



STAND OUT OR STAND DOWN:

Getting Your **Message Across**
in an Ever More Competitive World

TRANSEARCH
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“To be the best you have to separate yourself from the rest.”

We are witnessing globalisation’s final act. Different trade unions have dusted off a disruptive script. Fractured supply chains have replaced “just in time” with “just in case.” The employees that organizations need most are changing the power dynamic from “power over” to “power to.”¹ Geopolitical tension, the energy crisis and global warming add to the overall upheaval. Turbulence takes a front seat. When crypto was added to the S & P 500, investors lost \$12 trillion in the US market in 2022. A technological transformation stands in the wings. The world is getting faster, more frenetic and politically more fragile. Things are not as they were. Today is not a replay of yesterday. It’s clear that what got us here, won’t get us to where we need to be.



1 Blended employment is here to stay. Moving forward, expect the typical workweek to be Monday and Friday work from home and Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday in the office.



In the midst of this turmoil, it's becoming more difficult to get your organization's message out. Who are we? What is our story? Why should you work with us? What is our distinct point of difference? In a heavily overcrowded marketplace (and getting more so), it's a case of **stand out** or **stand down**. Your website is invaluable, but it represents a tiny point of light in a constellation of very bright stars.

Your challenge? To make the message relevant. In many cases, not to the world at large but to those potential customers you have the capability and desire to partner with.²



Amongst the many marketing means we find social media, blogs, conferences, interactive games, AI powered predictive customer analysis, event sponsorship and, the ubiquitous, “business development oriented article.” What follows explores the latter.

Successful writing is predicated on knowing your audience. That said, Neil Pasricha, in *The Happiness Equation* (2016), suggests that there are three potential audiences: (1) writing for yourself; (2) writing to win the approval of your peers; and (3) writing for a wider and general audience. Writing for yourself is a great way to work through a problem and/or accelerate the benefits of reflection. Writing for your peers builds one's reputation, but we are likely addressing a small and very specialised group. Writing for a broad audience means stripping out complexity, avoiding ambiguous language and making the text entertaining. The dilemma? You can only successfully meet the needs of two of those audiences. What group will you abandon?

² It's important to distinguish between broadcast and targeted marketing. If you produce a product that could well appeal to many thousands, spreading a wide net makes perfect sense. On the other hand, if you offer a specialist service where, if you were successful, you could support relatively few customers, targeted marketing is far more effective.



Knowing your audience was brought home to me early in my career. My first position in Human Resources was with a highly lauded, major multinational. The role? Recruitment. As a total neophyte, I was keen to impress my immediate team leader (Tom). As it happened, he worked out of the next office. And then one day opportunity knocked. Tom had to leave work urgently. Believe it or not, his house was on fire. True story. As he sprinted through the office, he launched a single piece of paper in the air. Powered by the sheer panic of his exit, it fluttered gently in my direction.

When it eventually landed, I could see that it was the authorisation for the position he was about to interview for. A quick search uncovered no other paperwork. Not even a résumé. The good news? Although it didn't contain much else, the document did at least contain the job title: Lead Buyer. Knowing that my own next appointment was due to arrive shortly, I quickly set about expertly grilling Tom's candidate as to their breadth of experience in purchasing base metals.

Even now, I recall the extended and very pregnant pause that greeted each of my brilliant questions. I also remember that, inexplicably, after each question the silence in the room grew louder. Fortunately, although the level of rapport was obviously not what one might have hoped for, tenacity won out. It was perfectly clear that the candidate knew virtually nothing about the world of base metals. It was an invaluable lesson. If you create a poor first impression it takes at least seven subsequent interactions to get the relationship back on track. Know your audience!

To get to where we need to be, we also have to confront three common writing myths.

1. *Executives don't have the time to read.* Whilst reading reticence might be true for more than a few, successful leaders are readers. In my own coaching practice, the first sessions signal the scope of the challenge. By and large, those who don't read are, invariably, wedded to the status quo, devoid of curiosity and, if willing to change at all, limit themselves to an incremental agenda. If your commercial offering moves beyond a commodity and you are seeking to identify, at a personal level, your ideal customer/client, invest your business development resources with leaders who read.
2. *The shorter the better.* French mathematician, Blaise Pascal (1623 – 1662) wrote, "I'm sorry I wrote you such a long letter; I didn't have time to write a short one." One of the finest pieces of writing in the English language, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, has only 271 words. Shakespeare, on the other hand, not only wrote voluminously, he invented 1,700 words that are still in use today, e.g., bandit, lacklustre, lonely, critic.

