

Book reviews

From Clarity to Storytelling

Simon Hall, *Compelling Communication: Writing, Public Speaking, and Storytelling for Professional Success*
(Cambridge University Press, 2024)

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“To effectively communicate, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others.”

Tony Robbins

1. Introduction

For decades, one of the most popular ideas in Communications and Media literature has been that the communicator must craft a narrative that aligns with the preferences and interests of the audience, ensuring the content is engaging and resonates effectively with the listener's expectations and context. This approach enhances the listener's receptivity and strengthens the bond between the speaker and the audience, as highlighted in the book *Compelling Communication: Writing, Public Speaking, and Storytelling for Professional Success* by Simon Hall, which was newly published in 2024 by Cambridge University Press. Simon Hall brings extensive expertise to the subject, drawing on over 20 years of experience as a journalist and BBC presenter, alongside his role as a professor at Cambridge University. This book is expected to be the author's largest non-fiction project, showcasing the clear character of the writing and the passion for storytelling, persuasion, effectiveness, and action, along with many other interesting subjects.

The objectives of this review are to observe the contribution the author makes to the field of communication, assess its effectiveness in addressing the topics covered, and its relevance to both young and more experienced audiences.

2. Critical Analysis

From the beginning, the book positions itself as a manual of professional communication, approaching this perspective from many areas of life. Right

from the start, he provides readers with examples of lessons drawn from the most significant communicators in history, such as Sir Winston Churchill. It highlights the importance of learning from the past to craft innovative contributions to the field. Another important aspect is that the author offers specific life examples, implicitly reflecting his professional experience - his BBC days - and presents examples from his courses. He sets up certain challenges right from the beginning of the book (*the world's easiest compare-and-contrast exercises*). I like that he asks questions in the book, which makes readers think and provide answers, remember what's important, activating automatic mind. It is a very effective method of monitoring attention. It even encourages readers to remember what they previously read (phrases like - *Remember our illustrations earlier*). It is interesting how the author highlights several essential aspects regarding the foundation of effective communication - *At a glance: compelling communication requires a series of critical components: clarity, brevity, simplicity, authenticity, and - perhaps surprisingly - humility* (p.93).

One factor that remained with me was the importance of clarity in the narrative. Many authors tend to go into insignificant details, complicating the reader's mind, but Simon Hall manages to be very clear about the information. I would also highlight that the book is similar to a communication manual being very suggestive and visually appealing (graphs, pictures, sketches, highlighting specific information). This design supports the human brain's natural focus on single, significant tasks, preventing distractions and maintaining interest. One chapter I'd want to focus on is the fourth - *The Splendour of Storytelling*. As a personal passion, I truly think that storytelling is an art, and I wanted to examine how well the author explained this mastery. According to Hall (p.93) - *But one I love the most, and that's storytelling*, I can state that one of the author's strong points is that he speaks with great passion about what he has been able to research and about his experience in the field, which attracts the reader in. I like that the author approaches this particular topic in the same way I do, demonstrated by the words he uses: *marvellously enjoyable, beautiful and uplifting art*. Simon Hall uses a compelling narrative style that effectively combines elements of storytelling with personal anecdotes and memorable quotes, making the text engaging and informative, trustworthy and realistic. He demonstrates the principles of storytelling not just in theory but through the way he presents his own ideas. For example, his story about experiencing imposter syndrome during a school talk is rich in detailed descriptions and emotional impact, making it fascinating in how it resonates with a universal human experience. Hall backs up his ideas with academic references and specific examples. Hall supports his insights with academic references, such as Robin Dunbar's research, which shows that 65% of daily conversations involve storytelling. The use of this data lends legitimacy to his work, arguments, demonstrating a well-documented approach.

Another notable aspect is the way Simon Hall draws attention to the usefulness of storytelling in both professional and personal communication. His memorable phrase, *Facts fade, but stories stick*, briefly and sophisticatedly captures the importance of reworking information into stories to make it both memorable and persuasive.

Regarding the weaknesses, it would be a mistake to say that it is a book that asserts itself through its flaws; despite this, in order not to present it as flawless, I believe that, for a reader who is not passionate about the field, it can be a rather overwhelming and too repetitive book, because it addresses an extensive amount of concepts, each chapter presenting a new magical communication idea. At the same time, in order to read this book with enthusiasm, the reader must have an idyllic feeling to be able to enjoy the author's humor and informality. This brings me to another important aspect: the use of excessive personal anecdotes, examples, and memories. Even if the personal stories add authenticity, some readers may find the text overly focused on the author's own experiences, to the detriment of a broader or more theoretical perspective.

