


# Boosting Business Performance

Learn, Share, Prosper



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by Adele Sommers, Ph.D.

Adele@LearnShareProsper.com

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● In this Issue:

Greetings!

- Feature Article: **Designing Information to Help People Act Quickly**
- Note from the Author: Information Is Still One of Our Biggest Challenges!
- Special Message: Tips for Communicating in a Local and Global World

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● Note from the Author:

Information Is Still One of Our Biggest Challenges!

Over a decade ago, we were still in the midst of praising the "Age of Information." The Internet had just provided us with a powerful new venue for exchanging ideas, and electronic self-publishing had democratized the world of information distribution. This meant that practically **anyone** with a computer, desktop publishing software, a printer, and/or Internet connection could broadcast ideas to the rest of the world.


**Where are we today?** The amount of available information has exploded and seems to be growing exponentially. We have moved into an age of trying to attract or retain people's awareness, interest and concentration. That's because human **attention** has become one of the world's scarcest commodities!

Therefore, we must overcome stiff competition if we wish to capture our audience's eyes and ears. The quality of our communication -- and in particular, **how we design our information** -- can mean the difference between having an audience or not.

There are many types of information, but if yours requires people to **understand and respond swiftly** to instructions, ideas, or systems, I hope you enjoy today's feature article, "Designing Information to Help People Act Quickly." I look forward to hearing your comments!

Here's to your business prosperity,

Adele



Adele Sommers, author of the "[Straight Talk on Boosting Business Performance](#)" success program

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### ● Special Message:

#### Tips for Communicating in a Local and Global World



I live in a relatively close-knit community, which means that to be successful, we all must cooperate fully when playing the "**communication game.**" What does that mean? Well, first, let's ask what happens when we *don't* play the game.

In a small community, if there's a serious misunderstanding between any two or more parties, it's not as if any of them can easily avoid seeing or interacting with the others. They'll encounter one another at the supermarket, at local events, and in the minds and hearts of many *other* people.

The ripple effects of a disagreement can spread far and wide, hurting feelings and damaging relationships in many unforeseen ways. And even in a **global** community, e-mail and other electronic communications make it difficult to mute those effects.

So to play the communication game properly, I believe we should follow the advice of Dr. Stephen Covey from "[The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People](#)." His Habit 5 is "**Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood.**" This maxim suggests that if we take the time to listen deeply and fully to another party before passing any type of judgment, we will be able to meet the other party more than halfway. In so doing, we can avoid jumping to conclusions and setting in motion many potentially harmful effects that we could regret for weeks, months, or years.

#### Tips for E-Mail Communications

One of my astute newsletter subscribers, **Emmy W.** of Atascadero, California, provided these important reminders for polishing your electronic missives:



##### **1) Your e-mail messages are powerful marketing tools!**

Whether you intend them to or not, they provide many clues about your sense of quality, style, and attention to detail. If you treat them as just "informal chatter" without using real words or correcting your spelling, your audience may develop subconscious opinions about your professionalism and ability to handle a project or deliver a service.

**2) Setting the tone for your messages requires effort!** Especially when you are broaching a delicate subject, try to consider every possible way that your audience can interpret it. Imagine your audience on their worst day, in their most unreceptive mood. Will they fully understand what you mean? If not, keep drafting and refining the message, or ask a trusted friend to evaluate the tone before you press "send."

### ● Feature Article:

#### **Designing Information to Help People Act Quickly** by Adele Sommers

**Today's media-saturated world** challenges people to comprehend and respond quickly to a plethora of visual messages! Did you know that more than 300,000 new book titles appear annually, and over 18,000 magazines exist just in the U.S.? Our colleagues, employees, and customers are all overloaded and **attention-limited!** The competition for their attention is fierce, and not likely to subside any time soon.

For this reason, it's quite possible that our **news-based** and "**how-to**" information

-- such as memos, newsletters, policies, procedures, instructions, user manuals, and system interfaces -- may just be adding to audience overwhelm instead of helping people perform. After all, we also want people to view our **persuasive** information, such as advertisements, marketing blasts, and commercial announcements. Multiply that by the number of **competitors** we have who are doing the same exact thing, and it's easy to see why our materials don't receive attention!



To remedy this situation, we need to "grab people by the eyeballs" and give them more control over what we submit for their attention. We must enable our audiences to **scan, skip, and retrieve** -- and then **act** on the information **fast**, before the relentless demands on their time force their attention to shift elsewhere.

The information we design must be "**high-impact**" to get attention, but also "**low-bandwidth**" in terms of the effort and brain-power required to process it. The easier the information is to process, the more readily people will:

- **Retain** the information
- **Retrieve** from it memory under the right circumstances, and
- **Apply** it correctly

As part of the solution, this article discusses five powerful **information design techniques** that can boost our audience's ability to interpret and respond.

### First, What Shortcomings Do We Find in Business Information?

On more than one occasion, you've probably encountered a puzzling user manual, bewildering procedure, baffling software interface, or confusing memo. Therefore, you've probably seen plenty of examples of dense, crowded text; long-winded, rambling sentences; a convoluted writing style; and a confusing layout.

Why do these things matter? A poor visual presentation **can delay or even prevent** someone from understanding and taking action! The consequences include:

- **Less interesting and less productive** interactions that rob people's time.
- **More mistakes and errors**, while the potential for harm and dissatisfaction skyrockets.
- **Customers and employees going elsewhere**, especially because there are often plenty of competitors who can do the job better! But why let this happen when there are remedies available?



