



Your Product or Service Is Either  
**Relevant** or It's **Worthless**

Three Things You  
Need to Do to  
Make Sure It's Relevant  
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Every day, according to best estimates, your customers and the people you would like to be your customers are bombarded with more than 5,000 messages. There are commercials, billboards, pop ups, calls from telemarketers, emails from deposed princes who need your help banking their fortunes, companies promising to enhance this or that, signs on buses and cabs, branding on clothing and in stores... you get the idea.

No wonder it is becoming harder and harder to break through the clutter. In an environment where literally thousands of messages are competing for attention, how do you get people to pay attention to your business, message, or offering?

Simply put: *by being relevant.*

More specifically, by crafting messages that appeal to both sides of your audience's brain—the left that is searching for a rational solution to their problem, and the right that wants emotional resonance.

Organizations like yours spend, in total, billions of dollars annually to get people to buy a product, embrace a brand, follow a candidate, or join a cause. And yet we can all agree that these marketing campaigns, ads, public relations initiatives, communication programs, and social media and change efforts are—to be kind—often less effective than they could be. If you are honest, you'll admit you need help forging a lasting bond with the people you hope to influence.

To create that bond, organizations need a single, reliable guiding principle to ensure that all their marketing and communications efforts make a sustained impact. This guiding principle can be summed up in a single word: relevance—a word that is typically defined as something that “is practical and especially social applicability.”

We think that definition is right, although we have found most people put almost all of their emphasis on the practical. That's understandable. It is certainly true that what you are offering must solve a customer need and do it well. But increasingly, that is not enough. Customers are becoming progressively fickle, as well as spoiled. They expect superior execution on your part. That is the price of entry, and, unfortunately, it's not something that will guarantee a long-term relationship. A slip on your part or a customer's encounter with a competitor that does what you do slightly better, or just as well at a lower price, and your customer may well abandon you.

And that is where the emotional part of relevance comes in. If your product, service, or idea resonates with a customer—if it means something to him in addition to being utilitarian—then the relationship will be deeper, longer lasting, and more profitable.

Let's consider an example: value and dependability are the bedrocks of the ideal shopping experience, and providing those two things is absolutely necessary. That said, they give you no competitive advantage, because the other companies battling with you to gain market share are providing them as well. If all you do is what everybody else does, you will never gain an edge. Relevance, however, changes the game. Consider generation Y shoppers, who according to our research, are much more likely—twice as likely as boomers, in fact—to say their favorite retailer delivers an experience that they'd like to share. The “shareability” component underscores the new social experience this cohort is looking for both offline and online. It's what is required to be relevant to them.

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That discussion shows why relevance is so important. Unlike other objectives marketers have aspired to—engagement, “eyeballs,” alignment, buzzes, clicks, and stickiness, for example—relevance has the power to change both minds and behavior. Those gen Y shoppers, for example, are going to search out retailers that provide experiences they want to share, leaving behind the ones that don’t.

Here’s another reason why relevance is so important. You can’t get people to do things if they don’t hear you. Sure, you can keep raising the volume on what you have to say to the point where people know you are trying to communicate with them. But the only way they are going to pay attention is if you can create an emotional connection. What you have to say needs to resonate. Your message must be personal if you want your audience to consider seriously what you have to say.

The connection also explains why customers will stay with you. It is easy for them to switch to another brand, and your customers will unless they feel some sort of personal connection to your offering. What’s clear from both these situations is that relevance brings power, depth, and sustainability to the relationships we all have with companies, brands, and causes.

# The Three Dimensions of Relevance

How do you go about building those meaningful commitments? There are three different ways: Quantitatively, where you come to realize one size can never fit all; Qualitatively, where you engage with people's emotions and senses; and finally by realizing that the circumstances you find yourself in—the context in which you are communicating—dictate the best way to engage with your audience. You need to employ all three approaches. Let's take them one at a time:

**1 | QUANTITATIVE: Segmenting Your Audience** | You cannot be all things to all people.

But you can be relevant to all people based on some aspect of your offering. You can find out which aspect will resonate by dividing your marketing by very specific categories: age, income, gender, education, geography, life experience, interests, politics, and so on. From there, determine how you can make what you have relevant to people in each of those categories.

