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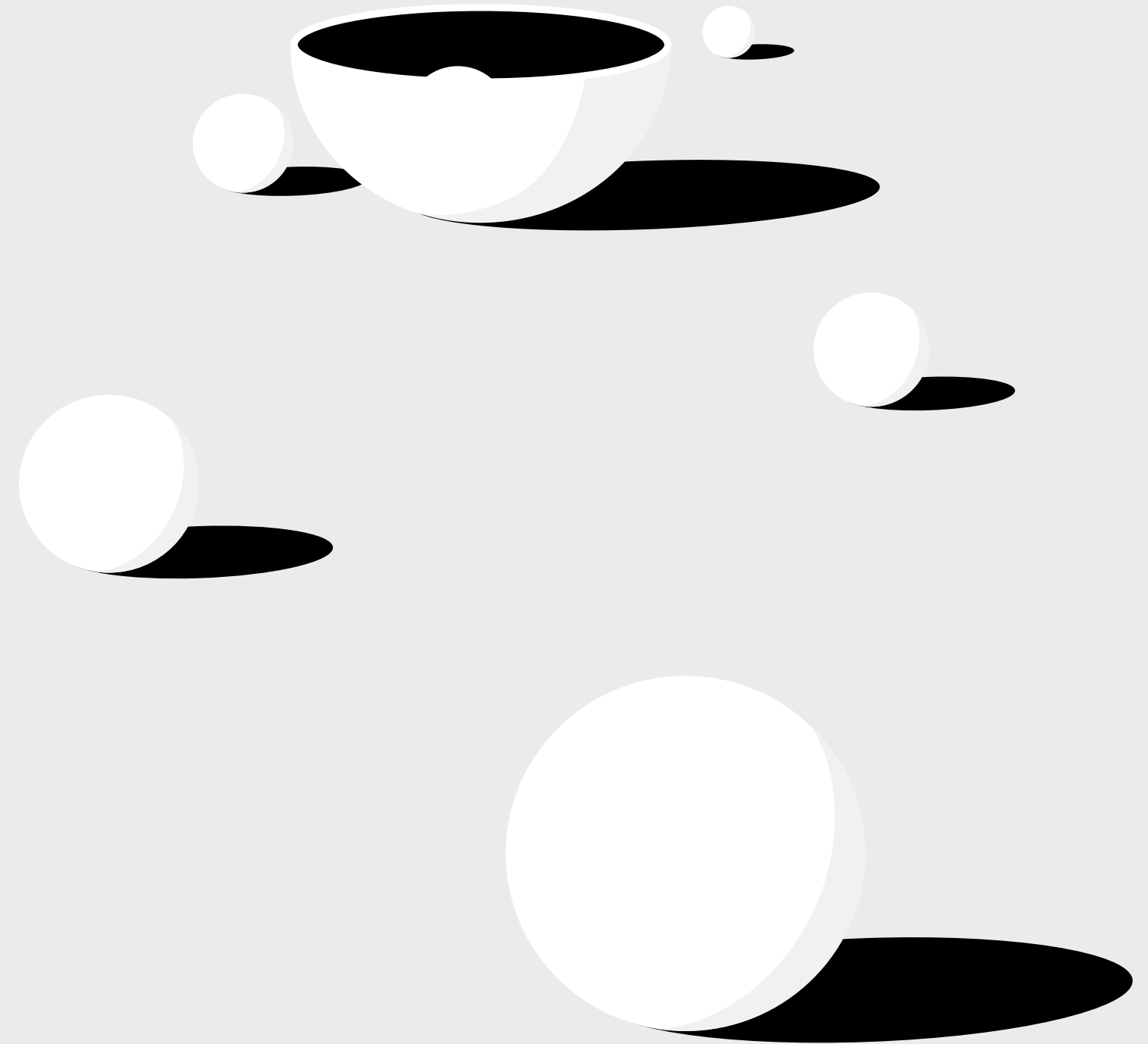
Radical Simplicity Why Saying Less Breaks Through in B2B Marketing

Neutrinos of information

Of all the sub-atomic particles, our favorite is the smallest: the neutrino. [Every second, about 30 trillion neutrinos pass through your brain¹](#) without impacting so much as a single atom in a single brain cell. We like the neutrino because it relates so closely to the challenges faced by B2B marketers.

