



Better
information presentation:
satisfying
consumers?

David Sless

Professor David Sless is research director and cofounder of the Communication Research Institute of Australia, Australia's independent, non-government, not-for-profit institute for communication research. He is professor in Science Communication at the Australian National University, and the director of Advanced Studies courses at the International Institution of Information Design.

A researcher and commentator in visual communication, information design, semiotics, communication theory, and communications policy, he has held academic appointments in Australia and the United Kingdom and is an advisor to senior management in both government and private enterprise.

► **Some important questions**

The main purpose of this paper is to provide some pointers to critical debates about the practice and purpose of information design.

The title of this paper suggests a simple truth: if we use better information presentation methods we will satisfy consumers. But if we look behind the title, as it were, we find a number of important questions. What methods can we use to design better information presentation? What do we mean by better? In what sense should we understand this idea of consumer satisfaction? And is the category of 'consumers' sufficient to characterize those who use information?

I would like to discuss these fundamental issues in an attempt to develop a deeper and more critical dialogue about our practice of information design. I would also like to bring into this dialogue an underlying concern for the moral-aesthetic dimension of information design. I am prompted to do so by a recent debate among information designers which, in my view, creates a false dichotomy between the performance of a design on the one hand, and its look and feel on the other. This false dichotomy has been used to argue that performance or usability is not concerned with aesthetics – making objects appealing and pleasant – and is only concerned with utilitarian measurement of such things as error rates and comprehension (Stiff, 1995).

This paper is to some extent an attempt to lift the debate beyond this false dichotomy, though at first it may not seem obvious why I have chosen to do so by linking the aesthetic

PO Box 8
Hackett, ACT 2606
Australia
Visible Language 30.3
David Sless, 246-267.

© *Visible Language*, 1996
Rhode Island School of Design
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

with the moral and talking about the moral-aesthetic dimension. However, I hope that this will become clear as I develop the conversation.

The conversational metaphor

You will notice that I recurrently use the metaphor of a conversation to shed light on information design issues. This is not a simple conceit – a metaphor of the moment – but part of a deeper theoretical conviction that has informed our work at the Communication Research Institute of Australia over the last ten years. Along with many others in the field of communication research we have been developing a theoretical view of communication as primarily arising from, and unified around, the concept of conversation (Penman, 1993). This work is located within what has become known as a constructionist paradigm, one which assumes that we construct our social realities in and through our communicative actions. This view has its intellectual origins in the social philosophy of Margaret Mead and John Dewey, the moral philosophy of Martin Buber and the linguistic and literary criticism of Mikhail Bakhtin.

If all of this seems too abstract for such a pragmatic context as information design – too much concerned with theory – let me remind you that it is precisely this type of theory that has informed and given coherence to our Institute's highly pragmatic information design work (for example Fisher and Sless, 1990; MacKenzie, 1994; Rogers, 1994; Sless, 1994). Moreover, to those of you with an aversion to 'theory,' let me suggest that theory is always present in our actions whether we see it or not. The danger of ignoring its presence is that this allows the theory to drive us, rather than allowing us to determine the theory we use. But there is no escaping theory. Having said that, I do not believe that theory in information design should be a great burden, a realm of obscurity. Like our design practice, our theory should be guided by principles of economy, clarity, simplicity and elegance.

I will now turn to each of the questions implicit in the title of this paper to open a dialogue for your consideration.

Design methods for better information presentation

From our point of view at the Institute, information design is now a mature craft concerned with making information accessible and usable, a craft that generates artifacts enabling people to conduct useful conversations with the information in their environment. Information designers have available a relatively stable and powerful set of techniques for developing these artifacts to the highest standards, whether in the traditional media or in the new electronic media. This may not be apparent to those from such disciplines as experimental psychology or human factors who have taken an interest in information design issues (e.g., Laughery et al, 1994), or indeed to those from cognate crafts such as graphic design.

The experimental psychologists' exclusion of all knowledge except that derived from experiments make it difficult for them to see the other substantial and mature types of practical craft knowledge at work within the field. But then I think the psychologists' search for invariant laws of human behavior, regardless of context, is philosophically at odds with our attempts to solve practical problems of conversation, in a particular culture, at a particular historical moment.

Graphic designers have often assumed, incorrectly, that information design is just a specialism within their own craft, failing to see the subtle but substantial difference between their own largely studio-based practice, informed by aesthetic judgment, and the information designers' contextualized interdisciplinary practice, informed by user expectations and needs. As information designers we do many things that take us outside the studio, both conceptually and practically.

Notwithstanding these professional blind spots in our colleagues, the maturity of information design can be seen if we take a broad view, encompassing within our craft the many lessons from the general field of design methods (e.g., Jones, 1980), from specific studies in information design methods (e.g., Sless, 1978), from the growing field of design for human computer interaction (e.g., Nielsen, 1993), and from the growing body of valuable case histories in our field (e.g., Waller, 1984, Fisher and Sless, 1990; Penman and Sless, 1992).

Looked at from this vantage point, it is possible to discern the basis of a coherent interdisciplinary craft (Sless, 1992a). In this cumulative tradition we can discern a continual refinement of a process for managing dialogues. The emergence of rapid prototyping and iterative testing as one of the central components of information design methods is no accident, but a clear indication of the dynamic conversational process that is at the heart of information design. Just as in everyday conversation, where meanings emerge – negotiated through the dynamics of dialogue – so too in information design we construct the outcomes as a result of a dialogue between ourselves and the eventual users of the information.