3. Methodological Considerations

Hall's methodology emphasizes experiential learning over traditional research methods. The book draws heavily on his personal experiences and reflections, supplemented by well-known theories and studies from other researchers. While this approach makes the content relatable and practical, it may leave readers seeking more empirical studies or theoretical depth somewhat dissatisfied.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, while the book's abundance of personal experiences and the wide range of topics it covers—such as *The Foundations of Effective Communication*, *Writing to Woo and Wow*, *The Tricks of the Writing Trade*, *Powerful Public Speaking and Presentations*, and *The Online World*—make it challenging to focus an academic review on a single theme, this paper has aimed to emphasize the author's exploration and exemplification of storytelling, as well as highlight several key aspects of the work.

Attention, advertising and the overcrowded informational society

**Faris Yakob, *Paid attention - Innovative Advertising for a Digital World*, second edition,
(Kogan Page, London, 2021)**

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The second edition of the series *Paid Attention – Innovative Advertising for a Digital World*, written by the author Faris Yakob, was published in 2021 by Kogan Page. It brings to the attention of readers a controversial yet highly interesting topic: attention in advertising, and how it evolves in a consumerist society overwhelmed by social media and advertisements that compete for user attention.

Faris Yakob is an accomplished author, writes a monthly column on effective brand communication, and is the co-founder of Genius Steals, a nomadic creative consultancy that works with brands, agencies and events. He is also an award winning strategist, creative director, writer, public speaker and geek. He and his partner Rosie speak at conferences and corporate events all over the world. He held senior agency roles at Naked Communications, McCann and MDC Partners, in London, Sydney and NYC; Faris was named one of the top 53 creatives in the world by The Clio Awards [2012]; He said about himself that “I like to help nice clients and agencies be more awesome.”

In the second edition of his series “Paid Attention”, Yakob takes into account the criticisms that arose after the publication of the first edition and shifts from being a “philosopher” of advertising. Instead, he practically discusses certain mechanisms and case studies about attention, and how we can stimulate it to achieve better results in advertising. He explores how we can create successful ads that capture attention, considering that society is in a constant state of boredom and is increasingly reluctant to watch advertisements and give them attention.

In the book, the author examines various definitions, concepts, and mechanisms that define attention and associates them with examples of successful advertisements. He also presents new ways in which these mechanisms can be used in creating ads that generate positive results. The author discusses attention in the context of online advertisements, analyzing user

behavior as well as their preferences. He mentions both content created on social media and the methods creators use to capture viewers' attention, as well as how our attention works and is activated depending on the environment and context.

The work presents the author's opinions and those of other experts: psychologists, communication specialists, creatives, and advertising strategists. Their views are supported by arguments and case studies. The author presents "attention as a powerful tool" that companies and brands chase, which must be supported by creativity and originality. He describes various methods that content creators and those aiming to capture attention can use. From the first chapter, classical tools used in advertising and content creation are mentioned, such as: stories, myths, and humor, which can generate attention when used properly. As mentioned on page 32: "So, in advertising, it's not what you say, but the way that you say it, that gets results."

The power of a story can still generate amazing results if it is adapted to the current context and trends. Classic tools can still be used and may generate the expected reactions if they are creatively adapted to fit the standards of the new, constantly evolving society. If content creators are able to adapt their messages to users appeal, and the brand manages to "speak" the language of the audience, then they succeed in capturing attention and surviving among competitors.

The author draws attention to both content and advertising. The two function effectively when they are well-crafted and understood: "Content is something a consumer would choose to consume. Advertising is something a brand wants to say about itself."

In his work, Faris Yakob details how the human brain chooses to react and the internal factors that influence it, as well as the external factors, over which we may not always have control, to better understand how attention works and how complex it is. He explains how our mind makes choices and pays attention to certain things more than others. On page 33, he talks about the two systems of the brain: System 1 and System 2, and our decisions regarding our preference for certain brands. These concepts, introduced by psychologist Daniel Kahneman, are extensively described in his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, published in 2012.