The clutter of messages we're continuously exposed to, both explicit and subliminal, has exploded exponentially. The more bulk information and complexity the brain is confronted with, the less it is willing to deal with. Yet many B2B marketers still pile on information, because they think that's what their customers want, even though their brains aren't equipped to handle it. **Complex messages and convoluted paths to a buying decision can cause [analysis paralysis](#)** — and all the neutrinos created from your marketing efforts pass right through their brains, untouched.

There's myriad psychological and neurological articles about how people make purchase decisions and decipher information. We're going to explain some of this (although we suspect a lot of the information is going to fly right through you). We're also going to offer some advice. Yes, you have to cut through the clutter, but you also have to get rid of almost all those neutrinos. **To break through, you're going to need to apply a more rigorous discipline:**



Radical Simplicity – In Three Messages (Just Three)

1

Radical simplicity means stripping communications down to the smallest discrete pieces of the most important information, hammering them into concise chunks, and limiting yourself to only three pieces of information. Some say five or seven. We say three (as we're using on this page).

3

Radical simplicity in marketing communications is now the only way to break through and guide a customer to a buying decision.

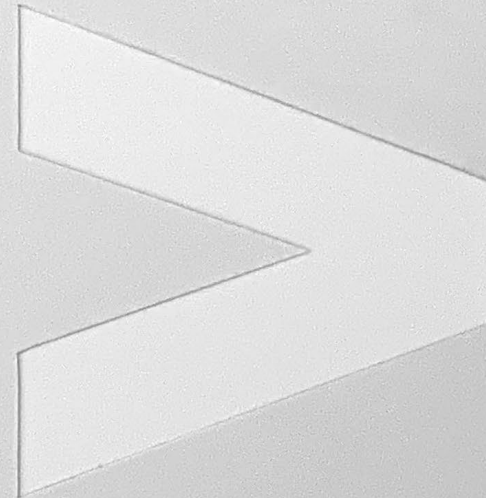
2

Radical simplicity makes a big idea visible, turning it into a landmark to help a customer navigate step-by-step toward related, relevant information.

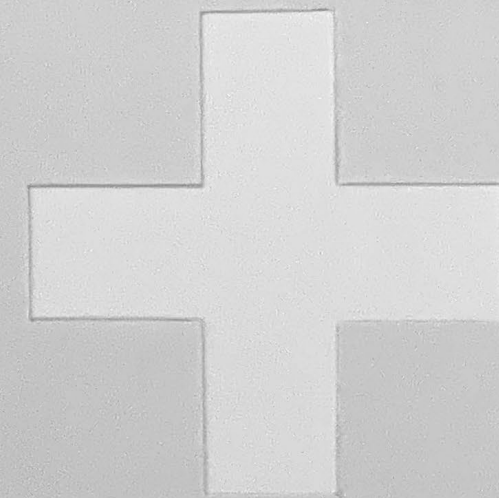
Subtraction



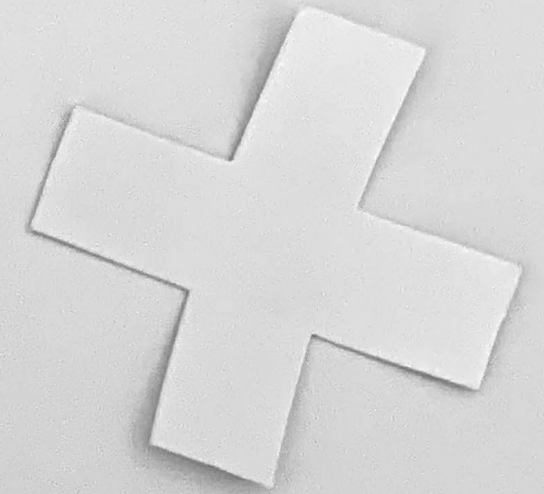
is greater



than addition.



The more included, the less communicated. Messages, visual and written, must be simplified to their most meaningful essence to connect and drive action.



Simplicity creates dignity and heightens drama. It adds value and meaning to the elements not removed.

Removing the obvious allows room for a person to imagine and become a part of the message.

Businesses create products to help someone solve a problem. We need to peel back the layers of complexity and deliver the essential idea.

The science of simplicity.

