



Focus

A publication of Wagner Consulting Group

July 2010

Home

Mission

Services

Testimonials

Clients

About

TMI: Overcoming Decision Paralysis

Too much information causes mental fatigue and inhibits decision making.

These days we are bombarded with superfluous data. People who subscribe to the more-information-is-better approach are either lazy, exhibit CYA behavior, or misunderstand the psychology of humans. I'll explain the reasons why TMI fails later. First, let's address these three reasons people assault us with TMI.

What I describe as "lazy" behavior is when someone fails to take the time required to consider the needs of the audience, whether one or many. They fail to discriminate and choose only the most relevant information to include in the message. It takes more time to be brief.

Mark Twain wrote, *"Anybody can have ideas – the difficulty is to express them without squandering a quire of paper on an idea that ought to be reduced to one glittering paragraph."*

Also, human brains work best when context is delivered before details. That is, gist first, details second.

CYA behavior is the next most common reason for TMI abuse, after careless thinking. The goal in "cover your accountabilities" is to avoid liability or blame by including every conceivable circumstance. While this might be a good idea in the Mission to Mars Spacecraft Repair Manual, it is unhelpful in Earthbound circumstances. This can be a gut-check moment for a leader. Is your goal to serve/protect/help the customer/client/patient, or is it to give your attorneys talking points when some nitwit files a frivolous lawsuit? These two choices are often mutually exclusive.

Last, some well-meaning people are just misguided. They believe more data improves the quality of the audience's choices. They are wrong, bless their hearts, and here's why.

The reason TMI harms decision making is because of the way people make decisions. We

make choices by reducing our focus to a few easy-to-understand factors. Excessive data inhibits this focus. The result? No decision at all, or at least a delay in making a choice.

Simple is more helpful than complex. For example, reflect on restaurant inspections by public health authorities. The inspectors cover many areas of sanitation and food preparation, but the most **useful** grading system for the public is simple A, B, C summary scoring. We understand these at a glance.

Moreover, we often need more than just raw data; we need expertise to provide context. The U.S. Tax Code is, according to Google, more than 60,000 pages. Is that your resource when preparing your income tax return? In addition to knowledge, experts have the experience to make informed recommendations in areas of ambiguity.

I'll close with a personal story. I decided to buy my wife a dressy watch this past Mother's Day. True to my Inner Nerd, I searched on Amazon.com and narrowed my choices from hundreds to just eight watches. But there I became stuck! I liked them all.

Fortunately, I understood my dilemma and took advantage of an expert and available resource – my son. He knows his Mom well (naturally), is artistic (unlike his Dad), and has the self-confidence typical of a 21-year-old male. In preparation for Mike's advice, I had arranged color pictures of the eight watches in a row.

My son glanced at the choices and chose a watch within five seconds, with absolute certainty. Time has proved him correct. The lesson? When you get stuck after analyzing gobs of data, bring in a fresh set of eyes.

Your Mom would approve.

Tom Wagner

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