The eleventh most famous movie quote of all time comes from the 1967 film *Cool Hand Luke*. In that scene, the prison warden clobbers prisoner Luke (Paul Newman) with a billy club and sends him tumbling into a ditch. The warden then looks across at the rest of the chain gang, pauses, and in a strained voice says,

“What we have here is failure to communicate.”

Corporate America has a similar problem—it’s losing the battle for people’s attention.
Like cool hand Luke, most companies are being severely punished. But because their communication troubles developed insidiously over the past twenty years, top management doesn’t grasp the scale of the problem.

In executives’ defense, the symptoms of this breakdown are subtle and indirect, because communication problems never remain just communication problems. In this case, the real damage shows up operationally. Companies are getting beat up—clobbered—by messaging failures that confuse priorities, interfere with alignment, and muddy the brand. Weak and clumsy communications also waste time, causing pervasive slippages in productivity. People can’t even be held properly accountable because of the problems that permeate the overall communication process.

This messaging breakdown is more or less invisible. But it seriously interferes with strategy execution and carries an outrageous hidden cost. So what’s causing the

failure to communicate?
Signal vs. Noise

Today everyone is overdosed with information. That’s a major reason why it’s so hard to communicate effectively...why organizations struggle to get through to their people.

Generally speaking, 95% of the information we’re exposed to these days is simply noise. It’s basically clutter. At the most, only 5% is signal. That huge imbalance gets to the heart of this massive problem.

Think of it this way—signal is an information carrier. Signal is what matters. Signal is what you’re paying for.

Noise is an unwanted effect on signals. Noise is the problem. Noise is excess...it adds no real value.

But modern technology makes it ridiculously easy for everyone to add to the information flow, so the noise level keeps rising. Signals—the core messages that honestly count for something—get lost in the flood of data that surrounds us. People can’t figure out what deserves their attention and what they can disregard, so signals fade into the blur.

People also have little patience for poorly crafted messages that bore, ramble too long, or have no visual appeal. When signals lack clarity, or when they’re weak and too dull to hold our attention, they don’t work. In fact, they too simply become part of the communication pollution.

But there’s more to the problem.

It’s us!
Signal

95% Noise

5% Signal
Getting Satisfaction from Distraction

Let’s personalize this. Consider for a moment how you deal with all of today’s noise. How are you handling the intense, ongoing fight for your attention?

Most people have become their own worst interrupters. We’re constantly seduced by the smartphones, computers, and other devices that tug at our attention. The incessant beeps, rings, vibrations, and flashing images pull us away from the task at hand, breaking our train of thought. We sacrifice concentration as we monitor the relentless incoming electronic nudges, yet we have patience only for “glanceable content.” Our attention can be snagged for a moment, but it’s extremely difficult to hold it.

Research indicates that most people’s attention span has shrunk dramatically over the last two decades. Some say the average attention span now lasts a mere five to eight seconds.

Brain studies also show that, like addicts, we actually get hooked on a chemical called dopamine that pulses through our synapses as messages ping us. Dopamine juices up a person’s “seeking” behavior, fueling the search for information and triggering a sense of anticipation for the next message. In fact, people literally can suffer withdrawal effects when they’re cut off from their devices.

The point here is that these habits exist. They’re real. The world has changed, people have changed, and this means organizations must change their communication strategies. We’re well into the 21st century now, and a 20th century messaging style no longer works.

So what will?
Follow the Eyeballs

Communication is most effective when it shows up where people want it. And when they want it. This argues for aiming your messages toward mobile—e.g., toward smartphones and other small portable devices.

Today we carry our #1 communication tool in our pocket or purse. We’re on the go, and we want our messaging to travel with us.

Mobile is the only media time that’s in a growth mode. Viewing time that people allot to television, online, radio, and print keeps dropping, while we spend an increasing chunk of the day eyeing our handheld tools. In fact, mobile Internet use was on track to exceed traditional desktop Internet use in 2014.

These trends will continue, and companies need to rebuild their communication strategies accordingly. Mobile use will accelerate because it offers convenience via immediacy and simplicity. But have no doubt—mobile will choke unless companies redesign their information traffic.
Small Devices Deserve Small Messaging

Fact: Your work force won’t tolerate conventional messaging practices on mobile. They’ll simply tune out.

The prevailing corporate communication style is bloated, meandering, mind-numbing, and...well, noisy. There’s too much babble and business jargon. It lacks clarity. It fails to capture attention, much less hold it. It’s also too forgettable.