In a study for the National Institutes of Health, [The Simplicity Principle in Perception and Cognition](#), researcher Jacob Feldman made an exhaustive case that people are biased toward simplicity. The brain is wired for it and can only handle the very minimum of stimulation, i.e., stuff on the page. And the more information you provide, the more you're depending on the reader to interpret it — but it may not be an interpretation that helps you.

Knowing the brain is neurologically biased toward simplicity, here are some more specific scientific principles to keep in mind as you consider the concept of radical simplification.

Neurology and the trash can

The brain's neural circuitry seems to minimize complexity involuntarily, throwing away almost all information as soon as it arrives.²

Memory and landmarks

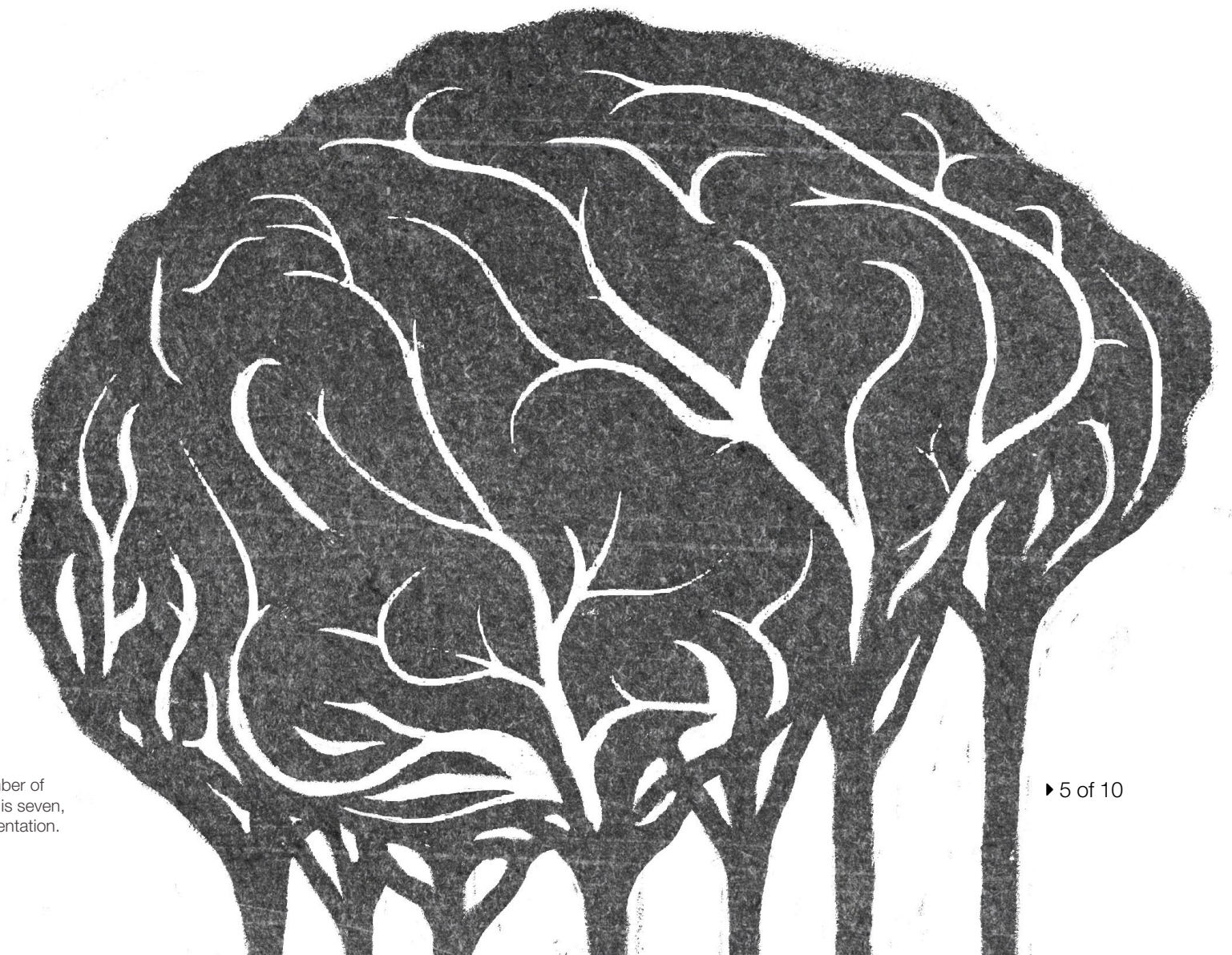
Simplicity and memory go hand in hand because [the brain compresses information before storing it](#). Our job in creating communications is to pre-compress messages and create landmarks of ideas that are easy to remember, particularly with repetition (this is also a key principle of branding). Once a landmark is imbedded in people's heads, they can refer to it and manage subsequent information.³