### What Can We Improve Using Effective Information Design?

Information design principles can come to the rescue by:

- **Easing the burden on the reader's brain** through reducing the information processing load.
- **Working within the typical limitations** of short-term memory.
- **Using other extensively researched principles** of perception and learning.



Five ways that information design techniques work their magic include 1) classifying, 2) chunking, 3) simplifying, 4) arranging, and 5) illustrating -- all approaches used in what's called "**structured writing**." The table below briefly discusses each method.

| Technique   | Background Information  |
|---|---|
| <p><b>1) Classifying</b> organizes content into five actionable types: <b>facts, concepts, processes, procedures, and principles.</b></p> <p>By classifying information into these types, we can create specific sections to support and complement one another. For example, readers often need <b>facts</b> and/or <b>concepts</b> before they can use <b>procedures.</b></p> | <p><b>Facts</b> are unique, standalone bits of information, e.g., "Over 300,000 book titles appear annually."</p> <p><b>Concepts</b> represent classes of ideas or objects. "Dog," "book," and "weather" are all concepts, and each represents many specific examples.</p> <p><b>Processes</b> describe how something works from a high-level point of view.</p> <p><b>Procedures</b> are clearly defined steps that explain in detail how to do something.</p> <p><b>Principles</b> are conditional decision-making rules that guide people's actions in different situations.</p> |
| <p><b>2) Chunking</b> breaks the content into smaller, more digestible messages.</p>  | <p>Short-term memory is very limited; humans can process only about 3–4 chunks of information at a time. By "chunking" material into smaller bites, we can reduce the information processing load.</p>  |
| <p><b>3) Simplifying</b> uses very direct, "plain talk" to get ideas across fast.</p> <p>Avoid "corporate-speak," "academic-speak," or a meandering style when you want a fast response!</p>  | <p>"Plain talk" uses the <b>active voice</b> and simple words to communicate ideas. The active voice uses a <b>noun</b> followed by a <b>verb</b> to show who is taking action: "The <b>technician</b> removes the <b>tray</b> from the table" (not "The tray is removed from the table"). <b>Instructions</b> in procedures are short and direct: "Remove the tray from the table."</p>  |
| <p><b>4) Arranging</b> text and graphics with visual cues helps people <b>scan, skip, and retrieve</b> quickly.</p>   | <p>Gestalt psychologists studied visual spatial cues and perception in the 1920s. They learned that the use of visual cues helps direct attention fast.</p> <p><b>Examples of visual cues</b> include bulleted lists, tables, white space, headers, bolded text, labels, dividers, hierarchy, grouping, and relative size.</p>  |
| <p><b>5) Illustrating</b> reinforces or replaces text with graphic elements.</p>  | <p>Much research shows that prose is less efficient and less effective than graphic elements. Robert Horn, author of "<b>Visual Language</b>" (who also developed <a href="#">Information Mapping®</a>, a widely used structured writing system), is a leading authority.</p>   |

**Why Do These Solutions Work?**

| Technique   | Background Information   |
|---|--|
| <p>Structuring, chunking, simplifying, and arranging all aid comprehension.</p>       | <p>Dr. M. David Merrill and Robert Horn have each contributed a set of ideas and methods that use some or all of these techniques. These methods have been tested repeatedly and found to boost reading, retrieval, and learning speeds.</p> |
| <p>Graphic elements further support the retention and application of information.</p> | <p>Extensive multimedia research by Dr. Richard E. Mayer illustrates when and how to mix text and graphics or multimedia. The right blend produces optimal learning, retention, and application.</p>   |
| <p>All methods reduce errors and response time, while raising response quality.</p>   | <p>When you combine these techniques effectively, errors that occur from reader misinterpretations drop greatly. Response time also declines when it's clear to people what to do and how to do it.</p>                                      |

**In conclusion**, don't lose sight of your audience's need to interpret and act quickly. Consider using information design principles -- **classifying, chunking, simplifying, arranging**, and **illustrating** -- to help ensure their success.

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#### ● The Author Recommends:

##### More Resources for Learning About Information Design:

- [Society for Technical Communication](#) (STC)
- [Information Mapping](#)®, a structured writing methodology
- [Visual Language](#), by Robert Horn
- [Multimedia Learning](#), by Richard E. Meyer
- [Developing Technical Training](#), by Ruth Clark
- [E-Learning and the Science of Instruction](#), by Ruth Clark & Richard Mayer

#### ● About the Author:

Adele Sommers, Ph.D. is the author of "Straight Talk on Boosting Business Performance" -- an award-winning Special Report and Workbook program.

If you liked today's issue, you'll love this down-to-earth overview of how 12 potent business-boosting strategies can reenergize the morale and productivity of your enterprise, tame unruly projects, and attract loyal, satisfied customers. It's accompanied by a step-by-step workbook designed to help you easily create your own success action plan. Browse the table of contents and reader reviews on [the description page](#).

Adele also offers no-cost articles and resources to help small businesses and large organizations accelerate productivity and increase profitability. Learn more at [LearnShareProsper.com](#).

LearnShareProsper.com/Business Performance Inc.,  
7343 El Camino Real, Suite 125, Atascadero, CA 93422, USA. For information and Customer Service, call +1-805-462-2187, or e-mail [Info@LearnShareProsper.com](mailto:Info@LearnShareProsper.com).



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