Survival of the Simplest

The Micro-Script Rules

Bill Schley

I have a simple premise: **it's too complicated.**

Now, you might say, "that's rather broad, Bill. In your manifesto, you must tell us *what* is too complicated." And I'd respond simply—"Okay, how about *everything*."
In fact, let's just look at a few…

→ Trying to turn on your cousin's TV (he calls it a home entertainment system) to watch *Madmen*, and failing: *Too complicated.*

→ Remembering to get all five town stickers needed to park your car at the beach, then arguing with the teenaged guard who doesn't care how much you pay in taxes: *Too complicated.*

→ Turning off any of the 3,000 helpful menu pop-up bars on Microsoft Word when all you ever wanted to do for the last fifteen years is get the @#$%&& curser to move to the left: *Too complicated.*

→ Figuring out the twenty less-than-$3 items on your billing statement, then deciding you don't have time to be on hold all afternoon to find out what they are, so you just pay them: *Too complicated.*

→ Trying to manage your 6 year old's social, nutritional and transportational calendar while continuously updating your blog: *Too complicated.*

→ Trying to figure out why the most popular break-out TV star of our generation is Snooki: *Too complicated.*

I could go on, but don't get me started.

All my suspicions were validated when I read a fascinating article in *The New York Times* by David Segal titled "It's Complicated." The article basically relates that the reason for the fall of empires and civilizations throughout history is not because they were invaded by barbarians or ran up the trade deficit, but because their societies got too complex and gridlocked to be managed. They just seized up and fell over. And *then* the Visigoths showed up.

The reason for the fall of empires and civilizations throughout history is ... because their societies got too complex and gridlocked to be managed.

How Do We Change This?

Now, I believe that there is a great, silent majority out there who also perceive this ominous tide, who yearn deeply, instinctively to change this. And they'll give a competitive advantage to any company or individual that helps them do it.

And I think The World-Wide De-Complication Crusade *can* succeed if each of us makes even the smallest contribution of whatever expertise or resources we have to work with. I have built a modest outpost on the front lines of this cause. In a lonely sector of the conflict that has been fought over for centuries but never tamed—marketing, branding and communications in general. That's my field. And with that, we can segue "like buttah" to the practical subject of today's manifesto.

The Magic Bullet

I have found out how to simplify the confused and mucked-up world of communications so that your message can penetrate the maelstrom of modern media, whether you are a global corporation, a local politician, a college lecturer, a sales rep or a start-up. I have a magic bullet that will sharpen whatever story you have to tell so that it gets to the heart of the matter, cuts through mental barriers and lodges easily in the mind. As an advisor to companies, politicians and institutions of higher learning, I've been thinking about this problem for about twenty years, and have been figuring out the solution for the last two. I don't know how to de-complicate my cable bill, or untangle the knots in the U.S. Congress, but I do know about this. This is my small part to play in the crusade.

So here's your answer.

You don't have to do the math, just think about the math and you'll understand the current reality that marketing gurus—especially the ones pushing social media at all costs—don't stop to consider. The new hyper-connected, democratic technologies that allow every human being to become an instant mass media outlet have created a lot of message traffic—roughly 500 billion whizzing by per second. Your chances of getting a word in edgewise—just by "joining the conversation" as they cavalierly say—is an irrational hope. Unless you do three things.

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Focus On This

1) Concentrate on more *message*, not just more medium—so you have something you want to say that switches on their imagination once you've got their attention;
2) Package your idea in the natural way the brain loves to receive—in fact, can't resist. and
3) Understand that in our hyper-connected world, it's not what people hear that really matters, *it's what they repeat.*

I want you to accept the notion that finding the *right* five words is more powerful than writing 5,000; that it's more important than ever to tell a story to get your point across, and it needs to be about two sentences or less; and the wild plethora of new mediums in "the digital revolution" are really just simple variations on something timeless that you already know, so you can stop stressing out about the medium.

The key is to verbalize your messages in succinct, compact word packets that we call **Micro-Scripts.** And there is a simple set of rules for creating them I call the *Micro-Script Rules.* I'm going to give examples of a few of the bigger ones in a moment. But, first, I want to set the stage for why these rules matter in the first place.