Simple confidence

A simple explanation of a complex subject inspires the confidence to say, "I get it." That's why there shouldn't be more than one main message in any piece of communication, so subsequent facts or ideas (all simplified) make your conclusion obvious.⁴ Call it the "Eureka!" effect.

The risk of misinterpretation

The mind cannot comprehend the world without assuming some form of underlying regularity. If confronted with complexity — at any level or depth — the risk is not just that the audience is going to ignore it. Neurologically and unconsciously, they may also simplify it to the point they think they understand it. In terms of what you want them to believe, they could be wrong ([PSYBLOG](#)). However, simplifying content to the point the audience can't break it down any further gives them no choice but to understand your intended message.



The eye catcher

The brain wants and needs a center of attention, and if you don't offer it, it will wander all over the place until it finds a place to zoom in. So, everything you communicate needs to have a center of visual attention. In essence, you're assisting with the "seamless integration of semantic, visual and motor aspects of a memory trace," as Jeffrey Wammes, Melissa Meade and Myra Fernandes studied in their [2016 research on visual memory](#). All those numbers and figures you've loaded into that fact sheet? Think twice, since we know for certain a picture really is worth a thousand words.

Language, fluency and stupidity

An abstract of studies on cognitive fluency by Jeremy Dean, PhD., made a blunt assertion: "Complex writing makes you look stupid."⁵ This claim was validated by manipulating text complexity to see how readers would judge the author's intelligence. The fact is, writing simply is much harder than writing complexly. But many technology and B2B writers go the opposite direction: thinking that without jargon and convoluted, run-on sentences, how can they be perceived as subject matter experts? Yet writers such as John McPhee, Michael Lewis and Malcolm Gladwell explain impossibly complex subjects with simple, expert, accessible writing. Simple writing stands out and connects.

Effort and effortlessness

A study in the [Journal of Experimental Psychology](#) posited that the brain has two systems for reasoning and decision making. The conscious mind is slow and (we'd like to think) analytical; it's willing to gather and analyze information to make a seemingly rational decision. However, the more limber and unconscious limbic system underneath is quick, effortless and automatic: it's our intuition. If a message is easy to process, the limbic system trusts it without a second thought. To further understand why this is such a powerful concept, reference [Stop Making Sense: The Powerful Role of Emotion in B2B Decision Making](#).



Once you know how hungry the brain is for simplicity, you'd expect simplicity to be the well-established business first rule of B2B marketing communications. Yet it is in business-to-business marketing where almost all hope for simplicity seems to disappear.

Keep that in mind when you see the next PowerPoint presentation with 50 words and three charts on one slide case. Marketing information can be extremely complex, especially in the business-to-business marketplace where products and services are often staggeringly so. How do you explain for security implications of fog computing on the Industrial Internet of Things in a few words or a single slide? How radical do you introduce immunotherapeutic nanotechnology to an audience with a shaky knowledge of either? Isn't it easier just to turn loose the nearest engineer or researcher and allow them to provide maximum content so no detail is missed on that fact sheet or webpage?

There is simplicity, often radical simplicity, in consumer marketing. Apple comes to everyone's mind immediately; they're the masters. Most well-known consumer brands, like Apple, are radically simple.

Since B2B products and services are infinitely more complex than consumer goods and services, we believe customers require vastly more information to make much more consequential business decisions. This is unfair to consumer marketing. For example, insurance is a consumer category, yet the vagaries of buying insurance can be complicated and confusing. But we all know one company where 15 minutes could save us up to 15 percent or more on car insurance. Need more information? That's what the telephone number is for. It's that simple.

Business customers are wired exactly like consumers. If they're confronted with extreme complexity, their brains will happily ignore you or simplify what you're trying to say in terms they understand (and one of those terms could be, "I don't get it.").

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B2B marketers who understand radical simplicity.