Therefore, the second edition of the "Paid Attention" series is more than just a valuable work in the field of advertising; it serves as a catalyst for combating the lack of attention, a journey into the human brain to understand how certain mental mechanisms work and how we can adapt our creations to appeal to the media consumer, who is tired of daily content, bombarded by messages that convey nothing but boredom and annoyance.

Advertisers, companies, and brands are competing for consumers' attention, that is becoming increasingly expensive due to the vast number of options a person has, both online and offline. Each of us decides where to direct our attention and to what extent, and this is becoming more and more difficult. The author tries to address these issues and proposes solutions that can be

implemented, as stated in a paragraph on page 82: “In the age of the empowered consumer, brands need to identify what they can do that consumers cannot, how they can add something to their lives. Technology may be part of the answer, if brands and technologists can learn to speak the same language, but it could also be via the appropriate actions at scale that give consumers something that even the latest laptop, tablet or mobile cannot offer.”

Creativity is the “magic” tool discussed in the book and can help companies, brands, and services remain in the consumers' attention, generate needs, and increase sales. But what does it mean to be creative in today's world? And how does creativity function in advertising? Faris states that all creators need creative thinking in their work; with creative ideas, advertising can avoid the realm of boredom. He explains how he generates creative ideas and what the process is: “Iteration, inspiration, and outspiration. The components of new ideas are always other ideas. I think of them as pieces of Lego. You can make anything out of Lego, but in order to make specific things, you need specific pieces. Looking at the most successful attempts to solve similar pattern problems in the past is the first place to look for ideas that can be evolved or iterated.” – page 109.

The book emphasizes the importance of focusing on the viewer of an advertisement or text, integrating them into the process, which can spark their interest and attention. By providing valuable, high-quality information, a brand can build a relationship that generates mutual benefits. Now more than ever, people need to feel involved by being part of the creation. People have a need to feel in control, to be acknowledged, and a brand that knows how to approach the customer in this way stands a good chance of succeeding in selling, being noticed, and being considered: “We can offer people the sense that they are in control of their interaction with the brand and that their interaction, their attention, is a requisite condition for its existence.”

Brands need relevant, creative, and high-quality material. By establishing relationships in social environments and creating a united community, they can capture attention. The way brands communicate in the online environment and the intent behind each piece of information must be evaluated. Attention to detail and originality are the elements that give a brand influence and power. These aspects are explored in detail in multiple chapters of the book and are emphasized as methods of capturing attention and maintaining public interest.

Being active in the social environment, relevant, and not just a passive observer, helps to maintain visibility: “The kinds of ideas that earn attention in an infinite media space are likely to require understanding of participation – users rather than audiences – and context.” – page 145.

Attention, as it is presented to us, is a complex mechanism that each of us possesses. Depending on certain stimuli and contexts, we direct our attention to things or situations to varying degrees. Understanding how it works means understanding how the brain and its mechanisms function. Capturing a

consumer's attention in advertising becomes an increasingly difficult task due to technological advancements and the over-saturation we are subjected to.

In the final part of his book, Faris Yakob explains attention through the lens of the "clinical model", which is based on several components. Focused attention directly responds to specific stimuli; Sustained attention represents the ability to maintain vigilance to stimuli by keeping information in working memory; Selective attention refers to the ability to ignore certain stimuli, allowing concentration on others.

Understanding the complexity of attention and how it manifests in the human mind, is essential for crafting up-to-date materials that enhance trust in advertisements and admiration from those who view them. First and foremost, we need to understand the societal changes and the evolving characteristics of emerging generations, tailoring our approaches to meet their needs and aspirations. Only in this way can we save an industry designed to help companies, brands, services, and products survive and generate profit.

Advertising today is fundamentally different from what it was 5 or 10 years ago due to technological advancements and rapid transformations. It is essential to continuously identify methods to keep agencies afloat. Additionally, close attention must be paid to how future advertisements are created, as they could provoke controversy or become irrelevant. Humanity needs creativity, originality, and focus in order to pay with attention.

In the second edition of the "Paid Attention" series, author Faris Yakob highlights the critical challenges confronting the advertising industry and warns of the escalating risks it may face if proactive measures are not taken.

He offers methods, advice, and recommendations that should be considered by all professionals in the field. This book brings valuable insights and benefits, thoroughly analyzing how advertisements should be crafted to be effective and appreciated.

"Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity." - Simone Weil