It's not what people hear that really matters,
it's what they repeat.

"Honey, I Think That Bear Wants You to Put Down Its Cub…"

It's ironic, isn't it, that when an organism is mortally threatened—when the gun is pointing at your nose, the tornado is in your driveway, or the great white shark bites the fin off your flipper—that's when life *finally* starts to get really… simple.

Behavioral scientists tell us that, in moments of crisis, we shift to an unconscious intelligence that is remarkably fast and accurate—gut feelings that skip normal reasoning you don't have time for in the moment. This intuition comes from a built-in set of *heuristics*, more commonly called *rules of thumb*. Heuristics are just simple mental instructions that let us make snap judgments with inconclusive data, without analyzing a whole set of facts.

When things get scary and complicated, our mental rules of thumb direct us to a much smaller set of more vital data. They tell us that *simpler makes us smarter.*

But what they're really telling us in critical moments is to do the *opposite* of what our schools and corporations have taught us from day one. They make us *discard* information, not collect more of it, to get smarter. When things get scary and complicated, our mental rules of thumb direct us to a much smaller set of more vital data. They tell us that *simpler makes us smarter*. Too much information gums up the works.

We All Remember the Glove

After eons of evolution, our brains are wired to simplify, they like to simplify, and they find it irresistible when others help us simplify.

Johnny Cochran, the defense lawyer in the O.J. Simpson "trial of the century," understood this when he offered his famous eight-word solution to the jury in exchange for nine months of testimony, and then asked them to choose between the two. He said, in essence, you can take the billion bits of evidence you were presented with, or just save the trouble and remember one simple thing: OJ was framed by racist cops. And then he offered them a little script to make remembering easy—something we call a **Micro-Script:** *If the glove doesn't fit, you must acquit.* A mini-logic set, in a memorable little word package, that could be repeated by everyone.

Back then, Johnny Cochran knew the power of turning 8,000 words into eight. He knew about Micro-Scripts. Today, when your message needs to fit on a cell phone screen and is competing with a zillion other conversations, wouldn't you think that would be even more important?

That's what the Micro-Script Rules are for. They set you up for the most penetrating kind of communication by working simply and quickly—the way our brains love to work.

The Micro-Script Rules

Here are a few of the really important rules to help start your thinking process.
I hope it whets your appetite.

BIG RULE I: It's What They Repeat

Frank Luntz, a prominent Republican word man, takes a lot of credit for teaching the GOP how to frame debates and win elections. He has counseled the party to use language like *"Death-tax"* instead of "Estate tax" and *"No Child Left Behind"* instead of "The Mandatory Punitive School Testing Law," and has propounded this basic principle for effective communicating: *"It's not what you say, it's what people hear."*

Sounds good—but it's not bottom-line enough for us to actually create those communications nowadays. We must go a step deeper to where the rubber meets the road.

To communicate your idea in a digitally powered, hyper-connected world, it's not what you tell people or even what they hear that drives communication. In this world, what's most important is: **It's what people want to *repeat* after they've heard you.**

This is big. If you've ever been in kindergarten or sat in a focus group, it will come as no surprise that what you are saying about yourself and your product, and what others are saying about it is not guaranteed to be the same thing. And they won't say anything just because you tell them to. They say it only if and because they want to say it, they like saying it, and they gain something from saying it.

The marketing and selling power in today's world is heading away from the seller and toward the buyer—and it doesn't matter whether you're trying to sell a political philosophy or diet soda. You know why?

Because of Big Rule #2.

BIG RULE II: **Every Screen's A Word of Mouth Machine**

In the old days, there were only three mediums: TV, Radio and Print. Today there's a new master medium that supersedes everything. (You thought I was going to say hundreds of mediums. But no, it's really one master medium). And, contrary to all the buzz, it's not the Internet or social networking. Those are just mechanical. It's a brand new, 50,000 year old medium.

You know it as **Word of Mouth.**

Now, it's worth taking a moment to think about how amazing and ironic this is. In a world that's creating new forms of electronic media every day—marketing gurus are saying that simple Word of Mouth, the most ancient advertising medium, is once again the most powerful of all!