Go ahead. Take a hard look at your company’s emails, training, website, slide decks, manuals, speeches and such. You’ll find a lot of infovomit—lengthy, complex, vague, and boring content with unnecessary detail. You’ll see a lack of focus...overdependence on words...shortage of visual imagery.

That must change. Or the punishment for failure to communicate will get worse.

It’s time to reorient all messaging toward simplicity. Not in a dumbed-down manner, but minimalistic in style, using constraints in a positive way to focus and strengthen the content.
The Magic of “Minimum Effective Dose”

“Minimum effective dose” (MED) should become the guiding principle in reshaping companies’ communication strategies. It’s a game-changing concept.

MED is defined as the smallest dose that will produce a desired outcome. MED not only delivers the most dramatic results, but it does so in the least time possible. Anything beyond the MED is wasteful.

Author Tim Ferris explains the idea in his book, *The 4-Hour Body*, pointing out that 212° F is basically the target temperature (or MED) if you want to boil water. You can waste time and gas going hotter, but boiled is boiled. Another example: Want to become fluent in conversational Spanish? The MED is to develop an active vocabulary of some 2,500 high-frequency words. That’s only 2.5% of the 100,000 words in the Spanish language, but with that you’ll comprehend over 95% of all conversation.

Of course, doctors and pharmacists rely on the MED principle as a standard for medical effectiveness, economy, and safety. Prescribe too small a dose and the treatment fails, prescribe more than needed and the patient might die.

**In the realm of communications, exceeding the MED means adding noise and weakening the signal.** Go beyond the MED and you increase the risk of message failure.

MED focuses on what counts most. It sets limits, clarifies, and simplifies. We begin to think in terms of subtraction—e.g., what’s expendable, unnecessary, even problematic. As Steve Jobs put it, “Focusing is about saying no.” Messages actually gain power when we say no to the noise, when they’re compressed and distilled to their core essence.

So what’s the simplest, quickest, most efficient way to communicate an idea?
Go Visual or Go Home

People think using pictures. And, in fact, it is said that we mentally process visuals 60,000 times faster than text.

But organizations still rely primarily on dry written words in communicating to the work force. Here’s why that needs to change:

- Words are decoded in a linear, sequential fashion. Image elements, on the other hand, are deciphered simultaneously. Our genetic wiring favors visual messaging.
- Words are processed by our short term memory where retention is very limited. But images go directly into long term memory where they stick.
- Visual messaging affects us emotionally. That makes it far more persuasive than mere words.
- Today’s shrinking attention span allows very little time to make a point. Since people are too impatient to indulge wordiness, our communication tool of choice should be pictures or graphics.

Look at advertisements. They rely most heavily on the visual element to convey their messages.

Look at Facebook. Pinterest. YouTube. Pictures are their dominant vehicle of information. Even modern textbooks have shifted from a majority of text to a majority of graphics.

Finally, look at your audience. Everyone carries a camera—even three-year-olds have become photographers and movie producers. We all want visual. And the truth is that a powerful photo or 60 seconds of well-crafted video can say more that people will remember than could five pages of print.
If you want to capture attention in this noisy world... if you want to sell your ideas ... if you want people to remember your message ... then by all means go visual. Or give up and go home.
Simple Is Hard

Granted, there’s a lot of work involved in finding compelling images and distilling the message down to minimum effective dose. Nevertheless, the person crafting a piece of communication should do the heavy lifting, leaving precious little work for recipients. Complex messaging is not a sign of intelligence, sophistication, or expertise, but rather proof that the job isn’t finished. Above all, communications should be easy to understand. As Einstein said, “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.”

Follow these guidelines to amplify signal and eliminate noise:

1. Don’t think in terms of trimming out a few words here and there. Most companies need a slash-and-burn approach, with major deletions that tighten messages and improve clarity.

2. Make the point in a heartbeat. You probably have only a few seconds before attention drifts.

3. Go for a stylistic shift, shaping communications to capture and hold people’s attention. Fight distraction and enhance retention by using visual imagery, sound, motion/video, and story.


5. Design counts! Don’t scrimp on this. Presentation and packaging can make all the difference.
The Payoff

The idea is to communicate with MED and bring high production value to your messaging. Sure, it’s harder and it might seem expensive. But the investment is a true bargain when compared to the punishments for failure to communicate.

Here’s the promise: Transform your messaging, and you can transform the organization.
Price Pritchett, Ph.D., is founder and CEO of PRITCHETT, LP, a Dallas consulting firm specializing in merger integration, culture, communication, and change. With over 20 million of his books in print worldwide, he is one of the best-selling business authors in the world. Virtually all of the Fortune 500 companies have used some combination of PRITCHETT’s consulting, training, and publications.