One of the central principles in good design is "fitness for purpose." Succinct can clearly be very impactful. There are times, however, when less is, well, less. Leaving central ideas or relevant examples out can lead to unintended consequences. It can shortchange the



reader. A great article is as long as it needs to be – no more, no less. A good example is the consulting company McKinsey. No organization was more impactful during COVID. They took competing on ideas to new heights. Their material on *Reimagining the post pandemic organization* ran to 202 pages. Other pieces were much shorter. *Speed and resilience: Five priorities for the next five months*, for example, was covered in only six pages.

3. *Simple is successful.* Simple can be interpreted as a descriptive and appealing title, short sentences, paragraphs that contain only one idea, language that has a discernible and consistent rhythm and writing that, like a good play, is formed around a beginning, a middle and an end. In that the qualities outlined are all tried and true features of good writing, it would be difficult to argue with any of the suggestions outlined. That's not the whole story, however. In today's overly congested marketplace, when we dig deeper, **S.I.M.P.L.E.** has far more profound implications. See the next section.





SUBTEXT SETS THE SCENE

Enter, stage left, the writer’s “voice” – an informed internal dialogue that finds expression in the words that appear on the page.³ Like dropping blue dye into a beaker of water, the right voice adds colour. A character-filled voice builds trust. A caring voice cultivates collaboration. An inspirational voice empowers enthusiasm. And a voice that draws on the provider’s story creates a customer.

Have you ever noticed how someone who exhibits mastery always seems to have a little more time? Competency is the start of it. Confidence is clearly part of it. But how they manage *the space* is at the heart of it. Space isn’t the absence of something. Space is dynamic. It’s where excellence comes to play. In music, it’s called “the measure.” In art,



3 The Magna Carta isn’t specifically mentioned in the US Constitution. To the informed reader, what is apparent, however, are the beliefs of the 25 Barons who, at Runnymede in 1215, forced King John to accept that no man, even the King, was above the law. A gold embossed replica is on display in the Capitol Crypt.



It's the difference between Picasso and a painter you have never heard of. It's the capacity for emptiness in innovation. It's the art in architecture. It's what makes Pele a legend, Greta Thunberg a hero and *The Godfather* a great movie. It's how you win an Academy Award. It's how you put diversity front and centre. For a successful leader, it's the hidden baton that orchestrates how the meeting unfolds. For the writer who makes a difference, it's the "why-this-matters" that appears between the words; the silent message that bleeds, unheralded, into the reader's consciousness.

It's impossible to capture the organization's (provider's) story if those at the helm are caught up in "cultural drift." The latter, the assumption that even though the top leadership fails to manage and measure⁴ all of the elements that shape the culture (current and future), the business will somehow, magically, end up where it needs to be. And recognising that what got us here won't get us to where we need to be. Good luck with that!

You can't be influenced by what you don't know. You can't convey what you are not committed to. And you can't embrace a story that hasn't been captured. Seven central themes frame the organization's story: (1) the compelling purpose; (2) the actions to address diversity and fairness; (3) the brand promise; (4) the approach to talent management; (5) the speed and agility demanded moving forward; (6) the philosophy around sustainability; and (7) the organization's values. With a true tech business, technology obviously enters the picture. The needed alignment between the organization's story and the emerging business model is covered later in the text.

Marcus Aurelius told his followers, "Don't ask someone to blow your nose." In a similar vein, outsourcing a writing project isn't always a good idea. The voice an external source brings to the project is likely to be a poor substitute for a writer who lives and breathes the organization's story every day. And without an intimate understanding of why your best customers buy what it is that you do, the business development opportunity is unlikely to be fully appreciated.

Stand out or stand down. It's not products and services that compete, it's your organization's underlying story. What builds customer loyalty, attracts talent and gives your business development initiatives a successful landing is your story. Don't cook up your next written offering without baking it in.

KEY QUESTION? Is the organization's story fully present in your writing?

4 The omnipresent employee engagement survey addresses no more than 20% of the factors that make up the organization's culture.



IMGERY MATTERS.

In fact, it matters a lot. Society is becoming, irrevocably, more visually literate. And for those who cannot remember a time before social media, imagery and life-style walk hand in hand. No imagery, no interest.





Imagery is far more than simply visual embroidery. We explore the world through metaphor and learn through stories. The visual metaphor that *the right* image represents is the emotional trigger that opens the door to possibility. Without a compelling opening image, visitors to your website, for example, are likely to spend less than ten seconds before deciding to look elsewhere.

