Communicating to Older People:
A Designer's Perspective

by Steve Braden

Typography

First of all, I'd like to talk to you about different kinds of fonts, all of which broadly fall into two categories:

Serifed fonts, and Sans Serif, or 'non-serifed' fonts

Which would you think is the more appropriate when producing printed material for an older audience? There's surprisingly little guidance around.

The Equality Act 2010 doesn't offer any SPECIFIC guidelines on this - it's more about generalities regarding not being discriminatory, so there's no actual 'right' or 'wrong' - just interpretation. The RNIB also sits on the fence.

If you search on Google, many of the hits on the first few pages link to a few local councils who have recommended extremely large, non-serifed fonts. However, if you dig a little deeper, you will find that they pretty much all stem from the same guidelines issued by one of those councils and regurgitated by the others, which seems to have no basis in any formal research. What's more, if you were to adopt all of the guidance outlined there you would find it, in practise, pretty impractical if you want to produce anything which looks even remotely appealing – unless you're happy to patronise your audience by producing literature which looks like it was aimed at 5 year olds learning to read.

On the other hand, if you dig a little deeper into the research (such as that done by the US National Institute on Aging), and if you speak to an old-school graphic designer with an understanding of the history and development of typefaces, a different consensus emerges. And it's in favour of serif typefaces for one simple reason:

Serif typefaces have tails on the ends of their letters in order to create an illusionary line, which is designed specifically to 'ground' the letters, and to help guide the eyes across the print.

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It's worth noting that if you go to the Large Print section in the library, you will find all the books printed using serif fonts – and that would be my advice to you…at least for body copy. For short headlines, you can be a little more creative if you need to bring a bit of life to your design.

There is, however, one exception to this: web-based fonts, as opposed to printed ones. Some serif fonts (which may have thin bits on the serifs) might not reproduce too well if they are on a poor monitor, or – more importantly – if they are too small, because a bit of the letter can disappear.

Which leads me on to my next question:

Does size matter?

The answer is of course 'yes' – but you can have too much of a good thing!

Large print type – ideally between 12 and 14 point – should be used. When selecting a type size, keep in mind that not all fonts are the same. For example, Georgia appears bigger than Times New Roman, even if the point sizes are equal.

Whilst 12 point should ideally be your minimum, it's worth considering that (especially for readers who do not have low vision problems), font sizes that are too large (i.e. greater than 14 point) may be difficult to read, as well as simply being impractical if you want to maintain an appealing design.

What else is important when it comes to typography?

'Leading' refers to the amount of space between lines, and you should aim to have it nice and wide to avoid your audience getting frustrated reading the same lines over and over again because they are blurring together. Double spacing is the ideal, but at the least we recommend using line spacing between text in the ratio 4:3 against the text size, for example, 12pt text with 16pt leading.

'Tracking' is the spacing between letters. Try not to condense or expand spacing so that the words can fit on one line. Spacing between letters should be wide – for example, a mono-spaced font such as Courier, which allocates an equal amount of space for each letter, is very readable. We, as designers, can create this space on any font we choose, as we can override spaces between individual letters if need be by the use of 'kerning', although much of this is done automatically with digital fonts.

You should also try to avoid using large amounts of block capitals, not just because it gives the impression that someone is shouting at you, but because they're difficult to read. Save it for short headlines or when you want to emphasize something.

Likewise, try to limit the use of italics, underlining or bold. These styles are good for highlighting information but if overused can make the text less readable. If you are using bold type, watch out for fonts that fill in when bolded up.

Align text to the left margin. Text is called "left justified" when the start of each new line is aligned with the left margin. This style is the most natural and familiar, and therefore the easiest to read.

Avoid awkward breaks. Breaking a word at the end of a line with a hyphen can make it difficult to read and looks ugly.

Now that we're all experts on typography and know exactly how to set our text, it's probably a good idea to think about what we are going to say, and exactly how we should say it…

Messaging & Copy Style

Bearing in mind that you are effectively addressing two audiences – potential residents, and their families – it can be easy to fall into the trap of speaking to neither directly.

