

The simple (marketing) life

BY LIZ TORLÉE

How did 'easy' and 'fast-acting' evolve into something so complicated?

A few decades ago, convenience became a big deal. It opened a whole new era in the everyday consumption of goods and services. It was one thing to have great quality and good prices, but being convenient was a real discriminator. All of a sudden, "just add an egg," "ready in five minutes," "while you wait," "three-in-one," "easy to use" and "dual-action" became the rallying cries of the ad world, sliding right into that sticky spot on creative strategies under the heading "reason to believe."

But then a sad thing happened. Convenience started to get a bit tacky; not quite wholesome. It was that TV-dinner thing. The thought that if something is convenient, maybe corners have been cut. Eventually, a new word came into its place: simplicity. Now there's a wholesome concept, packed with yin-yang, balance and moderation. Everyone wants The Simple Life. And they've been wanting it for some time-ever since "convenience" was taken off the market.

Surely we can assume, then, that there are all kinds of products and services out there to help people simplify their frantic existences? Unfortunately, not so. It seems that everything we do, from programming a new gadget to selling a house, is fraught with complexity.

For instance, selling a house without the intervention of a stager is a no-no these days. Stagers help you spend a lot of money making your home look so "visitor-ready" you'll wonder why you are selling it in the first place. You can't just clean or do a quick paint job. You can't even buy white paint without the advice of a colour consultant.

It's not just big things like houses driving people into complication-angst. If you come down with a sore throat, you must decide if it's a raspy one, one accompanied by a cough or one that comes from the chest, and whether you should buy regular or extra-strength pills, capsules or gel caps, slow-release, daytime or the ones that don't let you operate heavy machinery.

Which leads us, of course, to so-called simple technology. Most sellers of technology like to offer that magic word, simple, and others that fit snugly with it: smart, easy, solution. But consider something like the replacement of satellite TV smart cards. If they were really smart, you'd simply pull out the old one and pop in the new one. Instead, you must sit in front of the TV, remote in one hand, phone in the other, pencil at the ready and follow "14 simple steps." You are inevitably forced to pick up the phone to communicate with an automated Barbie voice that will say "I'm sorry, I did not get that," when you scream hysterically for a customer service rep. If you do connect to a real person, they will ask for your PIN. And, because you're totally stressed and can't remember, they want your mother's maiden name, which you've no doubt forgotten, too.

PINs alone are enough to complicate a day. My neighbour calls his golden retriever DogRover321. The poor animal actually has it etched on his name tag. The neighbour

decided (like some 39% of people) that his pet's name would be a good PIN. Easy to remember, but Rover alone contains too few characters for some services. So he made it DogRover. Still fairly simple. Until he signed up for something on the Internet and was told that, "for security reasons" his PIN required letters *and* numbers. So he typed in DogRover123. "Sorry, that password is taken, please try another," said a pop-up window. Hence, DogRover321. Now, whenever he's challenged to remember his PIN for anything, he just grabs the dog and reads the tag.

The complications in our lives are invasive. We're bombarded by more information and instruction than ever before, we work harder and we're under greater stress.

Thousands of dollars are spent each year by different industries to learn what's on consumers' minds. It seems in every piece of research- quantitative or qualitative, on the street, in homes and offices-people are saying over and over that they want things to be easier. Please, they beg, simpler products, simpler services, simpler instructions, simpler ways of getting through the day. No one is listening. Every better-than-ever product, every upgrade, every improvement seems to make life more complex.

Simple must be just too difficult. People can't have all this stuff and have it easy. Well here's an idea: Bring back convenience. Suddenly, it doesn't look so tacky anymore.

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