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## Designing public documents<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

For the last 19 years, I have been helping develop the methods for designing Australian public documents – those ordinary forms, notices, bills, timetables, labels, instructions, and web sites that are in the public domain and are one of the principal means of communication between organisations and individuals.

In collaboration with government, industry, the public, and my colleagues at the Communication Research Institute of Australia (CRIA), I have been developing the methods that enable organisations to produce these public documents to a high standard.

Based on that experience, I have come to the view that there is now no technical barrier to designing public documents to extremely high standards, though there remains much work to be done in training document designers to do the work, and in securing the necessary commitment and funding from organisations that produce public documents. In this paper, I am going to focus on some of the technical aspects of designing public documents to a high standard.

In a way, it is odd that we consistently fail to produce many public documents that work well. After all, since the reinvention of movable type in Europe in the 15th century, we have invented many highly effective typographic, layout, navigation, and writing practices. We have invented many new ways in which people can use

documents. We also have many millions of hours of writing, designing, and reading experience behind us.

From this extensive experience we have accumulated a vast store of agreed social practices. A great deal has been articulated in formal and informal style guides (Walker, 2001). We have dictionaries, thesauruses, many thousands of fonts, guides for writers and readers, and all the many informal and unarticulated practices that form a vast corpus – part of our infrastructure for understanding.

So we come to this moment as document designers with a great deal to guide what we do, yet it is a matter of common experience that many public documents are inelegant, difficult to understand, and unwieldy to use.

There are, of course, the economic and social reasons why this should be so. Our major contemporary institutions – government and capitalism – are not interested in good document design *per se*. Governments are primarily concerned with social control, and capitalism is primarily interested in making money.

Doing things well in an area which is not central to the organization's function or survival needs special justification. The fact that good document design costs more money in initial outlays often acts as a disincentive, though as the research shows, doing things well can lead to significant downstream cost savings, productivity gains, and customer satisfaction (Fisher & Sless, 1989; Sless, 1992).

These institutions' current interest in good document design, dating back to the mid '70s, is a product of democratic pressure and the economic power of consumers. Without these primary drivers, the interest in good document design – usually under the banner of such slogans as 'plain language', 'user-centred design', or 'customer friendliness' – would probably not occur. However, even where the interest does arise, and the desire to do things well is genuine, it is still the case that public documents are rarely designed to a high standard, though there have been many well-meaning attempts to do so.

The reasons are in part to do with a lack of awareness and skills in using appropriate methods. Despite our vast store of agreed social practices, we have not had, until recently, the range of practices needed to create high-quality public use documents. Moreover, many of the methods for doing so have been scattered across a range of disciplines, or inaccessible to everyone but the most persistent.

I have been fortunate to work in an environment in Australia which has enabled us to refine and implement some of these practices – new methods and new ways of thinking – in order to enable good document design to occur on a routine basis. We have not been alone in this. Those of you familiar with the *Information Design Journal* and the *Journal of Typographic Research*, now *Visible Language*, will know that before we started our work in the mid '80s, there were many good precedents to guide us. Because of the supportive research and development environment we have enjoyed in the Australian context, we have been able to refine these earlier methods into a new set of routine practices that can be applied across a broad range of public use documents. Moreover, as a research institute we have been able to publish and share our findings, unlike many consultants working in the field.

To give you some sense of these new practices, I will take you through the routine stages we have created in

order to arrive at public documents of a high standard.

The new practices build on the old. Our experience as practitioners and the findings from our research confirm the importance of well-established and well-articulated traditional processes in writing, designing, editing and reviewing documents. While I will not discuss those methods here, there should be no doubt that they are the bedrock on which the new methods build. The new methods are not a substitute for the old.

What do I mean by documents of a high standard? Like the document design practices, which precede us, the new standards of public documents are a matter of social agreement.

It is not our role as researchers or designers to decide those standards unilaterally. Rather, it has been our role to guide the process of social decision-making that leads to setting those standards.

In guiding that process we have asked four questions:

1. what is socially desirable?
2. what is the current performance of documents?
3. what is practically achievable?
4. what is socially acceptable?

In this paper I will try to answer these four questions.