Within the profession, information designers give many different accounts of their own understanding of the craft, and give it their own distinctive emphasis. (This was apparent at two recent international meetings: the Public Graphics symposium in Lunteren in 1994 and the Vision Plus symposium in Götzis in 1995.) But through the Communication Institute's research into information design methods and the accumulated case histories cited above, the Institute now knows how to develop better information presentation, using interdisciplinary skills, testing and evaluating designs at various stages of development, and taking account of the complexity and fragility of the systems within which the designs work. We know the range of interdisciplinary skills that are needed to solve complex information design problems; we know the sequences of procedures and methods to use; and we know what types of data and crafts help us solve information design problems.

If you think my confidence in our own work seems misplaced, you should note that in the specific area of information design concerned with human computer interaction there is no lack of confidence, and in that area of activity many of the methods which we would regard as part of information design go under the much more confident, if inelegant, title of Usability Engineering (Neilson, 1993).

Figure 1:
Before and after designs
of Capital insurance forms
and the Telecom bill.

SILVER

Capital Financial Group
Proposal for Insurance

Please print in Block letters

1. Insured (Individual)
Name: []
Address: []
City: [] State: [] Zip: []
Age: [] Sex: []
Occupation: []
Annual Income: []
Net Worth: []
Assets: []
Liabilities: []
Other Information: []

2. Office use only
Sales Office: []
Branch Office: []
Policy Office: []
Underwriting Office: []
Claims Office: []
Other: []

3. Policy Information
Policy No.: []
Effective Date: []
Expiration Date: []
Premium: []
Commission: []
Broker's Fee: []
Other Charges: []

4. Signature
Signature: []
Date: []

Policyowner(s)
If provided for the representation, policyowner to Capital Financial Group

1. Creation or grant names
Surname: []
Title: []
Sex: []
Date of birth: []
Place of birth: []

2. Are there any other policyowners?
Yes: [] No: []

3. Are policyowners
Joint tenancy: []
Tenants in common: []
First policyowner: []
Second policyowner: []

4. Postal address
Address: []
Postcode: []

5. Home address
Address: []
Postcode: []

6. Telephone number
Private: []
Business: []

7. Agent
Agent name: []
Agent number: []

8. Policy
Type: []
Details type of cover proposed: []

9. Nominated (investor or shareholder(s))
Name: []
Title: []
Sex: []
Date of birth: []
Place of birth: []

10. Insurable interest relationship to policyowner
Yes: [] No: []

11. Is this to change an existing Capital policy?
Yes: [] No: []

12. Replacing existing insurance may be disadvantageous
Yes: [] No: []

13. Is this a proposal for a savings plan or bond?
Yes: [] No: []

Telecom Australia
*** PAYMENT PAGE *** PAGE 1

ACCOUNT NO. 062-47 5056 056
22 JUN 88 (20)

FOR BICENTENNIAL NEWS
IN YOUR CAPITAL CITY

IF MAILING YOUR PAYMENT RETURN THIS PAGE.
IF PAYING IN PERSON PRESENT THIS PAGE.
TO PAY BY PHONE DIAL: 03-526 0920 (FREE)
PAY AT ANY WESTPAC BRANCH OR POST OFFICE.

THE COMMUNICATION RESEARCH
INSTITUTE OF AUSTRALIA
GPO BOX 652
CANNING ACT 2601

BANKCARD * MASTERCARD
VISA
NO. []
SIGNATURE []

*** H36 008 *** TOTAL AMOUNT DUE \$136.70

PR 2 06247505605642 #14072707#0000000000013670

Telecom Australia Bill

Your account number: 03-600 4715 715 9
Date of issue: 02 / 10 / 88
03-608 9003

Bill ref. no.	Via internet	Balance	Total of the bill	Total amount payable
890 12	-\$90.22	\$ 0.00	\$ 140.55	\$ 140.55

Payment due by: 18 / 10 / 88

JOHN CITIZEN
10 FLOOR
484 ST KILDA RD
MELBOURNE VIC 3004

Other Use
Your Telephone Service 03-600 4715

Code	Description	Period	Amount
1	Call charges		\$
2-1	Metred calls	23 Jun to 24 Sep	455 units at \$0.21 each 95.00
2-2	OTC (ID) (pre-payment)	1 to 30 Sep	1 call 8.00
2-3	Service and equipment	29 Sep to 28 Dec	34.95
Total amount payable			\$140.55

Telecom Australia
*** SUMMARY PAGE *** PAGE 2

BILLING ENQUIRIES 062-45 5655(FREE) 062-47 5056 056
22 JUN 88 (20)

TOTAL AMOUNT OF LAST BILL
PAYMENTS CREDITED - THANK YOU 154.50
BALANCE 62-47 5056 056 0.00

CURRENT CHARGES
SERVICE AND EQUIPMENT 20 JUN TO 19 SEP 59.70
CALL CHARGES - SEE PAGE 3 77.00

TOTAL CURRENT CHARGES *** DUE BY 08 JUL *** 136.70

TOTAL AMOUNT DUE \$136.70

PR 2 06247505605642 #14072707#0000000000013670

Telecom Australia Please return this section with your payment

Your account number: 03-600 4715 715 9
Bill enquiries: 03-608 9003
RVT
Total amount payable: \$140.55

Payment Methods
1. Mailing your Payment - Please detach this payment slip and put it, together with your cheque for credit card payment, inside the bill envelope. In the envelope provided. Cheques to be made payable to Telecom Australia.
2. Paying in person - Please present this page intact and make your payment by cash or cheque at any Post Office or at any Westpac Branch that has self-serviced bill payment. Cheques to be made payable to Telecom Australia.
3. Pay by phone - Call the telephone number 02-692 0123 three times during business hours. Please follow the on-line voice mail instructions.