Take the “simple” matter of buying eggs. It used to be that people had a choice of white or brown. Today, you can segment your sales differently. Are the eggs organic? Are they local? Are they freshly laid? By free-range hens? By hens that are naturally fed? Is the package made of paper or foam? Is it recyclable? Is it recycled or from virgin stock?

Today, the packaging material might be the trigger that prompts the sale. Yesterday, it was the mere availability of eggs on the store shelf. We are at a point where a simple purchase has more facets of meaning, and therefore, facets of potential relevance.

You find the place where your product or service is most relevant—let's say your potential egg buyer is most interested in sustainable packaging—and you start your communications with her based on that fact.

Obviously, once you segment, you are *not* done forever. All the factors change quickly; things that are not relevant suddenly can become so—and, of course, the converse is also true.

Let's take an example of each.

Remember Apple's Newton? You probably don't. In 1992, Apple unveiled this personal digital assistant, a communication device about the size of a VHS tape, which had many of the features we now have in our cell phones (note taking, calendar, address book; it also had a primitive application that, like Apple's Siri, let you enter commands simply by saying them). The problem? The market was not yet ready for it.

As for products or ideas that have stayed too long at the fair, you don't have to look further than the back of your closet for the clothes you no longer wear or products or services that have been done in by a change in the marketplace.

**2 | QUALITATIVE: Focusing on the Intangibles** | There are four components to consider here when it comes to building relevance; these four things, combined, affect consumers' responses to your offering, though often on a level they can't articulate.

**Thinking:** Clearly, cognition on the part of your audience may be necessary to create the change behavior you seek. You want them to logically consider the value of your offering. None of us is as rational as we think—all you have to do is recall your last impulse purchase—but the argument you are making for why your product or service is relevant needs to make sense.

**Sensory appeal:** How does the object you are selling look, feel, taste, smell, and sound? This dimension can be overlooked, and it shouldn't be. Given two devices that perform equally well, surgeons will always pick the one that feels better in their hands. We talked before about how Apple got it wrong with the Newton. Well, they certainly got it right eventually when it comes to sensory appeal. Users of Apple products rave about the products' appearance as well as their performance.

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**Community:** The opinions of friends and respected advisers have always been important to consumers, and the Internet has made finding out what they think far easier than ever before. Who are you going to believe when it comes to whether or not you go see a new movie—the star who appears on countless talk shows, or your best friend who knows exactly what you like?

**Values:** What is important to the person you are trying to reach?

Here's how these four components work in practice: imagine it's raining and you have no umbrella. *Thinking* tells you that you need to buy one.

How does each umbrella feel in your hand? That's a *sensory* consideration every bit as important as the thinking. If the umbrella is awkward to use, you are going to end up getting wet.

Now, if everyone in your profession carries a black umbrella, you might not find relevance in a pink one with a unicorn on it. That's a *community* consideration. So you want a black one, but which one?

It may be important to you that the umbrella was designed with sustainability in mind, that it comes from a local retailer, or is the same brand your father and grandfather carried. These emotional elements reflect your *values*, and it could very well be the most important consideration behind which umbrella you purchase.

### 3 | THE CIRCUMSTANCES MATTER

The third dimension of relevance involves the circumstances under which your communication occurs. Here we are talking the relevance that occurs through content, context, and contact.

The **content** of your communication—say, words and pictures on a web page—is the primary vehicle for delivering relevance to an audience.

**Context**, by which we mean time and space, is another factor. What is relevant in the morning—a double espresso, for example—may not be relevant in the evening.

**Contact** is a third factor: relevance depends on the communication's source, be it a child, a doctor, a business (through a commercial message), or a political party. For example, who are you likely to pay more attention to when it comes to your (slightly) high blood pressure? Some random television spot featuring an actor who looks like a doctor, or you physician-daughter? And it also depends on the medium itself. For example, communications experts are refining ways to spark online conversations and seed communities to trigger behavior. What was once an art is fast becoming a science.

