

# Designing for the Real World: Using Research to Turn a "Target Audience" into Real People

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PROJECT FIRST STEPS IS A RESEARCH-BASED COMMUNICATION DESIGN PROJECT to develop parenting education materials for low-literate adults. Members of the target audience were involved throughout the design process, providing input that directed the way the communication pieces were conceived, organized, designed, written and revised. In pre-design stages, interviews with members of the audience in their homes yielded information about preferences for content, illustration style, and information ordering that guided the rhetorical approach to the pieces. This opportunity for interaction also helped turn the design team's assumptions about a "target audience" into experiences and knowledge about real people. In later stages of the program, the design team and audience met again for preference and usability testing that suggested the format, organization, and style that would be most communicative and appealing for the audience. This article discusses how evaluation can be used to guide the design process.

One of the writing fallacies I try to convince myself of, from time to time, is that I'm the one in control of what I communicate. I also try to convince myself that I always understand exactly how a particular audience thinks and processes information. Sometimes I can picture people out there thinking and processing. It's a group who prefers lists to sentences, who scans and skips in all the "right" ways, who reads the headings and demands to get information in chunks. It's a group that believes what I believe and reads the way I write.

Sometimes, I'm successful when I make these kinds of assumptions. I've learned, however, that I can be more successful—and make exciting discoveries—when I admit that I'm not completely in control and that I need to find out more about what my real audience believes and thinks.

This paper describes such a process of discovery. It describes *Project First Steps*, a two-year project to develop materials to educate function-

ally illiterate parents about caring for their children (see Figure 1 page 374). In *First Steps*, the audience became an integral part of the Information Design process—a partner along the way involved from initial information gathering through final evaluation, providing input that affected how the communication pieces were conceived, designed, written, and edited. The project team included a writer, a graphic designer, a cognitive psychologist, an expert in learning disabilities, an expert in child development, and research volunteers—all contributing in unique and important ways to the communication we produced as a group.

As the writer and project manager, I found that the project reinforced my belief that many different perspectives demand attention in thoughtfully designed communication. And it taught me that what we don't know is more interesting—and sometimes more important—than what we do know.

## THE RHETORICAL CONTEXT

The idea for *First Steps* originated with the Diocesan Child Guidance Center, a social service agency in Columbus, Ohio, that provides mental health services to children. To serve the interests of children, the counselors and development experts at the Child Guidance Center often work with parents, providing in-home training, family counseling, and par-

## About the Author . . .



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Figure 1. Project First Steps is a series of nine posters designed to educate functionally illiterate parents about child care. The front of each poster focuses on a specific developmental stage. The back features a chart that overviews the entire developmental process.

enting classes for people who are at high risk for neglecting or abusing their children. The goal of the program is to develop a positive relationship between parents and children by helping parents understand and become involved in their children's development.

By educating parents about their children's abilities, growth, and needs, the Child Guidance Center helps change abusive behavior that results from parents' unreasonable expectations. However, reaching and motivating this audience is often a difficult task. Many of the people in the program have emotional or learning difficulties that stand in the way of their becoming better parents. In most cases, only the legal threat of having their children taken away motivates parents to participate in a program like the one offered by the Child Guidance Center. By successfully completing the Child Guidance Center program,

parents can demonstrate to the courts that they can responsibly take care of their children.

From years of working with parents who have motivational and learning problems, the counselors at the Child Guidance Center recognized a need to communicate their parenting information as completely as possible. They especially recognized a need for printed materials that would reiterate the messages of their one-on-one counseling.

A survey of materials uncovered a great deal of information on developmental milestones and activities for infants, babies, and toddlers. However, most of the materials were developed for a very general audience and relied heavily on written information that might not be readable by low-literate parents. Recognizing that there are as many as 90,000 functionally illiterate adults in Franklin County (Ohio), the Child Guidance Center

was committed to using materials developed especially for the needs of low-literate adults. Because no such pieces were readily available, the Center initiated a project to produce its own pieces.