Some — though very few — B2B marketers have an instinct for the simple.⁶

You know one of them well. IBM has 366,000 employees in 170 countries, and lists hundreds of products and services in dozens of categories. Yet one key product represents everything about IBM and why working with them is the best option:

Watson. Once a machine, now just a logo (the visual cue), Watson encompasses everything that makes IBM the first choice for large-scale corporate computing. For a few years, Watson meant supercomputing and even made a guest appearance on [Jeopardy](#) to prove it. Then the computing world cast its eyes on cloud computing, and Watson became the enabler of the cloud. Now artificial intelligence is on everyone's mind, and who knows more about AI than Watson? Watson has been the guide into each of these categories. IBM never starts by talking about the implications of supercomputing, the cloud, or AI at the start. That information is much farther down the communications chain. It is the existence of Watson that gives us a single word and image that guide our thinking about IBM. Simple.

On the other hand, you've probably never heard of **Hamilton Casters** of Hamilton, Ohio, maker of those little caster wheels on rolling boxes and equipment. They do, however, manufacture the toughest casters in the world. How do we know this? Because their messaging is so simple, and they make the purchasing decision so easy, there's really no incentive to look elsewhere: our brains have our simple answer. [Look at any Hamilton ad.](#) It has a single message. A visual that locks their audience into the message. Seventy words of copy make the decision seem more rational than emotional. All of these elements guide readers to an (almost) equally simple website that asks, "What's your business? Here's your answer." The message never varies. And all this disciplined, creative, fun communication is about little wheels for businesses. It's radically simple.

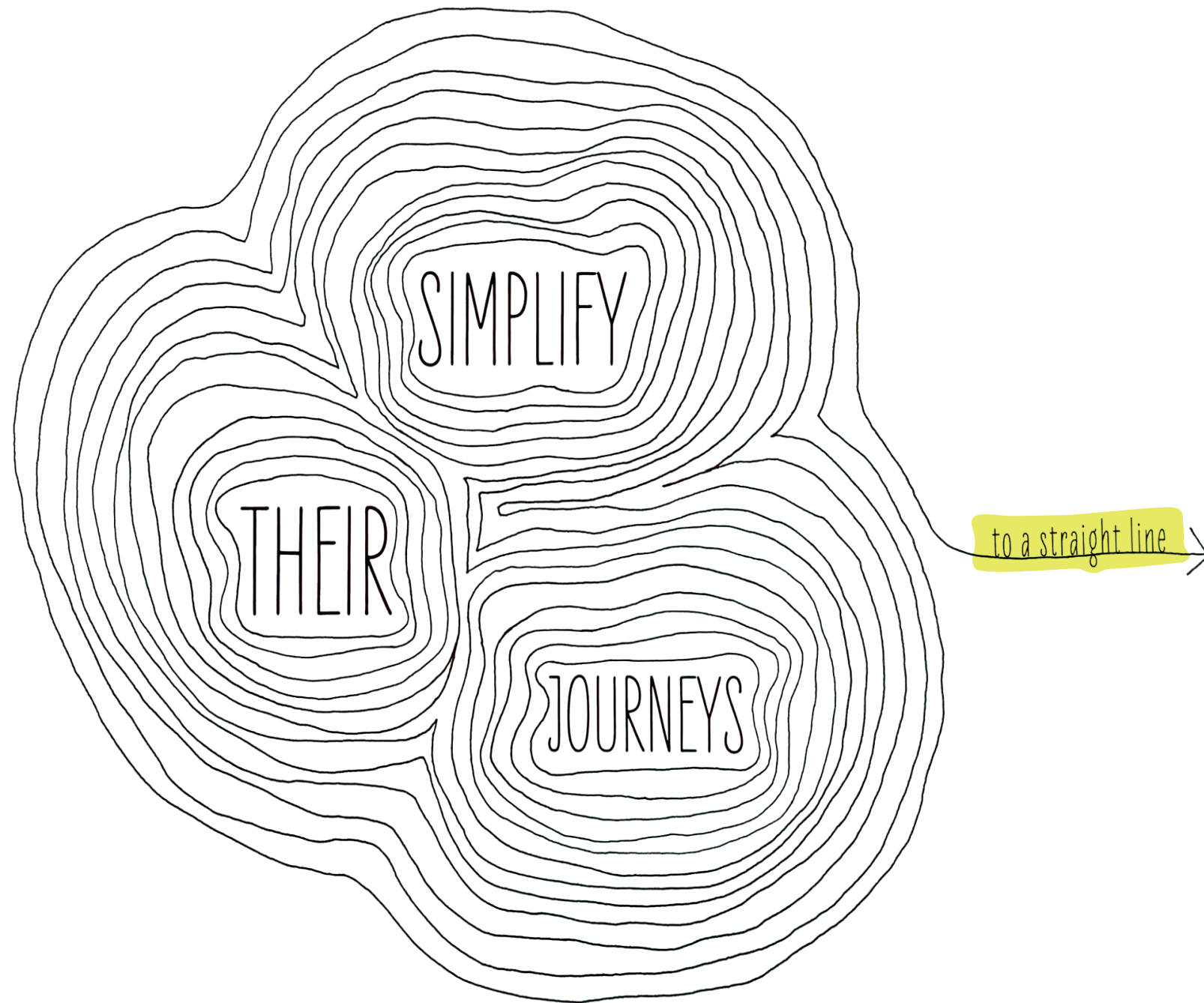
What Trader Joe's can teach B2B about simplification

