

The Indispensable Power of Great Writing



*How compelling stories
can capture the elusive 2%*

Ian Phillips

“Who are the 2%?”

“I fail to see the point of roughly 98% of human communication.” So wrote a British journalist recently. Coincidentally, a global client reckoned that his people engaged with just *two percent* of what they receive. So the demand on everyone’s lips? “Avoid the 98 and get us into that two.”

How? By finding compelling stories that take flight, all the way to the minds and hearts of those you wish to influence, inform and inspire.

So our short-sighted, balding writer hunches over piles of data, the client’s request bouncing round his brain. “A speech.” “A website.” “A think-piece.” His heart leaps. It’s his idea of heaven. All that complexity needing to be unravelled and then rebuilt into a winning narrative with just the right quality and quantity of words!

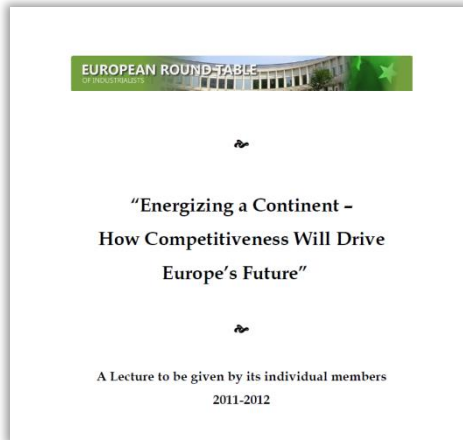
In these few short pages, you can take a quick trip through a selection of media, clients and subjects. Hopefully it proves diverting and informative ... and leaves you energised by the thought of harnessing the power of great writing.



“How can we change the world?”

What should Europe’s most influential business leaders do when they fear for the competitive future of their continent?

The first thing they realise: this is not a battle to be undertaken alone. There is strength in numbers. Emulating King Arthur, they gather at a round table which they call, with understandable pragmatism and a complete absence of romance, the European Round Table of Industrialists.



And they know that the more vital a message, the more the voice must ring with authority and clarity.

A lecture, rooted in robust thinking, grounded on solid research and leavened by engaging slides, weaves together the strands of what must be said to the leaders of today and tomorrow: “Act now to make Europe competitive, before it is too late.”

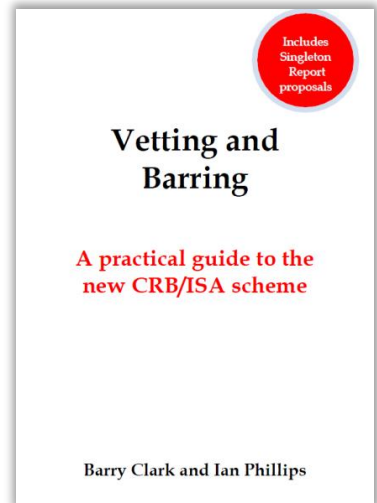
“What the hell does *that* mean?”

Phones were ringing off the hook. And not all every caller used ‘hell’ either. A profound new scheme was coming and no-one understood it. “What can I do?” bemoaned a small (business size, not stature) client. “I spend forever explaining it. What can I do?” “Time for a book.”

Statutes and policies were pored over and the architecture of a narrative emerged. Years of editing law books rushed from deep background as inaccessible legalese was turned into language that laypeople, profoundly affected by a major new regulatory system, could finally begin to understand.

Inconsistencies and uncertainties were exposed and dangers sign-posted so that the full impact could be grasped and plans prepared.

Not long after, a new government scrapped the whole scheme! But at least, for a while, some worried brows were soothed.



“Can we speak to them without effing swearing?”

Exactly how do you seize – and hold – the attention of an audience which is young and impatient, used to quick-fire messages and with a penchant for earthy language?

“Er, we know”, suggested the trade union for professional soccer players.



“A 20-minute video that tells them all they should know about all that we do.”

“We don’t think so” came the reply. It must be short and sharp and have an immediate, unambiguous impact.

