

Techniques of Persuasive Communication: Old Wisdom in a New Package

by Philip Yaffe

What you are about to read will probably sound familiar. Indeed, it has been said many times before. However, I believe this formulation is original and may help you better apply it in your marketing communication. I immodestly call it Yaffe's Law.

Yaffe's Law

If you give people what they want first, then they are likely to accept anything else you want them to have. If you give them what you want first, chances are they won't accept anything at all.

This is simply the classic principle that you should write from the reader's point of view. And of course we all do this. Or do we?

How often do we interpret writing from the reader's point of view as telling people: "What I have to say will be of benefit to you, so you should pay close attention"? When we do this, we are in fact writing from our point of view, not theirs. We may sincerely believe that our message is important and beneficial to our potential readers. But unless they agree—and agree almost immediately—the argument is lost.

We have all been guilty of such self-serving logic, and some of us do it more often than we would like to imagine. This is why this new formulation of the classic principle is potentially so useful. It forcefully reminds us that the readers are king. And like royalty they must be served first. Only after readers have sampled what we have on offer and find it palatable will they be truly inclined to listen to what we want to say. Assimilate it. And hopefully act on it.

The power of Yaffe's Law lies in the fact that it is more than just a reminder. It is in fact a formula for ensuring that you will always write from the reader's point of view. The trick is first to apply the formula, then check how well you have applied it—and, if necessary, reapply it.

The formula consists of three steps:

1. Determine what your readers really want to know, rather than what you want to say.
2. Give this to them--first.
3. Link what you want to say to what they really want to know.

Here are a few examples of how Yaffe's Law works in practice.

Corporate Image Brochure

I was once commissioned to write a corporate image brochure. Two things are certain about these expensive, glossy booklets:

- Almost all companies of any size feel compelled to produce them.
- Virtually no one ever reads them.

By applying the formula, I created a brochure that people not only read. They called the company to request additional copies to give to friends, clients and professional colleagues!

How? I started from the assumption that no one would want to read anything about the company itself. So I asked myself: What things does the company do that people might really want to read about?

The company's basic activity was producing vaccines. We are all naturally interested in health and virtually everyone knows the importance of vaccination. Here were already two things people might want to read about.

I was able to define seven areas of the company's activities that could be naturally attractive to potential readers. However, it didn't stop there. If all this interesting information were mixed up with company publicity, people would still probably not read it despite their natural inclination to do so.

The brochure was therefore laid out in seven double-page spreads, i.e. each of the seven areas of activity would be allotted two facing pages. However, the text would be rigorously segregated.

- Theory

The left side would be pure science; the company's name would never be mentioned.

- Practice

The right side would explain how the company used the science to produce vaccines.

In short, I gave the readers what they wanted first (scientific information), then what the company wanted them to have second (company information).

When I proposed this to the company, the reaction was one of shock. "You mean people could read the brochure left side only and never ever see our name?" Exactly. But having learned about the basic science, wouldn't they naturally want to learn how the company was using the science?

It took a while for management to accept the idea, but finally they did. When the brochure was ready, they couldn't print enough of them.

Of course, not all companies would be suitable for this particular type of corporate image brochure. The important thing here is not the specific structure of this specific brochure, but the thinking process that led to it.

Stand Specific Video

I have done considerable work for pharmaceutical companies. This often included attending medical congresses. The first couple of times I did this, I noted something strange.

Pharmaceutical companies regularly erect exhibition stands to inform specialist doctors about new drugs and new applications of older drugs. I noted that many of the stands had several video monitors at their edges running videotapes. I observed the behavior of the doctors. The vast majority of them watched the tape for only a minute or two, then went away.

I asked an international marketing director why he was using these monitors and tapes. "To attract attention to our stand," he said. "But the doctors stay in front of the monitor only a couple of minutes, then leave." "Yes, but they were attracted to our stand. They know we are here and may come back."

Frankly, this didn't make much sense to me, but being young and inexperienced I accepted it. A couple of years later, when I felt I knew better what I was doing, I made a suggestion.

The videotapes ran anywhere from 10 - 15 minutes, then automatically recycled. The problem was, doctors who began watching after the tape had started never knew how long they would have to wait for it to finish and restart. Moreover, hardly any were likely to stand in front the video monitor for 15 minutes or more, even if they had known how long the presentation was.

The tapes were so long because they had not been conceived for medical congresses, but for a totally different purpose. They were used simply because they already existed.

I suggested making a "stand-specific videotape", which would concentrate all key information about the company's product into no more than 90 seconds. The fact that the tape ran only 90 seconds and then automatically recycled would be prominently posted, so that the doctors would know exactly how much time they were being asked to invest in it.

Consider the benefits:

1. Virtually all doctors who started to watch the tape stayed for it to recycle.
2. Because they got all the key points, many who wanted more detailed information immediately came onto the stand.
3. Those who were interested but were short of time probably came back later.
4. Even those who were not certain they were interested nonetheless went away with a complete picture of what the company's product was all about.

In short, virtually 100% effectiveness!

There was no way to gauge the effectiveness of the previous system. But if it had been as much as 10%, I would have been shocked.

Interactive Stand Animation System

Another thing I noticed at medical congresses. Doctors would come onto the stand, pick up the brochures and scientific papers, put them in the congress bags, then move on to the next stand and do the same thing. The problem is, pharmaceutical companies could never really tell if doctors actually read the materials they take away. Estimates are that up 95% of it ends up in the hotel's wastepaper basket without ever being opened.

Using the method of Yaffe's Law, a few years ago a colleague and I created what we call the Interactive Stand Animation System. It is applicable not only to medical congresses, but virtually every other kind of professional trade show.

There is not room here to describe how it works, but I can tell you its results.

With this system, you are certain that your brochures, data sheets, etc., are being read, because people read them right in front of you on the stand. Even better, they actually study the documents, then discuss, debate and compare notes with their colleagues. At the same time, they provide you with valuable market research information that would be difficult to obtain in any other way. This can be very important for determining the best ways of presenting your products, which features to emphasize, which aspects may require change for later versions, etc.

I once described this system to the international marketing director of a major pharmaceutical company. He was very sceptical. Basically he said: "I have been in this business for nearly 30 years and I have attended dozens and dozens of medical congresses. What you are telling me just isn't possible." He maintained this position until he went to a congress where we were running the system for another company. His reaction: "I've seen it, but I still don't believe it. I never would have imagined anything like this could possibly be true."

But it was.

Editor's Note

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