Cashier
Telecom Australia
GPO Box 9501
Melbourne VIC 3001

Y70 602 PR V1 3 0360047157159 #813 65190001405100014055

Telecom Australia
*** CALL CHARGES PAGE *** PAGE 3

ACCOUNT NO. 062-47 5056 056
22 JUN 88 (20)

TELEPHONE SERVICE 062-47 5056

METERED CALLS	DATE	REGISTRATIONS	CHARGE	AMOUNT
1	11 MAR TO 12 MAY	385	0.20	77.00
METERED CALL SUBTOTAL				\$77.00

TOTAL CALL CHARGES \$77.00

What do we mean by ‘better’?

Implicit within any craft that claims to improve something is an ideological commitment to change something for the better. In the case of information design, we see our work within a more general framework of social improvement and reform – making information more accessible and usable for people, making better conversations possible. At the same time, to make this activity appealing to clients, we have claimed that better information design can make industry and government more efficient. Often the claims have run ahead of the evidence. But in our research program over the last ten years at the Institute, we have been collecting evidence that sheds critical light on both the claims and the evidence.

Better performance

The idea that information design can help industry and government gain efficiency and productivity has been borne out by the evidence. We have shown in a number of high-profile model projects that it is possible to achieve very substantial improvements in efficiency and productivity. For example, in our work for the insurance industry in Australia, we showed that it is possible to massively reduce the error rates on insurance application forms. In one case we reported a reduction of 97.2 percent, with savings of over \$500,000 in the one year on the processing of 44,000 documents (Fisher and Sless, 1990). In another case, after the redesign of a telephone bill, complaints due to the design of the bill went down from 47 to 4 percent (Sless, 1992b).

These are spectacular cases. And it is important to note that both documents were very poor to start with (figure 1). In one case, the document was the victim of what I call “administrative sedimentation”: a process of design neglect in which new features and pieces of information are added progressively over the years with no understanding of the overall effects of these additions on the capacity of people to use the document. In the other case, the document was a multi-page screen-dump from a poorly designed low-resolution character-based accounting system. One could argue, with some justification, that anything would have been better. Nonetheless, our measurements of productivity before and after rede-

sign demonstrate clearly that applying information design principles can improve documents.

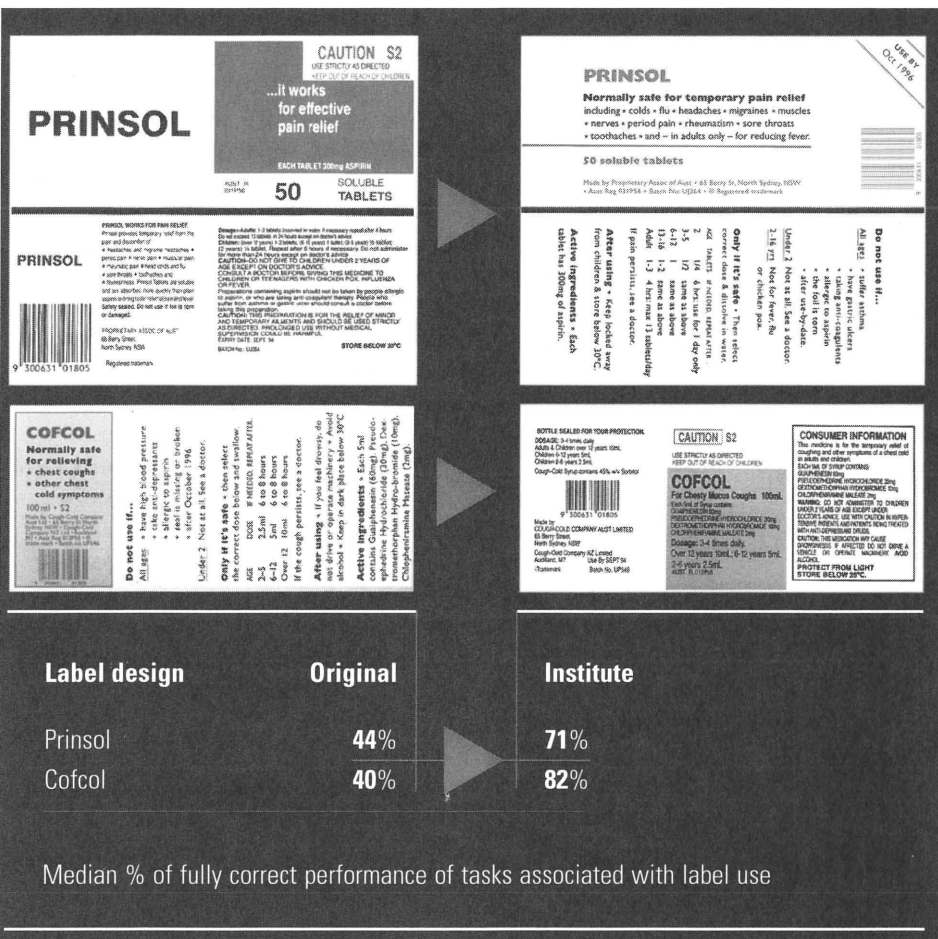
How far can we take improvements? What is an optimum performance beyond which the effort outweighs the cost?

