deliver simplicity, people get it. So why do so few companies actually do it?**

experience of ordering office supplies (including their red "Easy" buttons, retailing at \$4.98). I shop at Staples, both online and in person. It's an impressive operation with a wide selection and competitive prices. But I have yet to find shopping at Staples noticeably more or less simple than at, say, OfficeMax or Office Depot. In fact, my firm recently performed an audit of the three major office supply superstores to see how many mouse clicks it took to locate some common, popular products. The results were identical for all three companies.

Staples, by the way, has long been my special source of quirkily-shaped Regal paper clips, which I find are more attractive and effective than conventional clips. Staples has a private-label version called "Staples Regal Clips," but the last time I tried to order them at staples.com, they were nowhere to be found. I wound up driving to the nearest Staples store. (Note to Staples: That *wasn't* easy.)

To be sure, as our lives grow ever more complicated, our need for simplicity becomes more acute, which means that the promise of simplicity is now a wholly valid way to define a brand and connect it to a meaningful consumer need. But this strategy only works if a brand demonstrates its positioning; if the product or service really solves the problem that created the need in the first place.

I harbor this suspicion that simplicity

is regarded as a marketing quickie for brands whose competitors already own the classic value propositions of low price, high service, status and best performance.

"Wait!" some marketer behind the focus group glass says. "People say their lives are spinning out of control. Let's be the 'easy' brand!" So they reposition their brand, and assume their work is done.

It isn't. Some of the most glaring examples of the gulf between promise and delivery are in the telephone industry. I still grit my teeth when I think about a certain wireless carrier whose direct mail comes plastered with the word "Simplify" on the envelope.

Oh, really? When I needed my phone repaired, I visited the help desk at one of this company's stores, only to be told to return home and call the 800 tech-supported number. I did that. The rep on the line told me to return to the store.

If we can agree that simplicity is a virtue, the solution would seem to lie in changing and enhancing the product and service, and not just the message. Listen to your customers. Find out where the impediments to true simplicity are. Then build a model to remove them and actually *deliver* the simplicity.

Easier said than done? Yes—and that's exactly my point. Promising to bring simplicity to our lives is easy; delivering is anything but. A simple piece of advice to bear in mind.

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