I would hope that everyone in the care sector would be switched-on enough to avoid lapsing into 'do they take sugar' syndrome, but you would be surprised at how many communications make the mistake of consistently addressing their audience in the third person.

Consider the difference between these two statements:

"Our staff are here to help our residents to continue doing all the things that they've always enjoyed."

"We're here to help you to continue doing all the things that you've always enjoyed."

I'm hoping that it's obvious which of these statements appeals more directly to the reader, giving them more ownership and a sense of empathy. And if the reader happens to be a member of the family rather than the potential resident themselves – that's fine too, because they'll appreciate the fact that their loved one is being spoken to directly, as an intelligent individual. Addressing the resident directly does no harm even if they're not the ones making the decision, it can only help.

The messages that you want to get across are of course going to vary widely depending on the individual communication. However, regardless of your content, there are a few pointers that it's worth trying to bear in mind if you want your message to be successfully received by an older audience:

• State your main message(s) right at the start. If you bury the important message in the middle or towards the end of the publication (or even within a paragraph), it may not get properly digested, or even read.

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- Limit the number of key points. Try to stick with a maximum of three to five points per section. Make your message brief to help compensate for possible short-term memory limitations. And for the same reason…

- Break lengthy documents into short sections or paragraphs. This will help an older audience to remain focused and not get distracted in the middle of a long section.

- Support information with real examples and relatable stories. This helps to 'embed' and reinforce the message. Using a story can also help older readers build on information that is already familiar to them, as it may connect them to past experiences.

- Repeat the main points multiple times. This will help the reader recall and retain the information. It might be worth starting with an introductory summary paragraph or bulleted list and ending with a summary.

    - Introduce what you are going to say.
    - Say it.
    - Repeat what you said.

- Use headlines and sub-headings! These help the reader to navigate around the text, as well as providing an easy way to achieve repetition.

- Reinforce main points with questions. Research suggests that inserting questions related to the main messages into the text may help readers recall the key points. Things like: "What activities do you enjoy?" or "Do you like to have family and friends round to visit?"

OK – now we've got all the text sorted. What about design?

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Design

I've given you a whole load of typography rules to follow, and told you to be careful about breaking up the text into bite-size chunks, but as a designer, I'm also keen that we don't sacrifice visual appeal along the way. There's a few ways we can achieve this:

• First of all, font selection. There's loads of them about – even serifed ones! The goal should be to find a font that has easily recognisable characters, but still has some style too – you don't have to stick to Times New Roman!

• Limit line length. Keeping lines from 50 to 65 characters long can help the eyes scan across the text more easily, reducing the chance of readers inadvertently skipping to another line in the middle of reading. But be careful about making your lines too short because that can also be difficult to read.

• One way of controlling line length is to use a two-column grid. If you plan to insert a large picture into the text, you may want to have one column be one-third of the page width and the other column two-thirds so that the picture can fit without disturbing the text. Don't wrap sentences around a graphic. Sentences divided by images are hard to read.

• Allow for white space. Designers are always under pressure to fill space with what we at Braden Threadgold call 'ink on paper' and to cram in as much as possible. Space on a page, apart from being a great asset in creating visual appeal, can provide natural places for the eyes to relax from reading, and can help our older audience to focus their attention.

- Create contrast – it's one of the most critical factors in enhancing the readability of printed material. So, use dark type against a light background. Text appearing across photos or other graphics is also hard to read, so try to avoid it where you can – although you might just get away with it for short headlines, so long as the image area behind it isn't too busy.

- Colour is of course important too. Without getting too technical on you, older eyes develop a yellow cast, which means it becomes harder to distinguish between certain colours – kind of like when you're wearing sunglasses with a yellow tint in them. For instance, purple, blue and green – which are all colours of a similar density - may look alike. By the same token, using – for example – blue or green on a yellow backdrop or vice versa may make the words appear to blend in with the background.

Those are general design tips, but so far we've overlooked one key aspect that you need to include in your literature to bring it to life and add warmth…

Images

Images are essential, to break up the text and provide interest and realism for your literature. Lifestyle images or detailed shots highlighting important qualities like fixtures and fittings, safety measures etc. can be a great asset to showcase the quality of the care provided, without using reams of text.