In a cookbook it's not the recipes that make you want to buy, it's the pictures. Walk in the shoes of a visitor to your website. A potential customer? An outstanding performer interested in joining your organization? A shareholder who regularly "audits" the businesses they invest in? A key employee who wants to take pride in the organization they are part of? No "wow" factor, no sale.

In presenting your wares, you are in the emotional transportation business. Let imagery do your talking! A typical visitor to your website has been weaned on CGI, the incredible images and creativity accessible on their iPhone, online casinos and social media platforms such as Instagram, Imgur, and Snapchat. In vying for attention your competition isn't the established competitor up the street; it's Hollywood, video games, ChatGPT and graphic novels. And tomorrow that challenge is destined to be even more intense – in particular, software that uses artificial intelligence to create images from textual descriptions. Businesses such as Midjourney, DALL-E and Stable Diffusion being amongst the first to market examples.

Considering that LinkedIn alone has 722 million members and roughly half of them are active users, articles and/or marketing pieces that are merely text-based – even if they have a colourful ribbon that makes the title stand out – have little emotional appeal. To attract the reader you want, spend at least as much time on the imagery as you do on the text itself. Arguably, spend more time. That said, it has to be the right imagery. Where content and imagery are in conflict we create a degree of cognitive dissidence that is decidedly unhelpful.

Stand out or stand down. To get read, get visual. Ensure that the images used introduce a visual metaphor that captures and reinforces your underlying message. If you work in sales at Harrods, you are reminded that "teeth means money." The digital equivalent is "pictures promote profit." Metaphorically, make your writing smile.

KEY QUESTION?

Does the right imagery bring your writing to life?



MAKE “MINDSET” YOUR ULTIMATE GOAL

Muhammad Ali said, “Champions aren’t made in the gyms. Champions are made from something they have deep inside them – a desire, a dream, a vision.” We serve the next generation of leaders when we help clarify that desire, give wings to the dream and make the vision attainable.

To be the best you have to separate yourself from the rest. Don’t throw that opportunity away by presenting what the reader already knows. Don’t add to the background clutter by writing about what is readily available elsewhere. And don’t assume that by simply outlining what you *think* the intended reader should do is in any way effective. If self-help books made a difference, the same people wouldn’t keep buying them.

Inspiration lies within the theatre of the mind. If you can imagine it, you have already taken the first step in making it happen. Change happens when we engage the heart and enrich





the spirit. When the leader in question reframes the conversation they are having with themselves. When concern is replaced by commitment. When yesterday no longer dictates what's possible today. When the team's better angels take flight.

To win the reader over is, thus, to work at the level of mindset. This speaks to writing that contains rich imagery, appropriate symbolism, compelling stories, best-practice, impactful metaphors, new language, celebrating success and appropriate conceptual models. Beyond that, as Kurt Lewin, the legendary psychologist, was apt to say, "Nothing is as practical as great theory."

Whether actually leading a team or seeking to influence one from a distance, leaders are storytellers. Stories are to our species what grooming is to the other apes. They touch parts of the brain that nothing else can. They are a source of hope, the basis for much of what we refer to as "entertainment" and a basic building block in creating community. Without hope, "the why" lacks meaning. Without entertainment, life is an emotional desert. Without community, collaboration only takes place in some places some of the time.

The right story stimulates the secretion of oxytocin. In doing so, the listener or reader becomes far more receptive to the ideas being presented. Long (long!) after the writer's name has been forgotten, what *will* be remembered are the stories. If presented early in the text, the introduction of even a single story brings the reader onside.

Conceptual models are especially important with those who operate out of the C-suite. The higher in the organization, the greater the tendency for those in a leadership role to be gestalt learners; the more they seek to interpret the way forward by "interrogating" the whole⁵ rather than analysing and then integrating the individual parts.

Writing that amounts to more of the same is an appropriate vehicle for those committed to being a perpetual runner up. Sadly, it doesn't stop there. Apathy isn't just a state of mind, it's a state of being. Striving to be "second best" is a cultural virus that infuses and then overwhelms the rest of the team.

To be the best, you also have to work with the best. And the customers you *need to work with*⁶ are unlikely to be attracted to a "me too" provider. By comparison, in what Mark Pagel⁷ calls "cultural nepotism," market leaders go out of their way to partner with providers that think and act as they do. It's fun to win and in pursuit of that quest, emphasising a compelling point of difference is the most competitive message of all.

Stand out or stand down. Know that even the most resistant amongst us turns the page when we see possibility through a new lens. Don't seek to influence people's behaviour by

5 Systems thinking

6 Working with market leaders provides learning and growth opportunity for which there is no substitute. Not to do so amounts to a cultural deficit that erodes competitiveness.