With WOM, either trust comes first or there won't even be a conversation, won't be trial, won't be anything.

The Word of Mouth Machines

You can quit stressing out about keeping up with the wildly morphing, dizzying new world of media and gadgets if you just stop and let yourself realize: all these new personal digital machines—like iPhones and Blackberries and social media websites—are nothing more than 21st Century, electronic *Word of Mouth Machines*. They give the power to anyone to broadcast their WOM content, not just over the backyard fence, but around the planet to related communities in nano seconds.

The new machines have made caveman communications scalable.

But this still doesn't explain *why* WOM is suddenly so appealing—why so many consumers are drawn back to it now?

The reason is that Word of Mouth takes the most important success factor in communication and flips it on its head. WOM has changed the source and the sequence for building *Trust*.

The problem was that in the past century, too many people believed the marketing, tried the product and got hosed. Too many companies over-marketed and under-delivered, and trust of corporate authority went out the window as a result.

Word of Mouth solves the problem by delivering trust *up front* with a personal endorsement from someone you know and believe at the beginning of the transaction. With WOM, either trust comes first or there won't even be a conversation, won't be trial, won't be anything. And WOM doesn't get switched off by the remote.

Word of Mouth can't be mandated, but it *can* be facilitated using certain techniques and tactics you employ, which leads us to Rule #3.

What type of messages do people want to repeat?

BIG RULE III: **What They Want to Repeat Are Micro-Scripts**

You remember: *It's the quicker-picker upper. Nothing gets between me and my Calvins? What Would Jesus Do? Location, location, location.*

How many of you (us) have slyly winked when you said you were heading to or from Las Vegas and said, hey *"What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas."*

Or for that matter, what did simple little words like the *"Bridge to Nowhere"* and *"Maverick"* mean to you before the election of 2008?

These are Micro-Scripts. They are a short set of words, from one word to a sentence or two (certainly no more than can fit on a small screen or a tee shirt) that uses metaphors, descriptive imagery or just rhythmic words to verbalize a complete idea in a way that people like to say and to *repeat* to others.

When people hear a Micro-Script, they're much more likely to pass it along in conversations, emails, blogs, press articles, text messages, even bumper stickers—any person-to-person communication that comes and goes quickly.

Micro-Scripts are like magic words because they work fast, let us absorb fast, decide fast, act fast—just right for our heuristic brains.

Q: But isn't a Micro-Script just a catch phrase or a sound bite?

A: Sure, but it's much, much more—a very special kind of sound bite.

It's a story bite.

It either tells a whole story or provides a piece of a story that fits to one already running in the brain. It's used to inform, impress or influence, so it must contain just enough information to persuade another person to change a mind, or have permission to act.

For example: *It's made from sugar to taste like sugar. Friends don't let friends drive drunk. It's finger-lickin' good. Guns don't kill people, people do.*

If a sound bite, a tagline or even a descriptive name can do all the above, and if people are using it to tell others about you, then it meets the definition of a Micro-Script. Indeed, when a tagline is written like a Micro-Script, it's a much more effective tagline!

The key for any communicator is that, once you have your big idea, you have to learn to express it in Micro-Script.

Gasoline for the Word of Mouth Machine

It's been political campaigns (not the advertising industry that invented them) that have done some of the most impressive things with Micro-Scripts in recent years. After all, political campaigns are a "one day sale for 100% market share" so there's no time to fool around. Finding the most effective fuel for Word of Mouth communication is vital. The Republicans figured it out with Ronald Reagan in the 80's (*Are you better off than you were four years ago?* and *There you go again!*). They were a decisive factor in the five out of the seven Presidential races that the GOP captured up through 2004. (*Kerry's a flip-flopper*). The Democrats are just now catching up (*Yes we can!* and   ).

But the smartest marketers and brand people are finally re-discovering their power. And once you see how they're put together, you can make Micro-Scripts for yourself just as easily as they can.

So now let's ask one other basic question. What should be the *subject* of your Micro-Scripts? What should a Micro-Script be about?