We recently undertook a study for the Australian government into consumer product information in the pharmaceutical industry. Our purpose was to develop a set of usability guidelines for the pharmaceutical industry. We designed them to help the industry produce high quality information about medicines for consumers, in accordance with government regulatory requirements (Sless and Wiseman, 1994). As part of the study, we iteratively tested and developed a number of documents for a variety of different medicines, and concluded that ninety percent of the literate population could be expected to find specific information on the documents, of whom ninety percent could be expected to use the information they found appropriately. In the guidelines, therefore, we set the minimum standard at eighty percent. In practice, most documents about medicines which use our guidelines exceed this standard. This compares with an average of fifty percent in previously reported studies.

In another study, in which we attempted to make improvements to medicine labels, we specifically tested older people who are known to have problems with the use of medication (Rogers et al, 1995). With this group we managed to achieve significant improvements over previous attempts, though rarely reaching the same level of performance as in the study to develop usability guidelines. The reason, apart from the specific limitation of the group we tested, was the limitation that the packaging size imposed on the presentation of the label's information.

The methodology for improving the labels involved iterative diagnostic testing and modifications of the design to achieve optimum performance with older people. We then tested the performance of the new labels against the old. The new and old labels are shown in figure 2 which also shows a summary of the performance results for each.

Figure 2:
Before and after label designs
and a summary of relative
performance data.



CAUTION S2
USE STRICTLY AS DIRECTED
KEEP OUT OF REACH OF CHILDREN

...it works
for effective
pain relief

EACH TABLET 50mg ASPIRIN

NET WT. 30.1g (1.07oz)

50 SOLUBLE TABLETS

PRINSOL

PRINSOL WORKS FOR PAIN RELIEF
Pain relief begins in 15-30 minutes, lasts for 4-6 hours and is effective for:
• headache and migraine • toothache • fever • muscle pain • rheumatoid arthritis • earache • sinusitis and • menstrual cramps. There are no side effects in children over 12 years of age. Do not use if you are allergic to aspirin or if you are taking other aspirin-containing products. Do not use if you are taking other aspirin-containing products. Do not use if you are taking other aspirin-containing products. Do not use if you are taking other aspirin-containing products.

DO NOT USE IF...
Allergic to aspirin
• taking anti-coagulants
• taking anti-thrombotics
• after surgery
• after stroke

Under 2: Not at all. Use a doctor.

2-6: 1/2 to 1 tablet 4-6 times daily.
7-12: 1 to 2 tablets 4-6 times daily.
13-18: 1-2 tablets 4-6 times daily.
19-65: 1-2 tablets 4-6 times daily.
66+: 1-2 tablets 4-6 times daily.

Active ingredients • Each tablet has 50mg of aspirin.

After using • Keep bottles away from children & store below 20°C.

MADE BY PROPRIETARY ASSOC OF ASIA • 43 BERRY ST, NORTH SYDNEY, NSW
• Aust. Reg. 531954 • Batch No. U3364 • © Registered trademark.

PRINSOL

Normally safe for temporary pain relief
including • colds • flu • headaches • migraines • muscles
• nerves • period pain • rheumatism • sore throats
• toothaches • and • in adults only • for reducing fever.

50 soluble tablets

Made by Proprietary Assoc of Asia • 43 Berry St, North Sydney, NSW
• Aust. Reg. 531954 • Batch No. U3364 • © Registered trademark.

Do not use if...
Allergic to aspirin
• taking anti-coagulants
• taking anti-thrombotics
• after surgery
• after stroke

Under 2: Not at all. Use a doctor.
2-6: 1/2 to 1 tablet 4-6 times daily.
7-12: 1 to 2 tablets 4-6 times daily.
13-18: 1-2 tablets 4-6 times daily.
19-65: 1-2 tablets 4-6 times daily.
66+: 1-2 tablets 4-6 times daily.

Active ingredients • Each tablet has 50mg of aspirin.

After using • Keep bottles away from children & store below 20°C.

COFCOL

Normally safe for relieving
• chest coughs
• other chest cold symptoms

100ml • 12
Made by Cofcol-Cold Company
Unit 11, 111 Victoria Road,
Crows Nest, NSW 1585, Australia
© 1998 Cofcol-Cold Company
Printed in Australia

Do not use if...
• have high blood pressure
• are taking aspirin
• are taking aspirin
• are taking aspirin

Under 2: Not at all. Use a doctor.
Under 2: Not at all. Use a doctor.

ONLY IF IT'S SAFE • then select correct dose according to age. **DO NOT EXCEED RECOMMENDED DOSE.**

Age 2-5: 2.5ml 4-6 times daily.
Age 6-12: 5ml 4-6 times daily.
Age 13-18: 5ml 4-6 times daily.
Age 19-65: 5ml 4-6 times daily.
Age 66+: 5ml 4-6 times daily.

Active ingredients • Each 5ml contains Chlorpheniramine (5mg), Pseudoephedrine Hydrochloride (10mg), and Diphenhydramine Hydrochloride (10mg).

CAUTION S2
USE STRICTLY AS DIRECTED
KEEP OUT OF REACH OF CHILDREN

COFCOL

For Chesty Mucus Coughs 100ml
100ml of new content

DO NOT USE IF...
Allergic to aspirin
• taking anti-coagulants
• taking anti-thrombotics
• after surgery
• after stroke

Under 2: Not at all. Use a doctor.
2-6: 1/2 to 1 tablet 4-6 times daily.
7-12: 1 to 2 tablets 4-6 times daily.
13-18: 1-2 tablets 4-6 times daily.
19-65: 1-2 tablets 4-6 times daily.
66+: 1-2 tablets 4-6 times daily.