7 Mark Pagel is the author of *Wired for Culture* (2012).



telling them what you think they need to do. Rather, work to reframe how the reader *thinks* about the problem or opportunity. Make mindset mastery a must.

KEY QUESTION? Is working at the level of mindset a central theme in your writing?

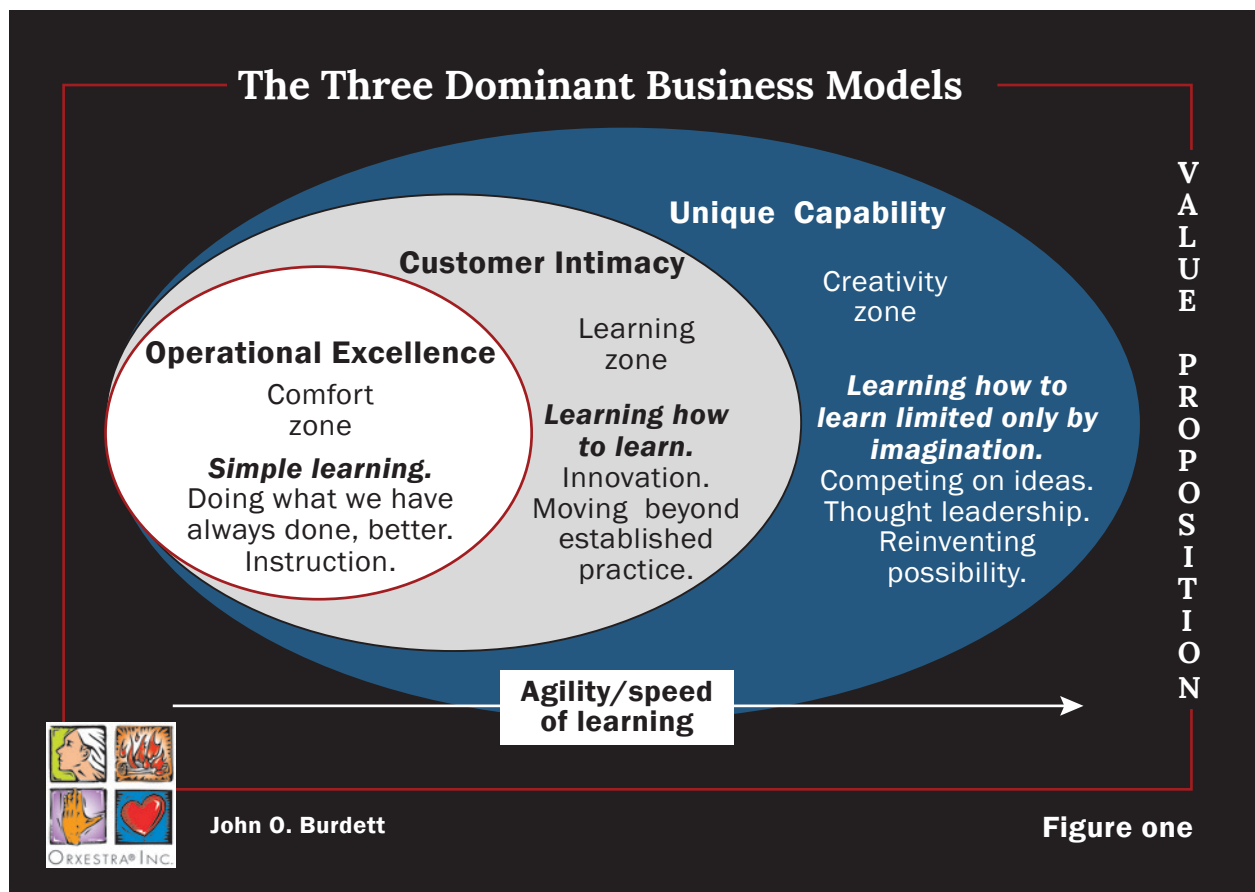




PUT YOUR BUSINESS MODEL AT THE CENTRE

A post COVID world provokes (demands) one overriding leadership question. “Moving forward do we have the right business model?” As an expression of the organization’s underlying cultural DNA, it’s a central question that has two interwoven themes. One: “Are our strategic assumptions and core business practices aligned with what tomorrow’s customer wants to buy and how they want to buy it?” Especially, how they want to buy it. Two: “Have we created a culture that both attracts and retains top talent?”⁸

There are three distinct business models. See **Figure one**.