As I'm sure you are aware, taking good quality photos in an environment such as a care home presents its own unique set of challenges! So here's some tips on how to overcome them…

- Create light and airy space. The best photos of 'care home' interiors are taken with curtains and blinds open, because you want to show a light and airy place to live. Although it is difficult to get both the outside and inside lighting correct in one shot, if both the photographer and the designer know their stuff, it can be achieved by taking two exposures and superimposing them together.

- Tidy away any unnecessary clutter and make the room look spacious and as warm and friendly as possible. Too much furniture and too many ornaments can also make a room look cluttered. Experiment with different furniture formations and, if the room looks overly crowded, remove some of it. Some top tips for this include:
  - Making sure any cushions and bedding look neat and tidy.
  - Setting the dining table as it would look before the meal is served.
  - Turning on all the lights.
  - Using floral arrangements where possible.
  - Checking that any wall pictures are straight, and that nothing is half cropped out of the photo.

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- Photograph the rooms empty. Unless you are producing a lifestyle shot with a handful of models, if the subject of your photograph is the quality of the room then avoid shooting a room full of residents. This will never look good because residents cannot be staged in the photo.

Which brings us to our biggest photographic issue…

Photographing residents. Here, I would want to make a distinction between what we at Braden Threadgold would call 'brand photography' and 'candid photography'.

Brand Photography refers to the images which will appear on lots of your literature as part of your overall brand image, and are likely to have a long shelf life. In this instance, I would recommend that you bite the bullet and pay for models rather than photographing residents.

There are very good reasons for this:

1) If you use a resident in your photos, at some point there is a chance that they might pass away and you might find family members withdrawing the use of the photo. Even if you've asked them to sign a model release form, there is a good chance that their attitude will change further down the line, and you really won't want to get into an argument with them.

2) Using models will give you a professional shot every time. The photo will also be achieved quicker 'on site' with minimum disruption. When you are doing posed or face-on images, you have to be very lucky to achieve the right result with a resident.

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Please, please, please try to avoid those obviously posed, off-the-shelf images which you can find on royalty-free photo libraries. They lack all realism, and they don't have the advantage of being set in your own homes.

The other kind of resident photography is what I call Candid Photography. This style of photography focuses on spontaneity rather than technique, and gives you the opportunity to show genuine residents in a real environment. Your subject's focus is not on the camera, but on what they happen to be doing. This means that the shots are unplanned and un-posed, and all the more powerful for it.

For these, you need to photograph residents at events such as Christmas parties, or taking part in activities, or interacting with carers. Candid photos are usually taken without a lot of technical equipment or any time taken to set up the shot, because the photographer needs to be unobtrusive. However, they can capture some wonderful moments of real life and tell a great story!

Right. Now you know everything you need to in order to put together great communications for an older audience. How are you going to get your message out there?

Media

Most of the points I have made so far apply to online communication as well as printed material, although you will have less control over some aspects (such as the finer points of typography) with live text on a website.

Clearly, your online communications are going to be of increasing importance, but bearing in mind the age of your audience you need to avoid falling into the trap of moving too far away from print, too quickly. Unfortunately, you really need to cover both bases.

It seems a very likely scenario that family may do the initial searching for providers online, and then – once they've shortlisted their preferred options (with or without a visit to individual homes) – sit down with their elderly relatives to show them printed leaflets and brochures. Print is also a more personal and less transient form of communication, which is important in this line of work.

Traditional media outlets like local newspaper advertising, community centres and doctors' surgeries still have a big part to play – we've recently run some very successful campaigns based exactly on these routes.

Hybrid publications, by which I mean, for example, brochures which work in both downloadable and printed formats, can help to avoid duplicating design costs. If you are designing an e-brochure which you intend people to print out themselves, then you need to be even more careful to avoid lots of heavy saturated colours and narrow margins, because most home printers will struggle to cope with it.

One last point on printed communications – avoid glossy paper, because it creates a shine that can make text difficult to read. Likewise, if a paper is too thin, the reader may be able to see through it to the type on the other side of the page, which again makes it harder to read.

About the author

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Since it was established in 1998, Braden Threadgold has
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