Active ingredients • Each tablet has 50mg of aspirin.

After using • Keep bottles away from children & store below 20°C.

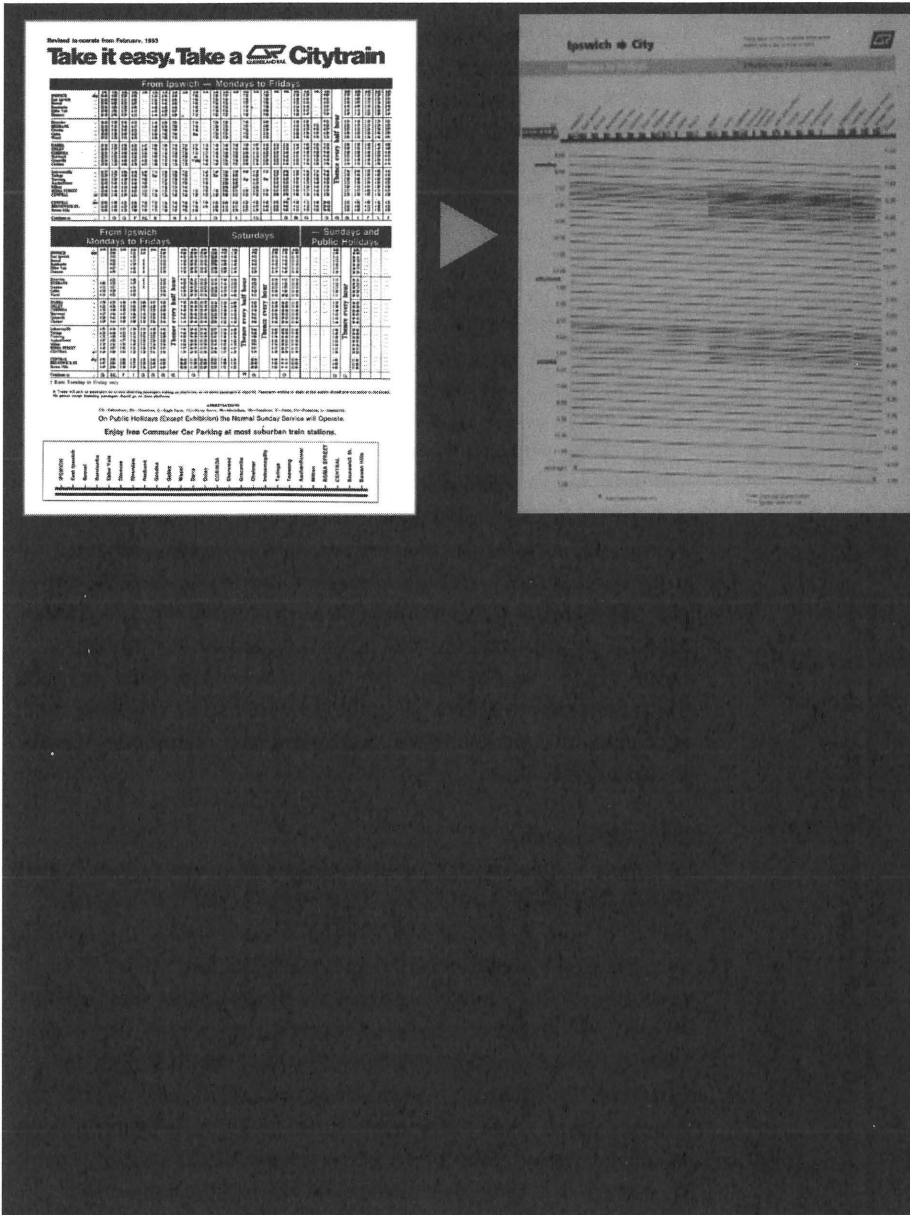
These findings have been extremely important in establishing the appropriate issues in future labelling regulations in Australia (Federal Bureau of Consumer Affairs 1995, Industry Commission 1995). This suggests that information design may be useful politically in establishing baseline performance standards for regulating all types of consumer product information.

Yet these measurements of error rates and performance only give part of the picture and leave something unspoken, something of great importance. If viewed narrowly, these measurements could be taken to suggest that people are mere mechanisms whose information processing have to be optimized along with all the other mechanical components of the system. Within such an utilitarian view, the information designer's task would be entirely concerned with optimizing the transfer of information by developing suitable stimulus material. Such a narrowly behaviorist view would also suggest that human communication is merely the transmission of information. But if we look at some of the examples of the work I spoke of there is something else at work; there are other voices within the conversation than those of efficiency and performance, command and obedience, stimulus and response.

Better conversation

In figure 3 are a number of before and after examples of work undertaken by our Institute. They are two punctuated moments of conversations. The "before" examples are the opening gambits of a dialogue; the "after" examples are a brief moment of closure, following many moments in which alternatives were tried with users, changed and retried. The users were involved in a collaborative conversation in which the "after" is the outcome – a moment of agreement. The conversation is itself invisible – mute at the moment when you look at these designs – but nonetheless powerful in shaping the transition that you observe. Something has happened in this process that is far more than the optimization of information transfer.

Figure 3:
Three examples of before and after designs which achieved improvements in performance: a train schedule, a statistical report and an insurance form.



