VisibleThread

GUIDE

The cost of a broken customer experience

Why companies should invest in clear communication for success at scale.

The Language Analysis Platform That Means Business

Introduction

Effective communication has cultural, productivity, and financial benefits for organizations. It can improve your employer brand, support new modes of working, and even increase revenue.

According to [a survey by leadership and communication coach](#), David Grossman, poor communication costs companies over $64 million per year. That's an alarming statistic as we continue to increase our reliance on digital services and distributed workforces due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

[In a recent report from McKinsey](#), it was shown that companies experienced five years of digital adoption in a mere eight weeks to cope with the almost overnight shift in consumer behavior. This rapid digital transformation forced companies to reckon with the gaps in their customer experience (CX).

"Committing to clear communication can ease frustration at scale for both customers and staff"

Many businesses lacked the digital skills and technology to handle the influx of online customer interactions. [Recent research from Adobe](#) revealed that 60% of client-side respondents said they would "possibly" or "definitely" get frustrated if they were a customer of their own digital experience. It's clear that there's a gap between customer expectations and the reality of their interactions with companies.

Committing to clear communication can ease frustration at scale for both customers and staff. It reduces conversation volume for time-strapped support teams while creating effortless interactions for consumers. And it has real financial gains for businesses: [companies that adopt a customer experience mindset drive revenue that is 4-8% above their market.](#)

It makes sense when you consider that [75% of customers said they are willing to spend more with companies that deliver a good customer experience](#). Creating personalized experiences that meet customer needs helps businesses to build trust and create long-lasting positive relationships with their consumers.

But what's the first step for organizations that want to improve their customer experience? It's simple: kill the complexity in their content.

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Assessing your customer experience

Customer experience is everything related to a business that defines a user's perception and feelings about it. By taking a proactive approach to clear communication your company can drive loyalty, satisfaction, and advocacy before a transaction has even taken place.

There are many frameworks to apply to customer experience, but the Gartner CX Pyramid is a good starting point for evaluating your approach to CX. The CX Pyramid aims "to test organizations' customer journeys and forge more powerful experiences that deliver greater customer loyalty and brand advocacy." Simply put, companies can build strong relationships with their customers by giving them the information they need, when they need it, and in the right context.

The CX Pyramid:
A Framework for
Powerful Experiences

Make me better, safer or more powerful

Provide what I need without me asking

Resolve my needs when I ask

Solve your problem when I ask

Furnish infomation I can use

Before you can reach the top level of the pyramid, you must start with meeting the customer's basic needs. Without this, you can't scale your efforts to create a customer experience that exceeds expectations. Once you have content that meets their needs, you can start to personalize the experience to make the customer feel more valued.

"Words matter, and for a stressed or confused customer, your words can be a deciding factor in their decision to remain loyal or switch to a competitor in a moment of frustration"

For example, to meet consumers' basic needs, a healthcare provider can write instructions for drug dosage or provide information on symptoms at a reading level that's accessible to a wide range of people regardless of their literacy or educational levels.

This is a deceptively simple way to improve your overall customer experience and build trust with consumers. Words matter, and for a stressed or confused customer, your words can be a deciding factor in their decision to remain loyal or switch to a competitor in a moment of frustration.

Empathizing with your customers will greatly improve your customer experience. If someone is ill, they don't want to waste time grappling with complex language, they want to easily access the information they need to feel better. You need to keep the human on the other side of your communications at the forefront of your mind as you write.

From policy to products, organizations must take a proactive approach to their customer experience strategy. As Augie Ray, Senior Director Analyst at Gartner says, "CX is not a game of chance, get prepared to play the right game."