8 In 2021, 49 million employees in the US quit their jobs. That amounts to almost a third of the workforce. Whereas past research quite rightly emphasises that employees don’t quit the organization, they leave their manager-one-level-up, it’s far from the whole story. Changing the manager isn’t necessarily the difference that makes a difference. What employees have been rejecting in recent times is far more comprehensive – the organization’s culture.



1. *Operational excellence.* The comfort zone. Simple learning: small steps, instruction. Mindset: doing what you have always done, better. Typical of a business that offers a commodity. If you want it, we've got it on the shelf. Adding value: delivering more than is promised. Slow to react when the market changes. Example: Starbucks.
2. *Customer intimacy.* The learning zone. Learning how to learn. Innovation, moving beyond established practice. Mindset: a focus on the customer's emerging needs. Distinct and differentiated products, services and/or processes. Creating value: in business-to-business relationships, making the customer's business better. Quick to respond when the market changes. Example: TSM (Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing).
3. *Unique capability.* The creativity zone. Learning how to learn limited only by the imagination of those involved. Competing on ideas/thought leadership. Mindset: leading the customer. Inventing value. In business-to-business relationships enabling the customer to be the one that disrupts the market. Speed of innovation is a very difficult to compete with competitive advantage. Example: SpaceX.

Each of the business models outlined supports a very different value proposition. In that who you hire today dictates what is possible tomorrow, executive search is a good example of where "value" is, invariably, the difference that makes a difference. International reach, deep sector experience and a digital capability are purely table stakes. Beyond that, consider the following (distinct) building blocks of value.

- ✓ *Adding value* equates to simply identifying and delivering a successful candidate. Although tools along the lines of leadership competencies and psychometric assessment may be used, each search pretty well follows the same format. The challenge? Established relationships and the personal touch will provide a degree of protection in the short term (especially for C-suite roles), but in the fullness of time, search firms that rely on a formulaic approach add very little that innovative digital competitors – dedicated bots, AI, gamified assessment – can't do cheaper and faster. Because there is no distinct differentiation, to operate successfully in this space the search provider must invest considerable business development time finding new clients. Vulnerability? Loss of the rainmaker(s). Competing against a rival that offers greater value.
- ✓ *Creating value* is when the search provider wraps, as warranted, a truly comprehensive search process around the client's strategic needs. A *strategic* orientation implies: (1) honing the client's employment value proposition; (2) a deep assessment of the culture the organization has and needs; (3) building a robust, future-looking score card; (4) accessing a library of emerging leadership competencies; (5) ensuring team fit; and (6) highly effective and proven integration support. In that a good many clients still want to outsource much of the search process (it appears to be time efficient), to operate successfully in this space the search provider must have consummate coaching skills.



All hiring is strategic; get the search wrong⁹ and the client will spend considerably (as in considerably) more time trying to fix the mistake – if they can. Vulnerability? Failure to invest in the learning needed – such that each search practitioner is fully conversant with all of the processes being marketed – means the provider cannot move beyond “adding value.”

- ✓ *Inventing value* builds on all the tools/processes already outlined but has an additional goal – to ensure that the client’s talent acquisition process amounts to a sustainable competitive advantage. To achieve that aim, partnering with the client might well embrace: (1) assessing why the organization’s top talent stays; (2) introducing a comprehensive



9 When moving to a new role, the major reason an executive stumbles is the inability to adjust their behaviour to fit with the current and/or emerging culture. In that tomorrow’s organization will be a team of teams, in the future, “team fit” will be no less important.



measure of team performance; (3) working to take the succession process to the next level; (4) talent scouting; and (5) advanced board assessment and selection (moving beyond the traditional skill matrix). To operate successfully in this space, the search provider must be on the leading edge of thought leadership. Vulnerability? The problem of finding talent that can work at this level. Access to true thought leadership. Finding consultants who can create tomorrow in the room, today.

Figure one also points to the synergistic relationship between value, organizational agility and speed of learning. No matter how advanced the products and/or services you offer, if you're learning slower than the competition, you are living on borrowed time. Similarly, if the competitor that concerns you most responds to opportunity or changes in the marketplace faster than you do, it might be a good time to consider offers for your business.

In times of disruptive societal change, managing the business from the outside-in is a strategic imperative. Doing so builds early awareness as to the need to rework the business model. Conversely, those who attempt to manage the business from the inside-out, all-too-often, fall into the trap of perpetuating a redundant business model (repeating what worked in the past).