First, it is important to understand something of the quality of the conversation that has taken place. The quasi-scientific term “testing” is often used to describe what goes on between information designers and users at the moment when a designer consults a user. But this terminology is misleading. These moments of dialogue are social occasions between people, not events between experimenter and subject. In our construction of these social occasions we try to make clear to the participants we invite to help us that we are seeking their advice; we want to understand the problems they have while trying to use the designs. We usually suggest that someone else is responsible for the design, so that they do not feel under an obligation to be kind to us by being kind about the design before them. Our job, as we describe it to the participants, is to find out what is wrong with the design, so that we can advise others what to do to change it. Thus we create a three-cornered dialogue between ourselves, the participant and the design, in which we interrogate the faults in the design. As part of this dialogue, we usually ask participants to perform certain tasks with the designs, asking them to identify problems as they proceed. We also observe and note the moments when problems occur. While we obviously control the social occasion and many of the tasks performed within it, we provide many opportunities for open-ended dialogue in which the participants can control the direction of the conversation. Underlying this process is one of respect for and interest in the words and actions of the participants. It is their view of the design that is given legitimacy and which is articulated in the conversation. Thus the before and after cases that you see in figure 1 are the punctuated moments of an extended conversation, the result of a dialogue that respects the participants’ voice.

Second, between these two moments there has been the application of information design skills; the language, graphics and typography of the designs have been transformed and refined, making the objects not only usable but also more appealing and pleasant. Participants in our “testing” vary greatly in their capacity to articulate and recognize the visible evidence of design skills. They make comments about the improved versions, such as “it looks professional,” “it’s easy to

read,” or “it’s nice to look at” which give a sense of something underlying what is articulated.

Here we begin to see how our contemporary concern for performance blends with Stiff’s concern for traditional aesthetics. Our strong advocacy of performance-based assessment does not constitute a dismissal of aesthetics, as Stiff (1995:44) says. On the contrary, our design processes take account of the “look and feel” of a design, to use Stiff’s phrase, and indeed we take care to evaluate the aesthetic performance of designs. But I would like to give this traditional concern a new inflection, more consistent with our craft of information design and with our sense of communication as conversation.

I believe that our improved versions give users a sense that the designers respect and care about both the information and the people who have to use it. Users of these designs can see that pain has been taken, time and effort have been expended, and craft has been deployed; the design speaks, as it were, in a voice that the user can understand. But, importantly, this is not a conversation in which one of the parties shows off. Unlike the designs that win awards – the outcome of conversations amongst designers displaying their skills to each other – these designs speak with a modest voice, taking a place in the conversation that is respectful of the other voices and listeners in the dialogue. These designs offer the possibility of a good conversation.

Satisfying the consumer

It is the possibility for good conversation which I now want to turn to, and within this possibility I shall explore notions of satisfying the consumer. Information design, like other forms of public communication, is concerned with managing a relationship; it is a kind of managed conversation. The designer presents information with which the users can interact. It is out of this interaction that users generate meaning and understanding, and it is this kind of interaction which can be seen as a special type of conversation. The designer is setting up and managing a conversation between the information and the user. This is why I want to argue that the notion of good conversation is a more suitable way of discussing aesthetics in

information design than the traditional way of looking for aesthetic value in appearances.

There are three obvious senses of good when applied to conversation: the functional, the pleasurable and the moral. I want to suggest that these are also essential for good information design.

First, I can say that conversation is good functionally because I find it effective, I can use it to perform a task correctly. I can engage appropriately in the conversation, there is a sense of shared understanding. This is often what is meant when people talk about good design. It is also the sense in which I began talking about better information design. Second, I can say it is good in a pleasurable sense, if I find it delights the senses. Third, the conversation is good morally if it respects and values all participants. The process of iterative development through conversation that I described earlier is a practical manifestation of this at work, the effect of which should be apparent to users of the final design.

The visible deployment of care and craft works in two directions: it informs the consumer that the author of the information regards the information as sufficiently important to employ sophisticated design skills in its production; and it dignifies the consumer's use of the information with importance and value by making the information accessible and usable. This is the basis of a good conversation, one that is effective, pleasurable and properly respectful of the participants.

Deceptive conversations

But not all conversations are good. Let me give you an example of a type of conversation that we find worrying and not good.

In some of our work we have been critical of the plain language movement (Penman, 1992 and 1993; Sless, 1993 and 1995). Some have been surprised by our criticism. After all, the intent of the plain language movement is in many respects congruent with our own – plain language advocates want to

make written information clear and accessible. However, the problem is not with the intent but with the practice. Our criticism has been partly on functional grounds: plain language advocates have claimed that they work in the interests of the reader but they consistently fail to offer evidence from readers in support of this claim. Moreover, we have found in our research and practical information design that there are so many factors to take into account in developing good information designs, apart from the language, that calling the practice “plain language” is grossly misleading.

For example, in a recent review of best practices in forms design (Sless, 1994), I listed the following stages:

1. Identify the dominant voices in the organization’s dialogue.
2. Decide what information needs to be collected or given.
3. Find out who are the users of the form.
4. Find out about the context in which the information is to be collected or given.
5. Develop a prototype of the form.
6. Test the form with users to see if it works.
7. Modify the form in the light of the testing.
8. Repeat testing and modification at least three times.
9. Introduce the form on a small pilot scale.
10. Modify the form on the basis of the results from the pilot.
11. Introduce the form.
12. Monitor the form in use, measuring against known benchmarks.