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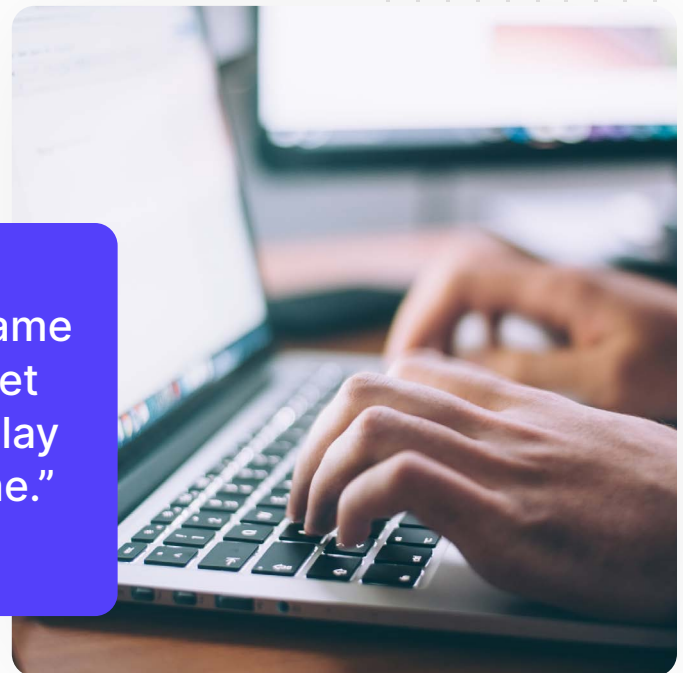
Boosting customer experience with plain language

Communication is fundamental to improving customer experience. It helps build trust, loyalty, and knowledge among your customer base. Empowered customers know where to go for support and advice. Meanwhile, your customers can't use services they don't know about, and they are unlikely to use services they don't fully understand.

To improve customer experience, companies need to focus on communicating clearly. More specifically, they must pay attention to the following plain language principles.

1. Keep grade level low

Make your content accessible to the average consumer. Grade level is a useful indicator for tracking this. It tells us how many years of education a person needs to understand your content. We know that the average North American consumer reads at an 8th-grade level, so firms should pitch their communications at this level or below.

Content written at a high grade level forces consumers to concentrate more. When we reduce our grade level, more people can understand us. Your customers live busy lives and they don't have the time or energy to waste on difficult sentences or jargon-packed descriptions. And this becomes even more critical when you communicate with customers who don't speak English as a first language or experience accessibility issues. More vulnerable groups need to focus even harder to understand you. Keeping your grade level as low as possible is better for everyone.

Here's a great example from Zendesk, a customer service platform, on their ticketing service.

Long Sentences	0.00%	Passive Voice	0.00%	Readability	58 / 100	Grade Level	8.9
0 Sentences		0 Sentences					
ⓘ Learn More		ⓘ Learn More		ⓘ Learn More		ⓘ Learn More	

Using VT Writer, we can see the copy has a reading grade level of 8.9; the sentences are not too long and they use the active voice.

"A fully integrated ticketing system is the first step to building a great customer experience. It's a central hub for all your customer questions, requests and concerns. Above all, it gives you a complete picture of each customer, so you can offer the right support."

You immediately understand what they do as a business and the value of their product.

Long Sentences	100.00%	Passive Voice	100.00%	Readability	10 / 100	Grade Level	19.8
1 Sentences		1 Sentences					
ⓘ Learn More		ⓘ Learn More		ⓘ Learn More		ⓘ Learn More	

Contrast this with an anonymous ticketing service provider with a reading grade level of 19.8 and you'll understand why plain language is important in business:

"As a completely cloud-based, online help desk ticketing system, [our software] can be accessed on any authorised platform or device, and users can access the same, up-to-the-minute data, automatically synced in real time."

It uses passive voice and the sentence is far too long. It's difficult to understand what service this company provides and it doesn't inspire users to take a clear action.