That's our next Big Rule…

BIG RULE IV: **Build Them on a Dominant Selling Idea**

The Dominant Selling Idea is the sinlge most unique, important and ownable advantage that you can claim that others can't (or don't). It's your single best differentiating attribute—the difference that makes the difference. In marketing textbook terms, it is brand positioning brought to its sharpest, most specific edge. Safest car. *The dentists' #1 toothpaste. The working man's favorite beer. The fastest headache pill. The longest-range jumbo jet.*

A Dominant Selling Idea (DSI) is the central proposition underlying any successful Micro-Script. Since it's the foundation, it's always the first piece that needs to be in place before making your own Micro-Scripts.

I introduced the term 'Dominant Selling Idea' with my partner, Carl Nichols, five years ago in *Why Johnny Can't Brand*. Back then, we thought the DSI was such an improved destination by itself, that if most companies just got there, all the rest of branding and marketing could fall into place.

Not anymore. The quickly emerging, hyper-connected, digital age has showed us there's another piece that's vital to keep communicators on track—the verbal expression that carries your Idea from one mind to the next. The simple reason for this is that people don't speak in strategy; they speak in Micro-Script. They think and absorb in Micro-Script. If you want to put across your strategy then you must **1)** sharpen it down to a Dominant Selling Idea and **2)** verbalize that DSI in a Micro-Script.

From now on, the best brands will
be built with fewer, simpler elements
from the ground up.

What Micro-Scripts Say About Building Brands

The best way to get penetration in the hyper-conversation is give every brain the tools it loves to broadcast with. That is, you need to make it work one-to-one in micro, at a Word of Mouth level, before it works one-to-a-billion. Heuristics tell us that, in times of uncertainty and complexity, we must think simple.

Start small. In the era of the Word of Mouth machines, the notion of a "brand" will percolate upward more reliably than 50,000-foot strategies will trickle downward. That means that, from now on, the best brands will be built with fewer, simpler elements from the ground up.

K.I.S.S.

Once you start thinking about the heuristic-loving human brain, how it thrives on simplicity and speed; once you grasp this communication truth, you start seeing Micro-Script traces everywhere you look.

And if you don't believe me, would you believe... a Higher Authority?

When I was researching the book, I found out that the god of the Hebrews, YHWH him/her self used them in the original Ten Commandments, so that even the most illiterate, dust-ridden slaves could memorize them on the fingers of both hands during the Exodus. All ten had to be available on demand since he/she hadn't brought forth text messaging yet.

Thomas Cahill, the literary and biblical scholar in *The Gifts of the Jews*, explained that what we call The Ten "Commandments" was written so tersely—to be memorable and repeatable— that the original Hebrew called them the Ten *Words*. "Though shalt not steal" simply appeared as "no-steal." The Ten Words came out as: *no-kill*, *no-adulter*, *no-lie*, and so on.

So, take my word for it… *even God uses Micro-Scripts!*

And thus I say unto you: as the world of everything gets more complicated, simplicity and those who know how to make it so will be the ones who win in any almost any arena. They will provide ever-greater relief to the minions mired in the merde.

Their products, their companies, their words and their solutions will be sought after not because they superficialize, but because they can prioritize.

They, the Simplifiers, will understand that to **be successful and happy, we must learn to focus on a much smaller set of much more important things.** And not just in the material arena. It's every bit as important with ideas, words and in relationships.

Micro-Scripts will be one of the Simplifier's primary tools—a lever that any one of us with a message can use from now on to help change this overcomplicated world. ⬛

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a copy of Bill Schley's
The Micro-Script Rules.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bill Schley is the author of the new book *The Micro-Script Rules: It's Not What People Hear. It's What They Repeat…*, where you will find a comprehensive list of practical rules for creating your own Micro-Scripts. Bill is an award-winning marketer, author and international speaker on communications. He is President of David ID, the branding firm known for creating the Dominant Selling Idea at some of the world's largest companies. His book *Why Johnny Can't Brand: Rediscovering the lost art of the Big Idea.* was honored as a "Top 5 Marketing Book of the Year" by *strategy+business* Magazine. He is an Alumnus of the legendary Ted Bates advertising agency, Harvard University, a trans-Atlantic sailor and avid skydiver.

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