The Center required that the pieces communicate information clearly through a combination of visuals and written text and that the pieces be readable by low-literate audiences. While this task may be difficult enough, the information pieces also had to be motivating for parents who could be resistant or indifferent to learning about child care.

To develop their concept of low-literate educational materials, the Center knew that they needed to combine their expertise in child care with outside expertise in writing and design. They approached us at Fitch RichardsonSmith, a design consultancy whose U.S. headquarters are located in Worthington, Ohio, near

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## EVOLUTION OF A COMPLETE DESIGN TEAM

The combination of the Child Guidance Center and Fitch Richardson-Smith's Information Design Group proved to be a good one for this project. The Information Design Group includes people with backgrounds in writing, graphic design, and research. We emphasize the merging of different perspectives to design visual and verbal information that communicates as simply as possible.

Our usual process for solving communication problems involves working closely with our clients and finding out as much as we can about our audience. With First Steps, both the client and the audience became completely integrated in the design team, each providing an important perspective on the problem.

Upon bringing together our project team, we discovered that each member entered the project with very specific understandings of our target audience. Individually, we approached the project as a writer, a designer, a psychologist, a child development expert, a marketing expert, or a teacher. And we brought with us the unique assumptions, sympathies, prejudices, and understandings derived from our particular communication projects, academic coursework, or day-to-day interaction with clients. We assumed that the audience might be unsophisticated in their tastes, indifferent or uncooperative toward the project, consistently confrontational toward the counselors, or completely neglectful of their children. Despite these uncertainties, we all also brought enthusiasm to the project. However, none of us brought explicit experience producing communication for low-literate audiences. Our lack of experience and our need to learn more about our audience benefited the project more than we could have first anticipated.

## ARMCHAIR ASSUMPTIONS AND A RESEARCH PLAN

Before ever starting the project, we talked through some of our armchair assumptions about the audience and their needs. We assumed we would have to keep our communication simple, and we discussed some of the ways we might do that. Mostly, we threw out a lot of questions that demonstrated our naivete about the audience and the project. We wondered what kind of learning problems they might have. Would they be able to read at all? What things are important to them? Who do they identify with? What do people who abuse their children expect from their children? How detached would they be from their children? How do they see their children? What do they respond to on TV? How do they find out the simple things about caring for their children?

From our discussion, we recognized that the things we didn't know made the project interesting. And we realized that knowing the answers to these questions would make us able to communicate to the parents the Child Guidance Center serves in a way that no one else has seemed to be able to do.

The answers to our questions lay within our reach—with our audience. Unlike the amorphous group I sometimes talk myself into writing for, this audience existed and was available for me to get to know. According to the Ohio Children's Trust Fund Grant that funded this project, our audience was "parents served by child-service agencies in Central Ohio." We felt that the project would benefit from as much interaction as possible with the audience. Therefore, we created a research plan that included a number of different methods for getting at both general questions about the audience and specific ones about our project. The research plan put us in contact with the audience through the whole design process. Our research began with a literature review in which we took another look at existing parent education materials to find good and bad examples of information presentation techniques. From there, we used a

number of different evaluation methods which I describe below, highlighting (1) "timing" issues, that is, when the evaluation took place in the document design process; (2) our purposes in using the method; and (3) the method itself.

### Pre-design Audience Analysis

*Timing:* Pre-design.

*Purpose:* To determine the audience's information needs, reading abilities, lifestyles, preferences, and interests specifically relative to this project. To give us a personal interaction with the audience. To shape the overall rhetorical approach to the pieces.

*Method:* Interviewed approximately 25 parents who would receive the final communication pieces. Included the use of open-ended questions, a Likert scale, and an observation checklist to find out about parents' preferences for illustration style, sequencing methods, and information content. Recorded verbatim responses to questions and also described the attitude, environment, and interaction.

### Usability and Preference Testing

*Timing:* After first conceptual design.