### 1. What is socially desirable?

From an organization's point of view, there are many desirable *technical* attributes relating to the production, distribution and processing of the document. These attributes have to be satisfied before a document can be published and publicly available. Unfortunately, these are the attributes that usually drive the design of public documents. I shall not deal with those here. Instead, I will focus on the desirable attributes that are forcing their attention on organisations with the rise of democratic institutions and consumer power.

My Institute's nineteen years of detailed consultation

and research has taught me a great deal about the public's sense of the desirable attributes of public documents – that is, the socially desirable attributes.

It is a matter of common experience in our time that we are all routinely confronted by more information than we can absorb. As a consequence, many of us have developed information avoidance strategies, such as filling our trashcans with all the documents we don't want to look at. A document must rise above a certain threshold to avoid becoming landfill or recycling material.

Before people engage seriously with the content of any public document, they first have to read it – and they choose to read the documents that display the following desirable attributes.

#### *Attributes that encourage reading*

##### 1. credible

A primary desirable attribute of any document is its credibility to the user. It must not only be accurate and authoritative but must be perceived as accurate and authoritative.

##### 2. respectful of them

People are sensitive to the degree to which a social situation is respectful of them. So the question of whether or not a document shows respect for them is important. Here is a negative example taken from our own testing of medicine information:

A consumer bought a product because the packaging looked beautifully designed and clear, only to discover that the instructions inside the package was poorly printed on thin paper with the print showing through from the other side. Even though the information was actually legible and easy to understand, this person decided not to use the product or take the brand seriously because they believed that

whoever produced the information was disrespectful of them.

The consumer went on to say: "They put a lot of effort into designing the package so that I would buy it, but you can tell they don't really care about the customer when you see the lack of effort they put into designing the instructions!" Note that in this example the document may have been easy to use, but the customer didn't get that far.

##### 3. attractive

One way of bestowing importance, value, and dignity to the reader's task is to make the document attractive to look at and inviting to read. Being attractive is not just about first impressions or creating a quick effect in a marketing sense – grabbing the consumers' attention. It is about long-term satisfaction, so that each communicative occasion enhances the relationship between the reader and the document.

##### 4. physically appropriate

Can the document be used appropriately in its physical context? For example:

- reading a road map in a moving car
- reading the instructions on a child's medicine bottle in the middle of the night, with the child screaming in the background
- finding out which path to take in an unlit campus late at night
- reading the terms and conditions of an agreement in a crowded, noisy shop
- reading a patient's treatment schedule under dim lighting.

##### 5. socially appropriate

People can have many different types of social relationships: they can be citizens, workers, consumers, clients, patients, carers, parents and so on.

From the point of view of organizations seeking to establish relationships with people, these complex relationships are often expressed in the relatively crude terms of ‘customer loyalty’ or ‘trust’.

However, people enter into social relations with organisations with some expectation of what the relationship might involve, and they judge organisations on the extent to which those organisations match or adapt to their expectations.

The symptoms of failed adaptation are dramatically clear. Businesses lose customers, and governments lose elections. In the worst cases, businesses fold and regimes collapse. In other words, people walk away from or resist the relationships that do not meet their expectations.

Specific social relationships have their own dynamics of conversation and forms of politeness. For example, public health information documents partake of a complex web of social relations between the people who use the information on the one hand and the people or organisations who provide the information on the other hand. An advertising mode of address might be acceptable from a manufacturer of a product. Would the same mode be acceptable between a health care provider and person who is feeling ill?

Here are some examples of relationships that you might find inappropriate:

- a government department which has an obligation to provide you with services calls you a customer
- a tax office collecting mandatory taxes calls you a client
- a college at which you are studying calls you a target audience
- a shop where you sometimes buy groceries calls you a friend.

These five attributes apply as soon as someone has decided to read a document, and must be present for the reader’s interest to be sustained. At any moment, if a desirable attribute is not present, a document can become landfill.

In addition, there are some desirable attributes needed to sustain use of a document.

#### *Attributes that sustain reading*

##### 1. easy to use

This is what is sometimes referred to as usability. It is concerned with the ease with which people can use the information. Can they find what they are looking for? Can they understand it when they find it? Can they use the information appropriately? Is there enough information for them to use it appropriately?