Success, of course, is the biggest commercial trap of all. Blockbuster, General Electric, Xerox, Enron, BlackBerry, Kodak¹⁰ and Nokia were all wildly successful enterprises until suddenly – they weren't. They all attempted to manage the business from the inside-out. Looking forward, you can add terrestrial television, the shopping mall, transaction-based consulting firms¹¹ and second echelon streaming services to the list. In 2017, Rupert Murdoch was perceptive enough to understand the latter. He sold 21st Century Fox to Disney for the princely sum of \$71 billion.

Stand out or stand down. If the underlying message in your writing – on the website, or elsewhere – doesn't reflect your emerging business model, an invaluable business development opportunity is lost.

KEY QUESTION? **Is your business model aligned with what tomorrow's customers want to buy and how they want to buy it?**

¹⁰ Kodak is a classic example. They were the early architect/innovator of digital photography. Paradoxically, inside-out thinking – their failure to fully appreciate how dramatically digital would change the market for photographic film – destroyed their business.

¹¹ A consulting firm that is spread so thin that it has no real deep specialisation, little that differentiates it from the competition and/or sales based on personal relationship and little else.



LET CONTEXT COMPLEMENT CONTENT

Context equates to historical precedence, specific example, introducing new language, relevant facts and/or reminding the reader of the wider strategic imperatives. Without context, what is written often comes across as little more than reframed opinion. Unfortunately, unless the writer has built a reputation for being on the leading edge, has unique first-hand knowledge and/or is a recognised expert in the specific field, content expressed as opinion doesn't have much currency.

Think of the basic content as a surfboard and context as the current that carries your material to shore. The power of context can be seen in the examples that follow.

- Coaching lies at the heart of leadership development. Context is recognising that brain scans show that engaging a person's ideal self and/or personal vision is an essential driver of sustained and desired behavioural change.
- Inclusion is a much discussed and written about topic. Context is to underscore that fairness is both cultural and biological. Research¹² indicates that non-human animals



12 Sarah Brosnan, PhD, Georgia State University.



notice inequality as well we do. To better understand the cultural challenge inclusion presents, it's important to recognise that employee engagement scores around the world have changed very little over the past twenty years.

- Shareholder value is one of those topics that, to use an expression common in Texas, is “all hat and no cattle.” Context is to point out that, since 2019, corporate law in the UK means that any business quoted on the London exchange, by law, must report annually on both “the employee’s voice” and the “organization’s culture.” Reporting means auditing. Audit, in turn, means measurement. Expect democratic governments around the world to mandate for more “cattle” in the not-too-distant future.
- Millions of words are written every year on global warming and rising sea levels. Context is to point out that, unless governments around the world take action, by the middle of this century, Mumbai, Shanghai, parts of New York City and Miami will be underwater for parts of the year.
- Every organization is seeking informed input around diversity. Context is making reference to the fact that: (1) in 2021 there were only four African American CEOs in the Fortune 500; and (2) the number of women CEOs in the Fortune 500 had increased from 33 in 2019 to 41 in 2021. Not that 8% is much to boast about.
- The power of symbolism can be an abstract and difficult-to-grasp concept. Context, and with it meaning, is making reference to the Roman Catholic Church, the British Royal Family¹³, the raw emotion burning the national flag evokes¹⁴ and why Napoleon was quick to award medals for gallantry. Napoleon declared, “You call these baubles, well, it is with baubles that men are led.” There is a reason why the Catholic Church has been around for 2,000 years and the British Royal Family for the best part of a thousand.
- Describing the what, the why and the how of an organization’s values is a pretty important topic. Context is pointing out that culture is a system and that the organization’s values are just one, albeit important, dimension of that system.
- The so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) is a common theme. Unfortunately, far too many writers focus exclusively on the technology involved. Context is recognising that, to take advantage of the emerging technology, means rewiring how the organization operates – starting with the underlying assumptions that influence the organization’s structure. In that language creates imagery and imagery drives behaviour, to avoid the presumption of “hierarchy,” it might be better if we referred to the organization structure as the “performance platform.”

¹³ Meghan Markle’s egalitarian point of view may have found the “curtsey” problematic, but if you strip out all the pomp, ceremony and symbolism, the Royals become just another troubled family.