One of the best ways we know to talk about circumstances is to discuss the antismoking “truth” campaign. For decades, antismoking activists warned teens that smoking kills. And teens kept smoking. Then a few smart adults sat down and got to know some teen smokers. The adults quickly learned—as parents everywhere already knew—that preaching at teens is the worst thing you can do. Teen smoking is largely about rebellion.

Ironically, no institution is more “establishment” than the old-line, buttoned-up, manipulative tobacco industry. Thus was born the “truth” campaign, which shows teens the ways big tobacco tries to manipulate them.

That was relevant. Teens took the facts about the tobacco business in general, and the industry’s marketing approaches in particular, and ran with them, rebelling against the tobacco companies. This response created a new social norm that smoking isn’t cool. The National Institutes of Health cited the campaign as a major reason that in just one year, youth smokers declined by 300,000.

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# The Relevance Challenge

When it comes to relevance, recognize that:

**Relevance is more valuable today than it was yesterday.** Choice has disrupted the conventional merchant–customer relationship. The consumer, rather than the retailer, is now in charge, since consumers have so many more options when it comes to where and what they buy. They are no longer limited to retailers within an easy drive. And there’s the related point that organizations no longer know where their next competitor is coming from; it could come from down the block or halfway around the world. As a result, there is both a greater need and a greater opportunity to be more relevant.

**Relevance is more complex today than it was yesterday.** Because people have more choices of products, services, and ideas—and more access to information about them—what is, and can be, more relevant increases. This is the crux of the relevance challenge. Fortunately, the technologies that have complicated relevance can also help us identify, draw out, and engage people we are trying to reach. It becomes easier to find them and track what they like—and what they don’t.

**Relevance is more difficult to establish today than it was yesterday.** Thanks to technology, individuals now have an astonishing array of options in the marketplace as well as tools for evaluating them. And people have a greater ability to act on those choices. All they need to do is click on what they want, regardless of where it resides on the planet.

**Relevance is more difficult to hold onto...** because of the first three reasons. Let's consider this last point further. Why is staying relevant so difficult?

Remember, we are talking about relevance because of the impact it has in business. As business-people, we try to convert potential buyers into customers or supporters of what we do and retain them once we have convinced them. In short, we are trying to change—then maintain—their behavior.

It turns out there are five stages of behavior change: pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance.

Let's go back to our smoking example. In a study of people trying to change smoking habits, researchers found that once in the contemplation stage, people were most likely to respond to feedback and education as sources of information about smoking. Preparation stage folks were committed to changing and seeking a plan of action. Those in the action and maintenance

stages were actively changing their smoking behaviors and environments and found that social reinforcers were important. Those who had relapsed were found to cycle back into earlier stages as they geared up to quit again.

Therefore, the message sent to early adopters of a product will vary from the one sent to laggards, just as the message sent to an energized political base will be different from that directed to the disaffected voter. In so many cases, it's not enough to have the right message. To be relevant, it must come from the right source and arrive at the right time to the right person in the right place.

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# Are You Relevant?

Relevance is a profound concept with major implications for any marketing program. In fact, it is probably your most urgent marketing imperative today—one we strongly suggest needs to be built into both your overarching strategy and your tactics.

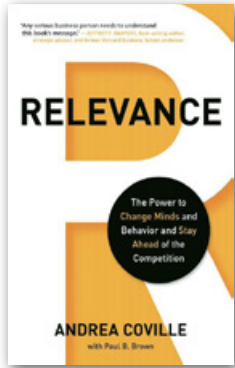
Now that we've explored relevance—its definition, origins, dimensions, and implementation possibilities—only one question is left. How is relevance relevant? What is it about relevance that makes it a meaningful concept in a noisy world? What makes it worthy of an organization's full attention?

First, relevance focuses on results: the behavior change. Old-school concepts of awareness and engagement are the potential means, not the end. Relevance is about the ultimate goal—triggering the desired behavior.

Second, relevance is right for the times. The world has moved beyond buzz, flash, glitz, shock, schlock, and decibels. It wants substance. It wants us to be relevant.

**That's why relevance needs to be part of your offering. People are awash in choices about where to spend their money and place their loyalty. If you aren't relevant, they will go somewhere else. 📍**

# Info



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