##### 2. efficient

For example, how long does a person have to spend looking through a guide to a particular service to find what they are interested in? The information may be there, but if it takes them too long to find, they might give up.

##### 3. productive

People need to find their engagement with documents productive; the information needs to be useful, reassuring, or leading to something new such as being able to resolve a query about charges, the steps to take to make a complaint, or the opportunity to buy a new product. In other words, the information opens up the possibility of future action and dialogue.

### **Getting down to specifics**

While the above desirable requirements are expressed in a general way, we have to express these desirable attributes quite specifically when it comes to particular documents. To give you a sense of what this involves, I will take you through the kinds of processes we use on particular documents to articulate some of these specifics.

### Specifying the tasks

In the first part of the process, guiding the social decision making, we organise an advisory group which is broadly representative of all those with an interest in the outcome – typically government, industry, consumers and professions. We ask this group a question: *what do you want people to do with this document?* To help them, we compile a preliminary list of tasks. We give this list to each member of the working group, asking them to critically review the list – changing the tasks, adding to them, removing them, and placing them in order of priority from their point of view.

In asking this question we are moving document producers away from their normal decision-making processes where they focus on the content and decide what they want people to know or what information they want to give. By focusing their attention on the *outcomes* rather than the content, we are deliberately distancing them from the writing, design, and editing of the document.

If possible, we deal with each member of the advisory group individually. This avoids the differences between the constituencies getting in the way of the task at hand.

The particular question we ask and the way in which we handle the group's activity has another beneficial effect. It avoids the group turning itself into an editorial committee, endlessly debating which form of words or layout will be best.

Figure 1 shows you part of a list of tasks that was the subject of discussion between us and interested parties in the development of consumer medicines information in Australia (Sless & Wiseman, 1997, p. 129). During the course of that discussion we modified and changed the list several times before consolidating the views of all interested parties into one document. Interestingly, these particular sets of parties are known to have quite different public views and interests on the subject of

## Schedule 12

## Patient actions

### 4. How to use the medicinal product properly

The necessary and usual instructions for proper use of the medicinal product, in particular:

- the dosage, together with an indication that this may not always apply and may be modified by the prescriber
- the method, and if necessary, route of administration
- the frequency of administration, specifying, if necessary, the appropriate time at which the medicinal product should or must be used.

In addition, depending on the nature of the therapeutic goods:

- the duration of treatment, if it should be limited
- the expected effect of using the medicinal product
- what to do if one or more doses have not been taken
- the way treatment should be stopped, if stopping the treatment may lead to withdrawal or other adverse effects.

The patient should know what the normal dose [4.1] and method of application [4.2] is for them (or the person they are treating). Patients should know to seek medical advice if the dose they have been told to take [4.3] or the method of application [4.4] they have been shown is significantly different to that on the CMI. Patients should also be able to recognise what a 'significant difference' is [4.3].

The patient should be able to calculate the appropriate dose [4.5] (if appropriate or in the case of OTCs). This may involve:

- reading the insert (or label or package) to find what the standard dose is
- weighing themselves (or the patient), multiplying weight by dose per kilogram, and then dividing by dosage strength per tablet or volume (alternatively, the patient may have to read the dose, based on weight, from a table).

Patients in an at-risk group should be able to modify the standard dose by following instructions from their doctor or pharmacist, in conjunction with the instructions on the CMI [4.5]. ▶

Figure 1.

Performance criteria on which to base the benchmarking "The main aim is to get people to renew their policy by the due date."