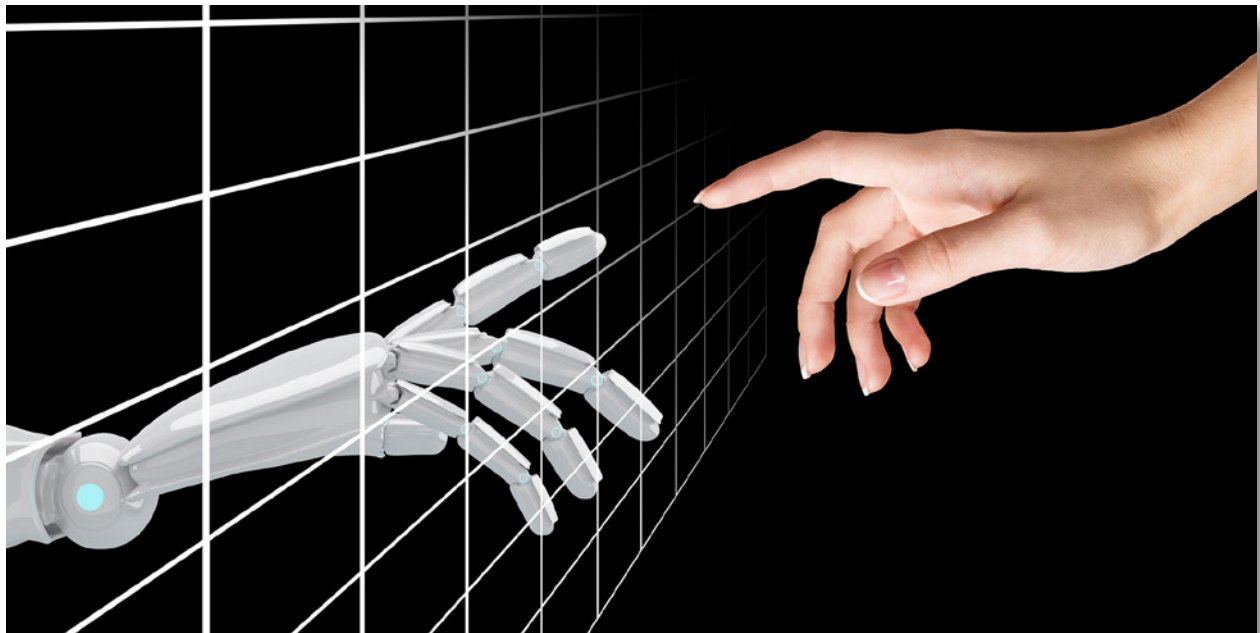
¹⁴ In Turkey, desecrating the national flag is punishable by three years in jail.



Content describes the who, what, when and how. Context puts meat on the bones. It's what makes information interesting. It's explaining the issue in ways that the reader can relate to. It's introducing a hero. It's outlining the struggle and how the hero overcame it. It's writing that teases out texture: the type of surfboards available, how a world champion rides the big wave, the cross winds that spell danger, where the hidden reefs are, what time high tide is and why the reader absolutely shouldn't take a surfing holiday in Nazaré, Portugal.¹⁵

Stand out or stand down. Go context or go home. Even if the script is truly original, personal branding isn't simply summarising and disseminating ideas and/or suggested actions. Writing that creates a customer – sets the scene, explores the topic from different angles, poses new questions and links the central theme to the bigger picture.

KEY QUESTION? Does context complement content in your writing?



¹⁵ Nazaré has recorded surf of 70 feet (21.3 m).



ENSURE THAT YOU ARE NOT THE COBBLER WHOSE CHILDREN HAVE NO SHOES

We set ourselves up for a fall if the topic we are writing about isn't either fully present in the organization we represent or evident in a path being chartered.

My local supermarket writes, in the most informed way, about being customer-driven. Meanwhile, they sell products that are clearly harmful to the health of their customers. Consulting companies wax lyrically about diversity whilst, at the same time, exude a surfeit of testosterone at the partnership level. Organizations, by the legion, write extensively about the role of the team while rewarding those same team members at an individual level, hire executives without fully considering team fit and lack an effective way of measuring team effectiveness.

The dictionary describes hypocrisy as “the practice of claiming to have moral standards or beliefs to which one's own behaviour does not conform.” Hypocrisy is the ultimate brand killer. And we will always be found out.





Customers/clients don't need more commentary about what the challenge is. They want to know what others are successfully doing about it. The best way to write about "mental health" isn't to describe the actions we think others should take. It's to outline the actions your own organization is taking. "Inclusion," similarly, needs to be more than a litany of warmed-over recommendations.

A positive word about a movie you haven't actually seen doesn't carry much credibility. Relevance enters the picture when your writing "shares" your organization's successful initiatives. In the case of a consulting firm when, as appropriate, you share client best practices.

What if your business is struggling on the issues in question? What if the consulting firm you work for services, what might be termed as, "bread and butter" clients? Reference to research, learned articles, webinars, books, videos, Ted Talks and a whole lot more can start to fill the hands-on experience void in your writing and become grist for the credibility mill.

