When Simplicity Is the Solution

From tax forms to medicine bottles to store shelves, we are facing a crisis of complexity. But there's a way out.

By ALAN SIEGEL and IRENE ETZKORN

At the beginning of "Walden," Henry David Thoreau makes a concise case against the complexity of modern life. "Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!" he writes. "[L]et your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail....Simplify, simplify."

That was the 19th century, though, and we live in the 21st. In a typical day, we encounter dozens—if not dozens upon dozens—of moments when we are delayed, frustrated or confused by complexity. Our lives are filled with gadgets we can't use (automatic sprinklers, GPS devices, fancy blenders), instructions we can't follow (labels on medicine bottles, directions for assembling toys or furniture) and forms we can't decipher (tax returns, gym membership contracts, wireless phone bills).

Every facet of our lives, even entertainment and recreation, is complicated by an ever-widening array of choices delivered at a frantic pace. Consider:

• More than 800,000 apps in the Apple App Store

• 240-plus selections on the Cheesecake Factory menu, not including lunch or brunch specials

• 135 mascaras, 437 lotions and 1,992 fragrances at Sephora.com

In 1980, the typical credit card contract was about 400 words long. Today, many are 20,000 words. "Fine print" complexity costs us money in the form of hidden fees (about $900 per year for the average consumer, according to research conducted by the Ponemon Institute), denied claims and unanticipated charges ($2 billion in one year for landline phone customers, according to the Federal Communications Commission).

Who has 90 minutes to read 20,000 words or the time to select a Medicare Part D prescription plan (a Web search on medicare.gov will return 45 plans for you to consider)? Ponder the fact that a dermatologist must sign his name to forms almost 30,000 times a year, according to a 2008 article in the Southern Medical Journal. We are on autopilot—blindly signing, agreeing, working and spending.

How did we get into this mess? Lawyers and technologists are the taproots of complexity. Government regulators make things worse with misguided attempts to require "disclosure." Predatory companies with business practices that are onerous for consumers are only too happy to hide behind the cloak of complexity. And virtually all companies and organizations are averse to change and naturally inclined to take the path of least resistance. For them, it is far easier to keep tacking on amendments and exclusions than to take a blank-slate approach that would make things clearer to customers.

Do you know anyone who stops to read "click-through" agreements on websites in the middle of performing a task? One company, PC Pitstop, deliberately buried a clause in its end-user license agreement in 2004, offering $1,000 to the first person who emailed the company at a certain address. It took five months and 3,000 sales until someone claimed the money. The situation hadn't improved by 2010 when Gamestation played an April Fools' Day joke by embedding a clause in their agreement saying that users were selling them their souls.

Complexity is the coward's way out. But there is nothing simple about simplicity, and achieving it requires following three major principles: empathizing (by perceiving others' needs and expectations), distilling (by reducing to its essence the substance of one's offer) and clarifying (by making the offering easier to understand or use).

Why is it so rare for a product or service to be launched with simplicity baked in? The missing ingredient is empathy. Companies tackle simplification as a science rather than as an art. They measure the length of customer service calls down to hundredths of a second, run readability formulas counting syllables and monitor mouse-clicks by the millions. Afraid to let common sense prevail, companies rely on numbers to judge clarity and usefulness—two attributes that defy quantification. As a result, they send out documents that they tout as being written at a sixth-grade reading level when in fact no college-educated person understands them.

Empathy is the only way to truly shorten the distance between an organization providing services and the individual receiving them. Cleveland Clinic (a client, in the mid-90s, of the brand-strategy firm where we work) understands that empathizing with patients is critical, so it doesn't just focus on simplifying medical care but looks at everything the patient experiences: smells, sounds, greetings, hospital gowns, security and appointment scheduling. It wasn't until staff members were wheeled through hallways lying in hospital beds that they realized how disconcerting and dizzying that experience can be. Preparing patients for the "thrill" ride is a simple gesture that allays fears.

The clinic's guiding principle—patients first—is used as a mantra by chief executive Toby Cosgrove, who weaves patient experience stories into all of his presentations. Everyone at the hospital, regardless of his or her job, is called a "caregiver." Through this simple change in

vocabulary, Cleveland Clinic is able to send an important signal to everyone in the organization about what's expected.

What makes the biggest impression on people during their stay in a hospital? As Cleveland Clinic learned, it's the small details: how long it takes a nurse to answer the call bell, the availability of food on request, whether staff members follow the "10-4" rule ("when 10 feet away from a patient, smile and make eye contact; when 4 feet away, address the patient").

Borrowing from the hospitality industry, Cleveland Clinic has even paid attention to the scent in the air. No antiseptic aroma; the air smells like a signature fragrance favored by four-star hotel chains. Everything from the way doctors talk to patients (in plain English, and with a willingness to answer questions until there are none left), to the hospital gowns (designed by Diane von Furstenberg to combine ease of access with a touch of dignity), to the clear, concise bills you receive after checking out reflects a commitment to simplifying the interaction between a human being and a large, complex medical establishment. The hospital has achieved simplicity through the elimination of "hassles" and the addition of clearer, more human communication.