Using language appropriately (not necessarily following plain language principles) is, of course, used in some stages of forms design, but it is typically a small component in information design projects. Our experience suggests that the time devoted to “plain language” within any such team project can sometimes be as low as five percent of the total effort. Further, if one looks at the total range of skills involved in a project, one can see additional reasons why the overall title of “plain language” is misleading. Wright (1984) suggested that in addition to a skillful control of language, good forms design required skills in typography and research methods and a capacity to

interpret relevant research findings. Our subsequent research suggests that one should add skills in design methods, organizational management, organization and methods, information management and philosophical reasoning (Sless, 1992a). Forms design, like other aspects of information design, is a craft which usually involves a team of skilled people rather than a single individual. From such experience, you may well understand why I regard “plain language” methods as a misleading description of information design.

There is, however, a deeper criticism concerning the morality of plain language. I can illustrate this clearly with some recent evidence from plain language advocates themselves.

The Life Insurance Federation of Australia (LIFA) recently employed some plain language advocates to develop model insurance documents for the industry. The documents were tested by an independent market research group. Part of the data collected concerned people’s preference for the new versus the old insurance policy documents. On the basis of this evidence the Chairman of LIFA proudly claimed that: “The research showed that respondents overwhelmingly preferred the structure used in the [new policy] ” (12). On the face of it this might seem like good evidence of consumer satisfaction. However, as many in the research community know, preference data taken prior to usage of information – simply based on the look of the document – does not predict performance. Indeed, the evidence from the LIFA study reconfirms this finding in an alarming way, and points directly to the reasons for our moral qualms about plain language. The study showed that people made many mistakes in answering questions about the document, yet showed great confidence in the document’s design.

For example, eighty-four percent of respondents got the wrong answer to a test question about the meaning of policy information. Yet, and this is the important point, only four percent thought the question was difficult to answer.

In another instance, where thirty percent answered wrongly, only two percent nominated the question “difficult to an-

swer.” This type of finding recurred throughout the study, leading the independent researchers to comment: “This discrepancy highlights the false confidence held by a substantial number of respondents” (11, Appendix 1). This goes to the heart of the moral-aesthetic problem that concerns us. The document was designed in such a way that it looked pleasant and simple to use, and, by using a plain language style of writing, it seemed to take the readers’ needs into account; it inspired confidence. This is the easy appeal to the eye that many of us find worrying about graphic design – the seductive surface charm that serves to entertain but not enlighten.

Yet we can all imagine the reaction of the readers who eventually find themselves disadvantaged by the conditions in a contract through their misunderstanding of the document. What is their reaction at the moment they discover their misunderstanding? Our evidence suggests that in the face of incomprehensible information most people will blame themselves for the misunderstanding; they will feel stupid or negligent. After all, if the document is in plain language they should have been able to understand it.

We must be skeptical of strategies that suggest that by using certain formal stylistic rules we can solve communication problems. We should resist reducing the user of a text to a cipher within the formalism. Put in conversational terms, we should avoid methods that suggest that good conversation can occur without collaboration, without mutual engagement and exchange, without dialogue. Put in ordinary language, such conversations are one-sided, insensitive, unfair and possibly arrogant. Notice how these terms all speak about the moral quality of conversation. They go to the heart of a central moral question about how it is appropriate to treat one’s fellow human beings.

However inadvertently, a conversation with such documents can potentially mislead people about their rights, make them feel stupid and negligent and undermine their self-esteem. This is not a good conversation. It is neither functional nor morally responsible, and in the end it is unpleasant – whatever initial satisfaction, pleasure or comfort it provided.

It has the form— the style of a good conversation – without the substance. In keeping with many other formalist strategies for “good design, such as those taught in many design schools, the plain language movement has tried to deal with complex dynamic problems by resorting to stylistic formalisms. We cannot separate form and content, aesthetic and moral considerations. This is why I have suggested that we have to talk about the moral-aesthetic dimension of our work, rather than treat these as separate concerns.

With that question in mind I turn to the final question in this paper about whether treating people as consumers is a sufficient basis for information design practice.

Is the category of “consumers” sufficient?

Describing people who use information as consumers implies a relationship of production and consumption. In conversational terms it implies one person talking and everyone else listening. This is a very limited type of relationship, but one that has become increasingly pervasive throughout the private sector – and increasingly in the public sector – wherever the pervasive ideology is consumer capitalism. This type of narrowing or restricting is occurring in many areas of public life.

For example, in Australia, a recent government policy statement on information technology in government boldly celebrated its central objective in its title: *Clients First*. On the face of it this seems like a desirable and wholly positive objective, until one realizes that the term *client* is replacing *citizen*.

The relationship between client and service provider is a limited one. I can be a client of a prostitute or a lawyer – I pay a fee, they provide a service. This is the extent of the relationship. But my relationship to government is altogether different. For example, it is meaningless to refer to my relationship with the taxation office as one of client and service provider. I cannot refuse the “service” they offer (which is to take money out of my wallet), and there are legal controls on the extent of “service” they can provide – although sometimes it seems their “service” can be too good!

Further, it is demanding to suggest that the relationship between a citizen and a government agency providing support in welfare, education or health is offering a service rather than fulfilling an obligation to one of its citizens with rights. Further still, as a citizen, one's right to a voice within a democratic society cannot be satisfied within the client/service-provider relationship. The conversation between citizen and state cannot be limited to a commercial transaction. There are mutual ties of rights and obligation that stretch from before birth till after death, and these ties cannot be easily or lightly broken or taken up.