2. Keep sentences short

Long sentences make content harder to read. When presented with a long string of words, most people can't retain the original thought from beginning to end. Especially if they're unfamiliar with the subject matter. Plainlanguage.gov advises:
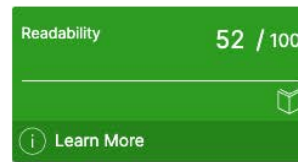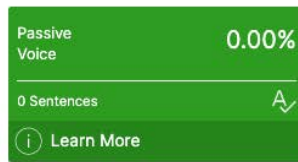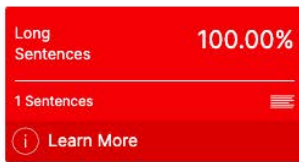
"Your document should have an average sentence length of 20 words, or fewer, in documents, and 15 on the web."

Take this paragraph from the section of a major American healthcare provider on broken ankles:

"A broken ankle is an injury to the bones that make up your ankle, including the talus (ankle bone) and the ends of the tibia (shin bone) and fibula (calf bone)."
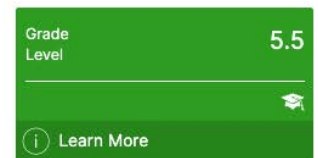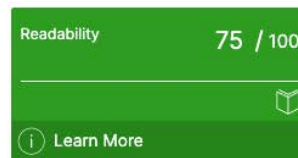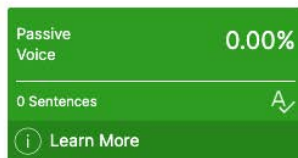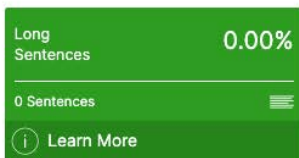
VT Writer says this would need 13.6 years of education to read and understand easily, mainly because the sentence is unnecessarily long.

Long Sentences	100.00%	Passive Voice	0.00%	Readability	52 / 100	Grade Level	13.6
1 Sentences		0 Sentences					
ⓘ Learn More		ⓘ Learn More		ⓘ Learn More		ⓘ Learn More	

By comparison, the Mayo Clinic describes it in shorter sentences that are easily understood to someone who reads at a fifth-grade level:

> "A broken or fractured ankle is an injury to the bone. The seriousness of a broken ankle varies. Fractures can range from tiny cracks in your bones to breaks that pierce your skin."

Long Sentences	0.00%	Passive Voice	0.00%	Readability	75 / 100	Grade Level	5.5
0 Sentences		0 Sentences					
ⓘ Learn More		ⓘ Learn More		ⓘ Learn More		ⓘ Learn More	

VT Writer gives this text a readability score of 75/100. Sentences are brief yet explanatory and there is no evidence of passive voice.

3. Remove complex words

Legalese and complex words are common in business writing. But the average consumer can't understand the formal and technical language of legal documents. Take examples such as "bona fide," "henceforth," and insurance-specific legalese such as "Guaranteed Issue." You should find simpler alternatives, wherever possible.

Simple alternatives make the text more understandable. The U.S. Government's Plain Language website says:

> "Simple words help you express your message clearly. Too many complex words are like hurdles in a race, barriers to understanding which slows readers down. Replacing complex words with simpler words whenever possible lets your readers concentrate on your ideas and information."

Take this example from a major US bank:

> "This credit card program is issued and administered by [bank] N.A. Mastercard and World Mastercard are registered trademarks of Mastercard International Incorporated, and are used by the issuer pursuant to license. Visa and Visa Signature are registered trademarks of Visa International Service Association, and are used by the issuer pursuant to license from Visa U.S.A. Inc. [Bank] is a registered trademark of [bank] Corporation."

According to VT Writer's analysis, you would need more than 17 years of education to understand it. The sentences are too long and so are the words. Phrases like "pursuant to" could be replaced with more commonly understood phrases like "in relation to."

Instead of saying "issued and administered" the bank could use a term like "managed by." And instead of repeatedly using the phrase "registered trademark" the bank could simply use the registered trademark symbol ® to express it.