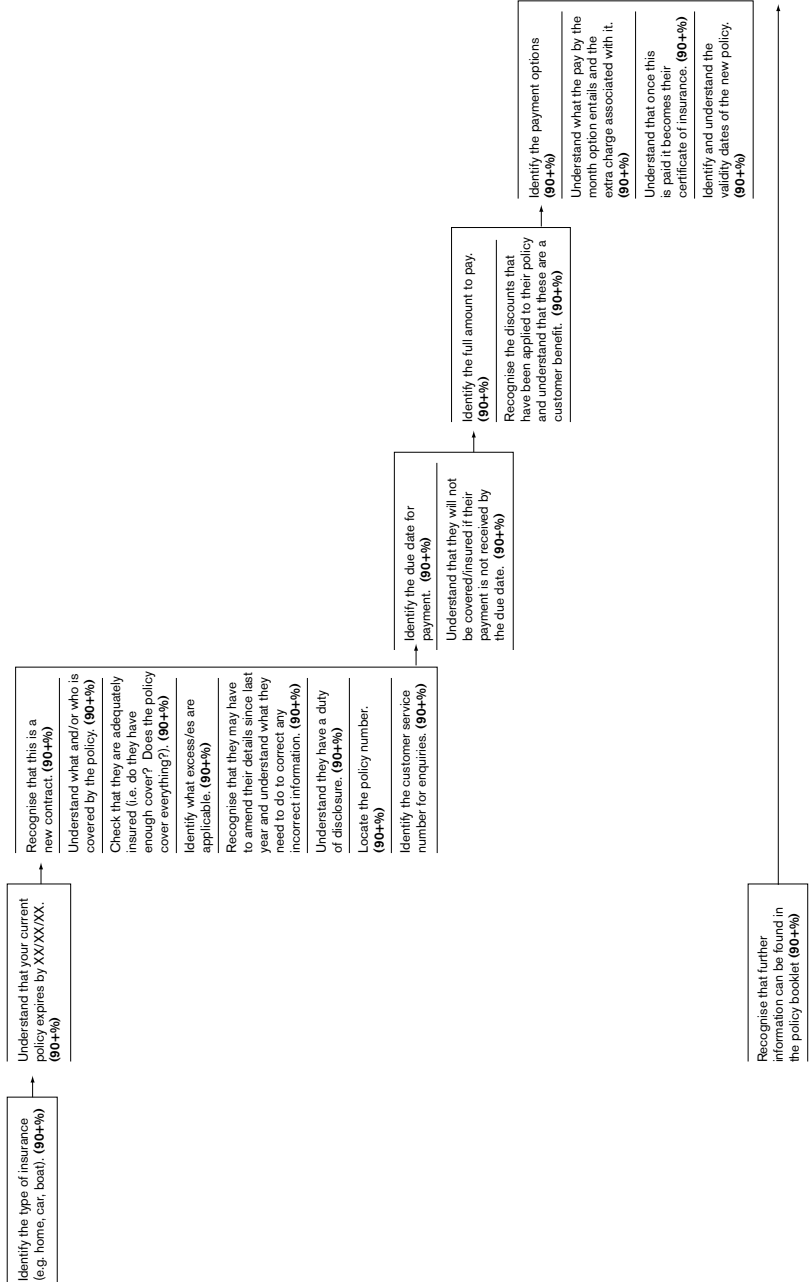


Figure 2.

providing medicines information to consumers. However, when each interest was approached separately, their opinions did not diverge significantly. In fact, we were able to complete this part of our process quite quickly.

Figure 2 shows you part of a list in the process of development for a different type of public document – an insurance policy renewal and certificate for Insurance Australia Group Limited (IAG), the largest Australian and New Zealand general insurance company. In this instance, you can see both the list of tasks and the order in which a customer might complete the tasks.

Agreement on the list of tasks is the first stage in the process of setting the ease-of-use standards for any public document.

Alongside the process of working out the tasks, we undertake a formal analysis of the document compo-

nents (*parsing*) to identify the potential functional components from the readers' point of view. Parsing focuses on the pragmatics of a document. It seeks to identify the components that correspond to the tasks undertaken by the reader; for example, some components, such as headings, page numbers, contents and indexes, aid navigation through the document. Each kind of component corresponds to a specific kind of search task, or aids the completion of certain types of search tasks.

Figure 3 shows you another example – a list of functional elements for over-the-counter medicines that enable consumers to choose a medicine appropriately at the point of sale. This list is part of an industry code of practice that we developed for the non-prescriptions medicine industry in Australia (CRIMA, 2003, p. 10.)