Why focus on "successful" initiatives? How we learn is invariably more important than what we learn. Although many would have us think otherwise, we don't learn from mistakes. Getting it wrong merely indicates what not to do next time. We learn when we are successful, when we can replicate that success and when we turn getting it right into a sustainable habit.

Stand out or stand down. Convey integrity or become irrelevant. Integrity and personal experience are obverse sides of the same coin. Spend less time outlining what you think needs to happen and more on amplifying best practice. Conjecture is always going to be an inadequate substitute for an authentic success story. And for even the less discerning reader, the inherent value (or lack of?) is very apparent.

KEY QUESTION?

Does your writing move beyond third party commentary? Does it authentically capture "the how" of *successful* and relevant implementation?



CONCLUSION

The only truly sustainable competitive advantage is how quickly those in the business (you) learn. Learning isn't reading something. That's knowledge. Learning isn't found in instruction. That's know-how. Discussion doesn't generate learning. That's insight. We learn – and can only learn – when we translate knowledge, know-how and/or insight into a specific and relevant action.

Through repetition, we develop and continue to build on positive habits. Meanwhile, a habit, once established, evokes unconscious learning. Learning by doing. Personal growth we only become aware of – and can, thus, build on – when we practice deep reflection. Learning how to learn.¹⁶



¹⁶ The critical issue here is *social learning*: adapting to a changing environment.



Agility is the capacity to unlearn the old and adopt new habits no less quickly than the rate of change in the emerging environment. Resilience is, thus, defined by the repertoire of enshrined habits we have available to us.

Review the suggestions, ideas and examples contained within the text. Surf your own website. Become your ideal customer. Push pride aside. Purge your thinking of past assumptions. Switch on your imagination. Fully engage your curiosity gene. Be a detached observer. Re-read your past material with a beginner's mind. And whilst doing so, like the music in a good movie, play the themes introduced by the term **S.I.M.P.L.E.** in the background.

To enrich reflection, recreate in your mind's eye how you approach a writing project. Play the video. *Set as a priority, catching yourself doing it right.* Look for mixed messages. Beyond that, how emotionally impactful is your overall message? In that beginnings start with endings, what are you going to stop doing? What are you going to start to do? Do differently? Do more of? Players who continuously swing for the fences strike out a lot. How are you going to get out of your own way? What one central habit are you going to develop first?

Things are not as they were. Today is not a replay of yesterday. It's clear that what got us here, won't get us to where we need to be. How quickly you and your team learn isn't a secondary issue. It's central to your very survival.

“Really good writing runs a lot like a visual on a screen. You need to create that kind of detail and credibility with the reader, so that they know you were really there, that you really experienced it.”

Ann Voskamp



TO THE READER

In that it means revisiting one's sense of self, criticism is rarely effective. With that in mind, the content was developed and honed with a spirit of learning and growth. The challenge? To prompt the reader to take their message to the next level.

To the best of my ability, I have also sought to live up to the **S.I.M.P.L.E.** theme. As for authenticity and practical example, I draw on personal learning from sixteen books – a number of them best sellers – and the and the circa hundred and fifty published articles I have authored.

That said, there are, doubtless, aspects within this particular article where I have fallen short. For that I apologise. We are all on a journey of discovery. Me more than most.





John O. Burdett

*“Purpose without
action is a
journey without a
destination.”*

- J. O. Burdett

JOHN O. BURDETT has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He continues to work on leadership development and organization culture for some of the world's largest corporations. In 2019, his work with ABB's top 240 executives received a major international award for the most innovative leadership development initiative of that year.

His ongoing partnership with TRANSEARCH International means that his proprietary work on talent acquisition, in any one year, successfully supports many hundreds of top leadership appointments on six continents.

He has written extensively on executive coaching and was awarded international coach of the year by the Finnish Institute of International Trade. Business graduates at the University of Texas indicated that his material on coaching was the single most valuable learning source they took away from their undergraduate degree. He has also coached numerous executive teams around the world in how to coach. He

currently coaches a select group of CEOs.

Apart from a range of corporate leadership workshops, he has taught at business schools on both sides of the Atlantic. His work on the MBA program at the University of Toronto received a teaching excellence award. John holds a doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

In addition to numerous business articles and twice being awarded article of the year by MCB publications, he has published 16 books on leadership, talent management, coaching and organization culture. A number of them bestsellers. His Leadership Beyond Crisis Series came out in 2021. In 2022, he brought out a fully revised version of his international bestselling book on executive integration: *Without Breaking Stride*.

Go to the TRANSEARCH International website to download John's books and articles (gratis). The site also has a number of webinars.