Here's an example of how it might look:

> "Your credit card program is managed by [bank]®. North American MasterCard® and World MasterCard® are trademarks used in relation to the license. Visa® and Visa Signature® are trademarks issued in relation to licenses from Visa USA. [Bank] is a registered trademark of [bank] corporation."

4. Use active voice

Passive voice conveys an academic tone and is not direct. It makes it unclear who is taking the action. Take the following example:

Passive: *Your job application is being reviewed.*

Vs

Active: *We're reviewing your job application.*

The active voice sentence makes it clear who is reviewing the CV. It's more direct and sounds more personal. People rarely use passive voice when they talk, and so we should avoid it in written communications. Active voice sentences are also usually less wordy, which makes them easier to scan. Most brands' style guides stipulate the use of active voice for these reasons.

We recommend that companies keep passive voice levels at an average of 4% or lower.

Apply your style guide

When we work with companies on improving their content clarity, we find that many already have a style guide. The document may include:

- Tone
- Words to use and words to avoid
- Grammar guidelines, for example, how to apply certain spellings
- How to write certain brand or product names

A common issue is that writers aren't using the style guide. That's because looking up a guide each time you write is not practical. So the guides often end up gathering dust rather than being actively applied. Some staff may not have ever been shown the style guide, because they're not seen as writers. For example, let's say you have an employee working in sales. Would you consider them a writer? Although they might craft emails for customers with helpful information, most would not consider this part of their role as writing customer content.

If you don't yet have a style guide, the first step is to create one. If you already have one you're happy with, then you need to make sure that everyone across the business is working to its guidelines. You can utilize technology to ensure it's then applied throughout the organization by all writers.

A feature of VisibleThread's VT Writer solution is "Watch Words." It automatically flags terms and phrases that the company's user pre-defines. For example, you might specify that writers never use the term "bona fide," or other Latin terms that might be better replaced with plain English. A writer in your organization can upload their document to VT Writer to scan it in seconds and highlight all instances of "bona fide." This allows the writer to quickly correct and adapt their language on a case-by-case basis.

Managing content quality improvements at scale

By now, you might be convinced of the importance of using plain language to save costs. And you're probably wondering how to make the relevant changes in your business to achieve this. Defining your plain language principles and creating a style guide are important first steps. But the real work starts when you enlist writers to improve your content across the entire organization.

Every team in your business creates content for your customers. Not just the marketing and communications team. Consider your helpline staff, legal, customer service, and other teams. Not everyone is a great writer and not everyone will have fully absorbed your style guide. Within most companies, teams work independently without a holistic view of the customer's journey. This can lead to an incoherent experience for the consumer and becomes impossible to manage manually.

The final challenge is measuring progress on an ongoing basis. Again, this is difficult to track–how do you quantify language improvements?
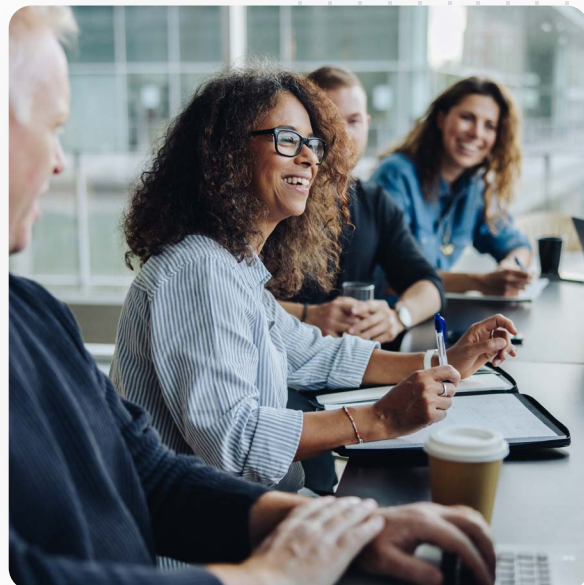
Reduce complexity to increase revenue

Using a Language Analysis Platform like VisibleThread will allow you to make quantifiable improvements to your communications across the entire business. VT Writer enables you to improve content quality and readability by:

- Flagging jargon and complexity. It improves customer experience by simplifying content and communications while ensuring a single tone of voice across the entire organization for consistency.