*Purpose:* To evaluate the potential usability and appeal of various media and communication approaches and select the most appropriate method for final design. To clarify specific problem areas anticipated in the design.

*Method:* Interviewed approximately 25 parents who would receive the final pieces. Included the use of simple preference questions and open-ended questions in which the parents selected among various communication pieces, including designs created specifically for this project. Also used a series of open-ended questions and paraphrase tests to determine the parents' understanding of various communication techniques.

### Effectiveness Testing

*Timing:* After final design and first distribution to families.

*Purpose:* To understand the effect of using the parenting education pieces in the home environment and on parent-child interaction.

*Method:* Professional counselors observed 18 families before and after receiving parenting education training. The families were observed in their home environment, and notes were made on the interactions between parents and children. A comparison was made between nine families receiving the communication pieces and one-on-one counseling and nine families who received only the one-on-one counseling.

We also built in several other research methods that helped us evaluate the success of the project from other perspectives. These methods didn't directly involve the end users and, therefore, had a less direct impact on our design.

#### **Readability Testing**

The final text was tested with a software package of standard readability tests. This testing was used as one minor indicator of the success of the communication. Because readability is affected by discourse-level issues such as organization, sentence structure, layout, typography, and other factors that are not easily measured in readability testing, it was used only as a cross check with the usability and effectiveness testing done directly with the audience.

#### **Professional Evaluation**

The pieces were reviewed by child care professionals. Their responses helped us understand the effectiveness and shortcomings of the pieces and guided our revisions as the project continued.

While our research plan seemed rather ambitious given the constraints of a limited budget, we were actually able to complete it rather efficiently and inexpensively. Often, user research gets left out of the communication design process because it is perceived as a drawn-out and expensive process. With this project, funded by state money, we discovered that by

carefully planning the kinds of research we did, we were able to produce a lot of useful information and make efficient use of our time.

#### **A "TARGET AUDIENCE" BECOMES REAL PEOPLE**

With the beginning of pre-design audience interviews, our ill-defined image of a "target audience" became real people. For the audience interviews, members of the Fitch RichardsonSmith team paired up with the Child Guidance Center's child development expert to visit parents served by the Center's program. The experience of visiting families in their homes, asking questions, and seeing the ways that they interact with each other helped provide the answers we needed. And it made a lasting impression that affected the way we wrote and designed our pieces.

As mentioned above, we visited about 25 families in the pre-design stage. We met most families in their homes where we had the opportunity to see parents and children interact in their regular day-to-day setting. We also had the chance to better understand the context in which the counseling took place and the environment in which our communication pieces would be used.

When visiting the homes, we asked a consistent set of open-ended questions and close-ended questions, using a Likert scale to find out about the parent's abilities, opinions, preferences, and interests relative to this communication situation. As we visited the homes, we sat with the parents and showed them a set of stimulus materials consisting of existing child care information pieces that we thought might be appealing to them. Specifically, we asked the parents for their understanding of and feelings about the following:

- *Illustrations.* We showed several different illustration styles (photographs, black-and-white line drawings, cartoon-style drawings, and colored drawings) and asked them to tell us which ones they liked and which ones they didn't like.

- *Information Sequencing.* We

showed the parents several pieces that sequenced information in different ways (left to right, circular, numbered, un-numbered) and then asked questions about which method was the most communicative and the most appealing.

- *Content to Include.* Although the content of the pieces was already established as the basic developmental issues the Child Guidance Center covers in its counseling services, we wanted to know what subjects parents were interested in. We felt that highlighting information that parents were most interested in could help make the pieces more relevant and appealing.

- *Information Sources.* We asked parents questions about how they usually get information about child care and other subjects. Because television seemed likely to be the most consistent information source, we also asked specific questions about the kinds of television programs and advertisements they liked. We hoped to gain a better understanding of what kinds of information sources were appealing to people who don't read at all or who read at a very basic level.