To a soundtrack pounding out Prokofiev’s Dance of the Knights, a montage of dramatic photos was captioned to capture the strands of their service, all of it compressed into one compelling minute.

And the new positioning line captured the union’s relationship with members, families and representatives. They were *!^#ing delighted.

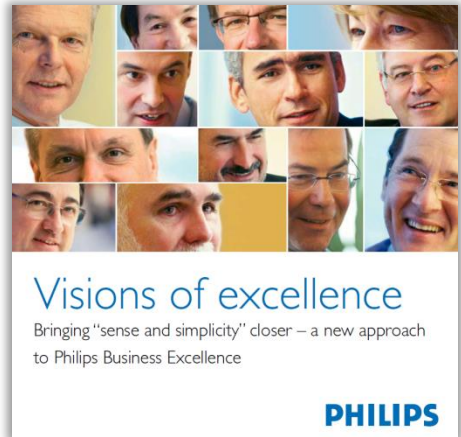
“How do we simplify our simplification?”

Cue double-take. “You what?” “We have this very complex business excellence model. Our new simplicity culture means it’s sort of being de-cluttered and made more user-friendly - possibly. Now we need to tell people - simply.”

The key question? “What does success look like?” It turned out that they needed a clear and clean articulation of a hierarchy of disciplines, along with the leadership’s reaffirmation of the function’s importance.

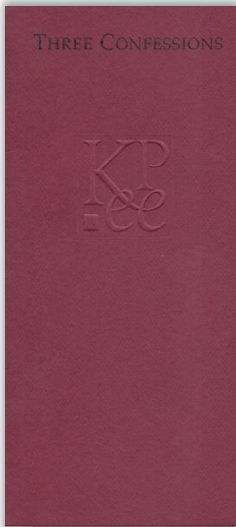
Interviews with the top two tiers of global management elicited varying attitudes towards the model and scepticism about the likelihood of a successful ‘stripping-down’.

The resulting brochure was a thing of elegant simplicity. It focused on the idea of vision, using pictures of just the eyes of company leaders. A personal statement and commitment to broad targets reinforced their individual ownership of specific areas of responsibility. Simple, eh?



“People don’t get our offer. What can we do?”

In a sector where vanilla is the norm, it can be difficult to get people to try tutti-frutti. Barriers to acceptance revolve around the fear of breaking free from the common herd. This creative events boutique needed to punch above its weight and allay any fears of being different.



The quest for engagement was enticing and tactile. Textured covers, raised lettering and translucent end-papers melded with idiosyncratic typography and stylish graphics. A gentle narrative built round a concept of confessing to the truth of what the business offers took readers on a voyage of discovery. Even the response mechanism allowed prospects to ‘confess’ their past ‘event crimes’.

Complementing the essential creativity of the business, *Three Confessions* raised not only the profile of the company but, equally (if not more) importantly, the self-esteem and confidence of those who worked in it. And so it was proved that confession is good for the soul.

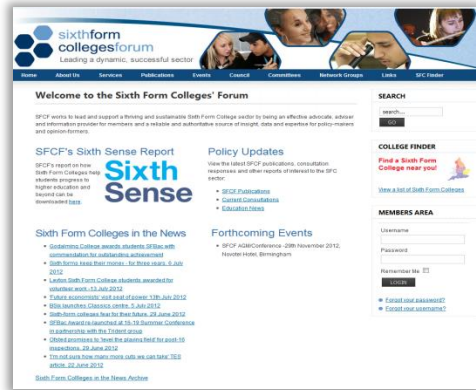
“What must we do to punch above our weight?”

It's a small but important organisation representing specialist state-funded colleges. In an era of budget cuts, increased competition and political volatility, the website had to reflect both the breadth of services and the climate in which the association operates.

As well as being the public face of the operation, the site also had to support members, council and committees with separate, secure sections. For resource and pragmatic reasons, it had to be easy to manage, change and grow.

Creating the architecture and content required painstaking attention to detail; after all, these were educators being identified with the colleges they led.