	<i>Name of part</i>	<i>Function</i>
<i>Consumer choice</i>	Product/Brand name	Recognised when making a choice of product and provides brand identity
	Technical/Generic name/s	Helps choice of product
	Pack size	Number of individual items or total volume in pack (tablet, capsules, liquid, etc.)
	Dosage form	Helps choice of product
	Dosage information	Strength of product/amount per item
	Type of product*	Helps choice of product
	What it's used for (indication)	Helps choice of product
	Qualified claim for product*	Helps choice of product
	Do not use (contraindications)	Helps choice of product
	How it works*	Reinforces choice of product

Figure 3.

## 2. What is the current performance of the documents?

In the case of a document that has yet to be designed, we bypass this stage. However, we are usually concerned with redesigning existing documents rather than creating entirely new ones. Then, armed with an agreed set of desirable actions, we ask: where are we now? What is the performance of the current document?

To answer this we undertake a series of conversations with a small number of the document's users. Through these conversations we test the document's performance.

It is important to distinguish this type of conversation and document testing from usability testing (Nielsen, 1993). Usability testing has its origins in psychology and human factors research methods, and follows agreed scientific conventions, procedures, and standards of evidence and proof. Our conversations with people do not; they are much more like clinical investigations. Indeed, we call our method 'diagnostic testing' (Sless & Wiseman, 1997, pp. 73–96). The conversations are conducted one-on-one, and the purpose of each conversation is to seek the participant's help in testing the performance of the document. Insofar as this activity can be described as testing, it is not the people but the documents that we are testing. During the conversations we ask them to perform tasks with the document, selected from the list of previously agreed tasks. We are particularly interested to discover the tasks they find difficult or impossible to perform. These are the pathological symptoms of a document's ill health.

This type of social framing (Goffman, 1974) is a long way from the neutral stance of objective science. For a start, we are highly biased in the people we invite to participate in the conversations. We specifically seek out people who are likely to 'present with symptoms', as it were. For example, in the case of medicines information, we would select older people with poor educational backgrounds who are already on multiple medications.

These are individuals known to be at risk of misunderstanding and misusing medication. However, we exclude from this group individuals who regard themselves as unable to perform reading tasks to maximise our opportunities for discovering faults.

Moreover, we encourage our participants to present symptoms. We tell them that we are trying to find out what is wrong with the document. We regard the symptoms that people present (for example, not being able to find information) as symptoms of a document's pathological condition. The full relevance of this approach will become apparent later.

The diagnostic approach also determines the number of people we invite to participate in these conversations. We are not interested in 'representative' samples or statistical significance in determining numbers. Our primary interest is in spotting as many pathological symptoms as we can, within the limits of available resources.

A useful way to look at this is by analogy. Suppose you had a staircase that had a few creaking steps: every time someone went up the staircase you could hear it creak annoyingly a number of times. How many people would you need in a sample to climb up and down the staircase to find the location of the creaks, and should you have a representative sample of staircase users to find out which steps creak? Would the sample size be important? Clearly, these types of consideration – so much a part of social science research – are not relevant in this context. By analogy, the same is true of document testing. Moreover, as with the staircase, to find out if the problem in a document has been fixed does not need a large representative sample of readers.

With fairly simple documents, most of the symptoms are identified in the first ten conversations. We stop when we are no longer collecting new symptoms, only repetitions of existing ones. Only in cases where a document is very widely used in a mission-critical context do we try to exhaust all possible symptoms:

for example, a small number errors on a tax form or a phone bill can cause major financial effects or increased complaints to call centres. In those cases, we may recruit about 50 people to help us.

In Figure 4, you can see a small part of a typical data set from such conversations, in this case an insurance renewal notice and certificate that we had been asked to improve. These results are from the unimproved

	QUESTION 8	QUESTION 9
	<i>Can you tell me, from reading this document, when the current policy expires?</i>	<i>Can you tell me the proposed dates for the new contract?</i>
participant 1	looked at validity date and read out expiry for new policy rather than current. "...2003 "	Read validation dates.
participant 2	Couldn't find information referring to expiry dates. "Can 't see it."	Took a long time to find validity dates. Initially didn 't look at tinted section. "12//8/02 to 12/8/03."
participant 3	Looked at validity date for new contract. "16/6/02 -I 'd presume, this was the date – it doesn 't seem to clearly state when current insurance expires (confused with dates for new contract).	Could not locate when it expired.
participant 4	Confused new contract dates with current policy expiry date. "Midnight 16/6/02 "	Referred to validity dates in tinted section. "16/6/02 –..."
participant 5	Referred to "pay by date " Couldn't find section referring to current policy. "Expires 16/02/02 I would assume considering I have to pay by that date."	Referred to validity dates. "16/6/02 –..."
participant 6	Respondent went to due date, "1/5/02 "	Respondent looked on the back and eventually found in blue strip.