- Measuring the readability and usability of content at scale. VT Writer highlights Watch Words specific to your role or industry, and suggests improvements to sentence length, grade level, and passive voice.

Complexity adds costs to your business. Prioritizing plain language leads to more efficient operations and reduced costs, across the following four areas of the business:

1. Reduced help center volume

Clear communication empowers customers to self-serve when they have a query, and 40% of customers stating that they prefer self-service over human contact. Providing clear information at each touchpoint of the customer experience ensures that your customers call less often for queries, complaints, and explanations. That leads to a reduced conversation volume, and fewer calls means reduced overheads.

2. Improved operational efficiency

Customers who understand what's required of them make fewer errors filling out forms. They comply more accurately and quickly with requirements. Processes are more efficient; there are fewer follow up communications and resubmissions. There are clear financial benefits to improving your communication on customer forms. For example, in Canada, Alberta's Department of Agriculture revised 92 forms that were sent out to more than one million people each year. Each new form saved staff at least 10 minutes in processing time, which saved $3.5 million each year These exercises in improved operational efficiency are win-win. Great for the customer who saves time as they only have to contact the organization once. And a significant saving in resources for the business.

3. Better customer retention and lower acquisition costs

Improved readability means customers know what they're entitled to and understand all messages from services. More consistency also promotes trust and leads to more loyal customers who are less likely to churn. They're also likely to recommend you to friends and family, further boosting your customer numbers at no extra cost to you.

4. Reduced hiring costs

The lower call volume that comes from clearer customer communications means that staff can focus on solving more complex customer issues that may require a human touch. This inevitably makes their jobs feel more rewarding. Employees feel less stressed, more appreciated, and more supported. They're therefore more likely to stay with your business. You keep hold of your talented employees while saving on hiring and training costs.

5 steps to improve content quality with a Language Analysis Platform

Clarifying communications requires changes to organizational mindset and processes. The framework below offers a starting point for leadership.

Step 1: Identify a champion or team

Recognize that all departments produce content. Identify a champion or team who can work cross-functionally.

Step 2: Create a baseline with a content audit

Gather existing customer communications and measure against readability metrics.

Step 3: Make your style guide accessible

Provide clear guidance to all writers. Ensure they can easily access it.

Step 4: Support writers to score content for clarity

Use technology to support writers and allow them to self-score their content for clarity.

Step 5: Measure and improve

Analyze usage and adoption of your plain language program. Measure quality improvements over time.

Focus your investment where it matters

Investing in customer experience pays off in many diverse ways. Clear communication and plain language are an investment in customer experience. They reduce costs across operations, customer acquisition, hiring and training. Not to mention the money saved by more efficient processes and a consistent tone of voice for your brand.

You have a choice to make. Will you nurture trust with your consumers, or will you confuse them? Will you support them through potentially difficult situations and processes, or will you abandon them? Companies who invest in customer experience don't just survive–they thrive. It's the right thing to do for customers, and it's the right thing to do for your business.

Get your free
VT Writer trial today

Self-score business-critical documents and text in a single click.

Get your free 14-day trial and improve your mission-critical business writing today:

- Analyze Unlimited Text Snippets

- Analyze URLs

- Analyze Documents

- Create Personal Watch Words and Ignore Lists

Get Started

"I'm on temporary loan to the Public Health Agency of Canada to help with web writing about COVID-19. This pandemic has underscored the essential nature of plain language during a crisis. When communication is critical, plain language is essential. There's no room for ambiguity."

Susan Scruton,
Senior Communications Advisor and Web Writer
Government of Canada

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