The site had to be easy to navigate and deliver its messages both simply and compellingly. Built on a universally-used content management system, it was

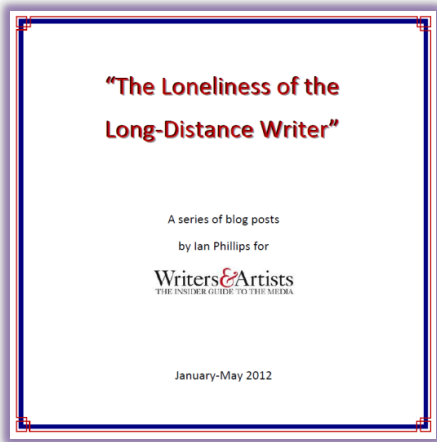


supported by experienced web professionals who could be turned on and off like a tap. The first law of great consultancy had been achieved: ensure your client is independent of you.

“What can writers learn from other writers?”

First of all, that they’re not alone. Bloomsbury, publishers of *Writers & Artists Yearbook*, are building an online resource for aspiring (invariably synonymous with ‘struggling’) writers.

Who better, they thought, to share experience than a first-time novelist on the threshold of publication. Thus was born *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Writer*.



In a series of sixteen weekly blogs, submitted every Thursday at 09.00, the tortuous progress from concept to launch was exposed to an invisible audience.

But not a silent one. Each post drew responses from readers keen to share and learn. Dialogues were established; adventures and advice shared. Every comment received a reply; no-one was ignored. And the building of a real community, much sought-after by the publisher, was enhanced.

“What’s in a name?”

Sometimes, wordsmiths are asked for just one word: a name. It’s the quintessential ‘Less is more’ project, distilling and fusing many different attributes into a single concept. And there’s only one sin in business naming: being forgettable. The ultimate goal is always original memorability, even if at first it might seem otherwise.

A business that vetted and screened employees wished to express its core benefit. The idea of armour came flying out of right brain during a rigorous session on a rowing machine while listening to Bach’s Art of Fugue on the harpsichord.

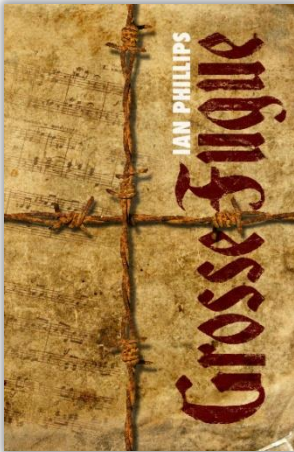


Inspiration married to research found the solution. Adopting the anglicised Greek-origin word for Persian horse armour, a striking and noble image emerged that promised power and protection without impairing speed or agility. The symbolism not only expressed the core benefit for existing clients. It also intrigued prospective clients, stimulating fruitful conversations.

A rose may never have smelled so sweet.

“Must it be? It must be. It must be!”

It might seem strange to talk about fiction in a brochure aimed at business. But it isn't. Because story-telling is the great beating heart of effective communications.



People are time-poor. So, whatever the media, communications should reward as well as engage.

They must repay the compliment of having attention paid to them. And that demands the most compelling words, the most beguiling design.

Literary fiction is not exactly the writing that business needs. But it shares essential foundations. Trustworthy research. Robust thinking. Gripping narratives. And flowing language.

At the end of his life, above the last movement of his final work, Beethoven wrote of his imminent end. Genius that he was, he embraced it defiantly. “Must it be? It must be. It must be!” Great businesses have to be equally bold in the face of the mundane – and let their stories sing out loud and proud.

“And if I need to know more?”

Seduced by the prospect of great writing helping you to be in the 2%? Well, here are some options.

You could visit one (or more) of my various websites:



www.fishbone-uk.com is predominantly my consultancy offer

www.theword.eu.com captures my extended writing service (in partnership with others)

www.grossefugue.com is dedicated to my novel.



Or you could just get in touch.

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