**Figure 4.** Answers given by test participants to two questions in the benchmark testing of an insurance renewal document

document then in use. Figure 4 shows the results of two questions; the grey cells show where people had difficulty finding the information, or couldn't find it, or gave incorrect answers.

In this particular case, approximately 25% of the answer cells in the entire data set were in grey. These results are not unusual in unimproved public documents. This type of data is valuable for three reasons:

1. It provides the client organization with clear evidence of a document's current performance against desirable attributes. A full data set, with large areas of grey, as shown in Figure 4, can be very compelling.
2. It provides us, the document designers, with a great deal of insight into what is not working in the document and what we might have to do to improve its performance in the future. It is a highly detailed pathology report on the document.
3. It provides both the organization and ourselves with a set of *benchmark data* against which we can judge the performance of any new design we create.

Introducing this type of data into the document design process was a considerable innovation when my Institute first used it in the 1980's. It is a new practice in the document design process, one with far reaching implications, as we shall see.

### 3. What is practically achievable?

In the next phase of work we move into the development of new prototype documents. Armed with the list of desirable attributes and the diagnostic benchmark data, we try to create a new document that is free of the current document's pathological symptoms.

It is at this point that the traditional document design skills of writing, typography and layout come into play. However, CRIA applies these skills quite differently to the way they have been applied in the past.

1. We do not separate the writing and designing tasks. Writing and designing go hand in hand, often undertaken by the one person who has learnt both crafts, or by a small team that share the skills between them.
2. The redesign is informed by the explicit functional analysis we conducted in the earlier stage.
3. The redesign is informed by the data from the benchmarking study.
4. We use the full range of digital technologies currently available for document design and production. This includes high-end desk-top-publishing software, and full colour digital printing to create prototypes.

The last of these has been available to us with increasing sophistication and flexibility since the mid-1980s. The invention of desk-top-publishing systems and laser printers has had the most profound effect on our document design processes. Prior to these inventions, the process of generating a prototype with all the attributes of a finished document took about 10 days to produce and cost approximately AU\$300 per page. With the digital technologies available since the mid-'80s, we can produce a finished prototype document within hours, for the cost of the printing paper and the capital equipment costs amortised over a year – a few cents per page.

This made it possible for us to create prototypes, test them, refine them following testing, and test them again within a very short time frame. Typically, each round of testing and modification takes about one week.

This iterative process has had the most profound effect on the final quality and performance of the documents we design – that is, what is achievable in practice.

I can show you what this means in practice using the data from the insurance document already mentioned – now a completed project.

The data in Figure 4 is part of a large data set that was collected at the benchmarking stage of the project.

What it showed was that many people had difficulty understanding when a policy ended and when a new contract began. In services such as telephone or electricity, the company does not cut off your supply if you are a few days late in paying your bill. However, in the case of an insurance contract, if you do not pay by the due date, the contract ends and you are not covered. From both the customers' and the company's points of view, misunderstandings about the dates or the consequences of non-payment can be costly. The evidence from the benchmarking showed that some of the key desirable performance requirements of the document were not being met, namely:

- Understanding that your current policy expires by XX/XX/XX.
- Identifying the due date for payment.
- Understanding that you will not be covered/insured if your payment is not received by the due date.

Figure 5 shows you the percentage of participants who met these performance requirements using the then current document and the percentages for each of the subsequent prototypes we developed.