In a brilliant [podcast](#) explaining why Trader Joe's should run the United States — no, really — Freakonomics Radio details why stores in inconvenient locations with lousy parking, narrow aisles and limited offerings are, by square foot, by far the most successful grocery stores in the world. It's all by design.

For one thing, Trader Joe's prevents analysis paralysis by limiting customer consideration: while most grocery stores carry about 40,000 stock keeping units (SKUs), Trader Joe's only offers about 3,000 per store. Almost all are Trader Joe's brands and come in one variety; there aren't 17 versions of tortilla chips. Trader Joe's makes the customer experience as simple as possible by eliminating the "paradox of choice." The offerings, i.e., the information to be processed, are highly limited. The customer's choice is binary: either "Yes, I want," or "No, I don't." They don't have to think about what they don't need to think about, like price or brand.

And then Trader Joe's goes overboard to make sure customers are directed to exactly what they want (you may be offered help five times in a single visit and you're welcome to try anything in the store). If Trader Joe's can't run America, they can at least help marketers take note of how they execute simplification and apply it to B2B buyers' decision-making journeys.

Be kind to your customers.



As [Forbes](#) magazine noted, in business a buying process that should be linear and straightforward is usually very messy: “This is when a potential customer could give up and abandon the customer journey altogether.”⁷ Where does this purchasing journey start? With your communications.

Take a careful look at your marketing efforts. Are they linear and straightforward? How many touchpoints are there before your customer gets the information they’re seeking? Is there too much going on? Would you get frustrated?

The [Harvard Business Review](#) agrees: “Customers feel overwhelmed ... Most B2B sellers think their customers are in the driver’s seat — empowered, armed to the teeth with information, and so clear about their needs that they don’t bother to engage with suppliers until late in the process, when their purchase decision is all but complete. Customers don’t see it that way.”⁸ As the scientific studies show, customers get increasingly uncertain and stressed the more information and complexity they encounter. They may ask for information, but only because no one is guiding them proactively toward a decision. They don’t need all those touchpoints, those 40,000 SKUs of information (remember Trader Joe’s?). Potential buyers just want to be pointed to a good business-to-business risotto that looks tasty.

Your marketing communications are that guide. It’s why simple tools such as infographics have become so popular. One highly visual page can contain a handful of compelling messages under a single irresistible claim or promise. If someone wants more information, fine. Hopefully, it’s well organized on a website that’s referenced on the page, or, even better, a phone number actually leading to an expert.

Yes, you have a treasure trove of data, and by all means, keep it — in a vault, doled out piece by piece, to avoid customer analysis paralysis. Be careful leading with, or even using, complex or technical information in your marketing communications. That’s the neutrinos that go in and out of the brain without touching a brain cell. Your job is to capture customer attention in a world of information overload that is out of control.

The way forward is radical simplification: of every communication you offer your customers.

Your business requires focus. Marketing is in a state of constant change. TriComB2B is your resource for B2B marketing and communications that respond to those changes. We promote industrial and technical products and services with the unique requirements of B2B.

With a team of engineers, technically oriented industry veterans, imaginative creatives and savvy interactive developers, TriComB2B can effectively complement your internal marketing resources or manage every aspect of your marketing programs. Learn more at tricomb2b.com.