Thus the category of consumer or client cannot adequately deal with the full range of relationships that may be possible between people and information, any more than listening to the voice of a single speaker defines the full extent and range of conversational possibilities.

The information designer's responsibility

I would like to conclude with some observations about professional responsibility that arise directly from these arguments.

Clearly information design is a highly interventionist practice. If, as the evidence shows, information designers can bring about changed conversations between citizen and state, consumer, and corporation – making information more accessible and usable – then the question of what counts as “better” cannot be treated lightly. The design practices that make things “better,” are bound by special responsibilities and obligations which must be subject to critical review.

There is something special about design that is sometimes forgotten or taken for granted. Designers create things that do not presently exist. In however small a degree, they are creating what Christopher Jones aptly describes as “seeds of human futures” (1970). This places designers always in a position of some responsibility.

It is with this responsibility in mind that I return to the question about the moral-aesthetic dimension in information

design. Through this dimension, at the point where the physicality of the design and the relationship with the user coalesce, one can discern the quality of the relationship that information designers set up between people and information; one can see how designers position the subject within the discourse that they manage. Fundamentally, this becomes a moral question; how is it appropriate to treat other people? As so many objects of ordinary life – forms, interfaces, timetables, legal documents and signposts – are badly designed, designing them well can be a critical intervention into the status quo. Design can be, as Manzini has observed, a form of social critique (Manzini, 1995). As such, the particular moral-aesthetic dimension of information design should have a very distinctive quality, and one should not expect to judge it by the same criteria that apply to, say, mainstream graphic design in the service of consumer capitalism.

One needs to understand that information design is a social practice that works through and at times against the prevailing systems of social organization in which it is located. I tend to think of information design, at its best, as lending a quiet dignity and politeness to everyday life. But doubtless there are many other ways in which to articulate these issues. Indeed, one of the important tasks that lie ahead of us in developing our craft is to articulate a critical moral-aesthetic vocabulary that is suited to judging information design work. This task is an essential part of developing a mature craft.

Acknowledgment

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Institute for Information Design (IIID) *Vision Plus Symposium* held in Götzis, Voralberg in August, 1995. The paper's title was suggested by Peter Simlinger, the Director of IIID. I am grateful to Peter for his inspiration, his invitation to me to address the symposium and beyond that to his tireless championing of Information Design for many years.

References

- Federal Bureau of Consumer Affairs. 1995. *Issues Paper 2: Consumer Product Labelling*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Fisher, P. and D. Sless. 1990. Information design methods and productivity in the insurance industry. *Information Design Journal*, 6:2, 103-129.
- Industry Commission. 1995. Draft Report: Packaging and Labelling. Melbourne: Industry Commission.
- Jones, C. J. 1970. *Design Methods: Seeds of human futures*. London: Wiley-Interscience.
- Laughery, Kenneth R. Sr, Michael S. Wolgater and Stephen L. Young, editors. 1994. *Human Factors Perspectives on Warnings: selections from Human Factors and Ergonomics Society Annual Meetings, 1980-1993*. Santa Monica, California: The Human Factors and Ergonomics Society.
- MacKenzie, M. 1994. *Developing design through dialogue: alternative transport information systems*. Presented at the Public Graphics Conference, Lunteren, The Netherlands, 26-30 September 1994.
- Manzini, E. 1995. *Dynamics of change*. Keynote speech ICSID '95 Taipei, October 1995.
- Nielsen, J. 1993. *Usability Engineering*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: AP Professional.
- Penman, R. and D. Sless, editors. 1992. *Designing information for people*. Canberra: Communication Research Press.
- Penman, R. 1992. Plain English: Wrong solution to an important problem. *Australian Journal of Communication*, 19:3, 1-18.
- . 1993. Conversation is the common theme. *Australian Journal of Communication*, 20:3, 30-43.
- . 1993. Unspeakable acts and other deeds: A critique of plain legal language. *Information Design Journal*, 7:2, 121-132.
- Rogers, D. 1994. Artifacts of conversations: bills and organizations-public dialogues. Presented at the Public Graphics Conference, Lunteren, The Netherlands, 26-30 September 1994.
- Rogers, D., A. Shulman, D. Sless and R. Beach. 1995. *Designing better medicine labels: Report to PHARM*. Canberra: Communication Research Institute of Australia.
- Sless, D. 1978. Definition of design: originating useful systems. *Design Methods and Theories*, 12:2, 123-130.
- . 1979. Image design and modification: an experimental project in transforming. *Information Design Journal*, 1:2, 74-80.
- . 1992a. What is information design? In Sless, D. and R. Penman, editors. *Designing information for people*. Canberra: Communication Research Press, 1-16.
- . 1992b. The Telecom Bill: redesigning a computer generated report. In Sless, D. and R. Penman, editors. *Designing information for people*. Canberra: Communication Research Press, 77-98.
- . 1993. Plain English stories. *Communication News* 6:5, 1-3
- Sless, D. (1994) Public Forms: designing and evaluating forms in large organizations. Invited keynote address presented at the Public Graphics Conference, Lunteren, The Netherlands, 26-30 September, 1994.
- Sless, D. (1995) The Plain English Problem. *Australian Language Matters* 3:4.
- Sless, D. and R. Wiseman. 1994. *Writing about medicines for people: usability guidelines and glossary for consumer product information*. Canberra: Department of Health and Human Services.
- Waller, R. 1984. Designing a Government form: a case study. *Information Design Journal*, 4, 36-57.