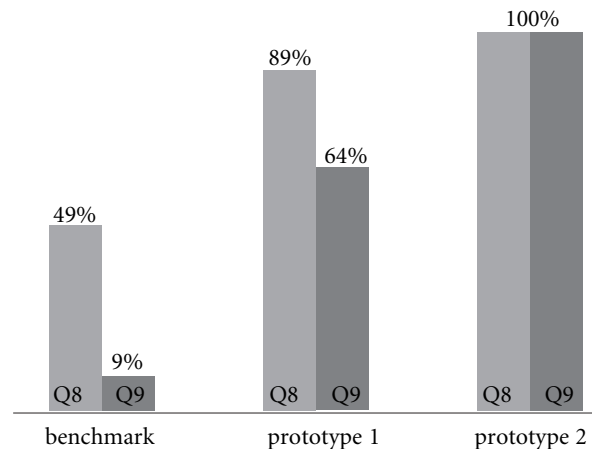


Figure 5. Percentage of participants able to answer questions 8 and 9 about an insurance renewal document

This data shows the progressive improvement in the performance of the documents. Looked at another way, it shows the disappearance of a particular set of pathological symptoms.

This pattern of data – the progressive improvements in document performance and the disappearance of pathological symptoms – is typical of our type of work, as we have shown in previous published case histories (e.g. Rogers et al., 1995, Penman et al., 1996)

It demonstrates what is practically achievable. But we need to bear in mind that behind this achievement lies the exercise of traditional document design skills, without which this level of performance would be impossible. To achieve these results requires the very best of imaginative typographic design and writing, plus the rigorous disciplines of editing and graphic refinement that are a necessary part of traditional good document design. None of these traditional skills can be dispensed with in the new practices. It is the way in which the old and the new are unified that makes these results achievable in practice.

Reaching 100% success on individual tasks is possible. Reaching that level across an entire document, across all tasks and all participants is a difficult task. Many organizations are not willing to go the extra distance to achieve this. It is at this point then that we move from the question of what is possible to what is socially acceptable.

#### 4. What is socially acceptable?

In 1994 – after detailed research on what was practical (Penman et al., 1996), and detailed consultation with all the stakeholders – CRIA provided industry and government with the first set of acceptable document design standards on which to base future development of medicines information for consumers (Sless & Wiseman, 1994, revised 1997). I believe this was the first such

document design benchmark standard that specified the performance of a document in measurable quantitative terms.

The standard specified that:

CPIs [Consumer Product Information] are directed at literate consumers, that is, consumers who say they are able to read.

If you develop a CPI using these Guidelines:

1. Over 90% of literate consumers should be able to find information on the CPI quickly and easily.
2. Over 90% of those who find the information should be able to understand and act on it appropriately.
3. Thus over 81% of literate consumers should be able to use the CPI appropriately.

(Sless & Wiseman, 1994 p. 2)

This standard was adopted – and adapted – by the European Commission (EU) in 1998 for Patient Information Leaflets (EU, 1998). Sadly, and much to the annoyance of manufacturers and consumers, the EU adaptation does not draw on the best of either traditional skills or recent research, which makes it impossible for the industry to comply with the standard.

We have been applying this approach to many types of public documents, including bills, notices, letters, legal and insurance contracts, instruction manuals, and product labels since 1994. Our work in all these areas suggests that it is possible to design public documents to an even higher standard. So over this time, as a result of further research, development, and practice, we have raised the benchmark.

Our most recent benchmark standards for public medicines and financial documents are now specified as:

Consumers who say they are able to read English should be able to use the label as stand-alone information, without help, to:

- find at least 90% of what they look for on a label
- use appropriately at least 90% of what they find.

(CRIA 2003 p. 8)

Superficially this looks the same until you notice that we are applying the standard to 90% the tasks for all consumers, not 90% of consumers. In some recent discussions, it has been suggested that specific tasks should be singled out as needing to be successfully undertaken by all literate consumers.

This is an indication of both what is socially desirable, practical and acceptable in the performance of public documents.

## Conclusion

Using traditional document design and editing processes, modern print technology, and the iterative ‘diagnostic’ method developed by the Communication Research Institute of Australia, documents can now be produced economically to the highest possible standards, for the benefit of all. All that is required is the political will of government regulators, the confidence of commercial organizations, and the education and training of skilful information designers.

Our challenge now, therefore, is to train enough document designers to undertake this work, and to persuade industry and government that public documents need to be of this standard to be acceptable.

## Note

1. This keynote lecture was held during the Document Design Conference at the Tilburg University from 22–24 January, 2004.

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