One of the keys to achieving empathy is feedback. The hospital gathers lots of it from patients and displays the data in patient experience "dashboards." For staff members eager to do well in comparison with their peers, "Bedside Manner" has become a measurable attribute, not an intangible quality.

If Cleveland Clinic appeals to the emotional side of our brains to provide a simple, soothing experience, the supermarket chain Trader Joe's tries to simplify rational choice. The company's long-standing goal is to reduce the grocery-shopping experience to a few manageable decisions. Trader Joe's figured out that trying to give people everything is a lousy business model: It overwhelms customers, clutters stores and undermines the shopping experience, causing some customers to default to "no" since they can't make up their minds. On top of that, it is inefficient for handling inventory.

Trader Joe's offers many fewer products than other supermarkets (about 4,000 items instead of 40,000, according to Peter Sealey of the Sausalito Group). Limiting variety doesn't mean bland selections, however; the company does extensive research on its customer base to make smart choices on behalf of the people who shop there, mixing in some exotic food choices and using playful, quirky packaging. Shoppers are thus spared the aggravation of having to sort through dozens of options for jam or mustard or frozen foods.

Does it work? The chain, which has about 350 stores in the U.S., sells an estimated $1,750 in merchandise per square foot, according to Fortune magazine in 2010, more than double the sales generated per square foot by Whole Foods Market .

Sometimes simplicity can be a matter of life and death. A decade ago, worried that confusing prescription labels threatened the health of her grandparents, Deborah Adler decided to do something about it. A graphic designer, she took on this challenge for her master's thesis. Rearranging the small type on the typical prescription label, Ms. Adler put the information in a logical order, giving prominence to the things that people most need to know at the moment they are reaching for their medicine. She divided the label into two parts, separated by a thick black line, and placed the critical information, such as the name and dosage of the medication, at the top, with everything else relegated to the bottom.

Ms. Adler next considered the shape of the bottles. The wraparound labels on conventional round bottles were difficult to read, so she designed a flat tube-shaped container that stood upright on its cap, with plenty of room for a large, flat label that could be read easily at a glance. Also, by color-coding the bottles, she made it possible for family members to distinguish among their individual medications. Her simpler, clearer drug packaging has been adopted by Target pharmacies nationwide.

Smart companies test product information by finding out how customers perceive it and how much of it the customers actually comprehend. Measuring perception alone can be misleading because people are often reluctant to confess their confusion. They view it as a personal failing rather than as a flaw in the information. Measuring their ability to perform tasks based on the information is a more reliable indicator of its clarity and precision.

This type of testing can be conducted quickly and cheaply with online panels of consumers. For example, testing a notice from the Internal Revenue Service (a current client of ours), a taxpayer might be asked how much they would pay in penalties and interest if they missed a deadline, revealing their actual understanding of the consequences of their actions, not just their impression of the tone and clarity of the notice. Similarly, patients can be asked what dosage of medication to take and when so that we don't have to guess whether they truly understand the package directions.

Simplicity is slowly catching on as a standard. The Pew Charitable Trust, for instance, is trying to develop simplified model documents on financial topics such as banking fees, about which there is widespread and costly confusion. The model form that Pew put forward last year has been voluntarily adopted by several of the nation's largest banks—a very encouraging sign.

Similarly, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau is working its way through the disclosures related to major consumer financial transactions (student loans, home mortgages, payday lending) with an eye to making it easier for borrowers to do comparison shopping. Local governments such as New York City are simplifying residents' interactions with the bureaucracy through systems such

as a 311 hotline for complaints and urgent matters. And social media is allowing all of us to get closer to companies and institutions and to make known our concerns and compliments.

What do we still need to simplify? For ordinary personal and commercial transactions, we need brief online contracts with interactive features explaining key words, concepts and computations. We need personal health records that can be easily used and updated by all health-care providers. We need summaries of our home and auto insurance that clearly explain how we will be reimbursed when the next storm hits; clear, one-page hospital bills that will allow us to recognize each element in the care that we receive; and a simplified tax code that will eliminate the need for costly tax return preparation by professionals.

For any modification or addition to its pristine home page, Google has a famous zero-based approach, which is meant to avoid creeping complexity. The company requires extensive justification for any new visual element, assigning "points" for each change in type style, size or color. The goal is the fewest number of points because, as the company says, "More points = less simplicity." Other institutions would do well to adopt a similar approach for evaluating new services, communications and products.

Simplicity may sound like a narrow standard, but it can help companies, governments and every other sort of organization winnow down unnecessary choices and clarify their messages to consumers, clients and citizens. We may not quite be able to re-create Thoreau's calm life on Walden Pond, but it is always possible to drive improvement by simplifying.

> — Mr. Siegel and Ms. Etzkorn are the authors of "Simple: Conquering the Crisis of Complexity," to be published by Twelve on April 2. Mr. Siegel is the CEO of Siegelvision, a brand-identity consultancy, and is the chairman emeritus of Siegel+Gale, a brand-strategy firm where Ms. Etzkorn is an executive director.