While we recorded the parents' responses to our questions, we also wrote down observations about the environment, the children, and the parents' attitudes. Some of the observations were very important to the way we approached our writing and design. For example, we noticed that very few of the homes had any kinds of books, magazines, or newspapers. However, we found the television on in almost every home we visited. Through the discussions, we found that television was an extremely important source of contact with the outside world—one of the only such contacts for people who often don't have other support systems of friends or extended family.

We found that most parents were very anxious to please us in the interviews. But we also encountered some difficulties in working with them. Some of the parents had trouble making decisions about things or understanding some of our questions. For example, when we asked one mother whether she liked to look at a color

photograph or a black and white drawing, she responded "I like this one, it has a happy baby. I don't like that one, it's about changing diapers. I'm sick of changing diapers." A few other parents responded with "They're all nice. I like them all." The experience of asking these questions (and, at times, re-asking them in different ways) helped us understand some of the inherent problems in finding a common ground for communicating with the parents in terms that they understood and responded to. We recognized that we needed to keep our questions focused and ask them very clearly. We found the audience to be very literal, suggesting that we needed to be very explicit in the communication we designed.

Here are some other general characteristics of the audience that we discovered:

- Most of the parents were very cordial in talking to us, but we didn't see a great motivation to learn about parenting. For example, some people responded that everything we showed them was very nice and they would use them all. Those responses often contradicted other responses about how they get parenting information. Some parents might have felt that they couldn't be critical because we were working with the Child Guidance Center.

- Information and attitudes about parenting were deeply ingrained. Several parents found items in the stimulus material that didn't match their own beliefs or understanding. They actively pointed out the things that were "wrong." For example, several parents pointed to a poster about bathing a baby and said that "Everyone knows you're never supposed to clean the inside of a baby's nose with a cotton swab."

- The parents were used to receiving information in a very passive way. Most of the people got much of their information from television. From our discussions, the set seemed to stay on most of the time. People are used to tuning in and tuning out as things of interest come and go. Other sources of information included doctors or social workers who filled something

of a parent role—a more experienced, knowledgeable person who gives them advice.

- The parents were very literal in the way they read information. For example, a number of people didn't understand the point of a cartoon in which a parent praises a child who attempts to dress himself but doesn't do it right. They didn't see the point in praising a child for doing something "wrong" even if the child gave a good try (Figure 2).

### TURNING RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS INTO SPECIFIC DESIGN CRITERIA

Based on our review and analysis of the information gathered during our visits, we were able to develop very specific communication objectives and design criteria that would guide our first concepts of the communication pieces.

The objectives and criteria listed below are particular to our project. They've come from specific research with a specific audience, so they may not be appropriate for other projects

or other audiences. However, for our project, these criteria set an important foundation for the approach we took to our communication design.

- **Make sequencing of information apparent.** The sequencing needs to follow a clear left-right progression. Almost all the parents seemed to prefer a left-to-right sequencing that also included numbers (see Figure 3 page 378).

- **Make steps in a sequence very clear.** In illustration, limit the number of details, focusing on the ones that are important for communicating the key points. For example, one mother commented on "all those babies" in a sequencing sample that was illustrated with seven different steps; she seemed to ignore the steps.

- **Use both expressive and instructional images.** Many of the parents had very positive reactions to images of happy mothers and babies together. Yet they seemed to get more specific information from simple drawings. We decided to combine expressive images that establish the context of a positive parent-child interaction and simple, uncluttered in-



Figure 2. Cartoon-style illustrations and less obvious sequencing methods didn't appeal to the parents. They preferred to get information from black-and-white photographs and simple illustrations.

structional images that communicate steps in a process.

- **Segment information into small, manageable chunks.** Because a number of parents, like the mother who commented on "all those babies," seemed overwhelmed by large numbers of steps, we decided to simplify procedures as much as possible and limit the number of steps to no more than four or five.

- **Be specific, concrete, and literal.** Our experience interviewing the parents helped us understand how literal the audience could be. The subjects covered, words used, and images shown needed to relate directly to the experiences and interests of the parents. We couldn't count on the audience necessarily responding to generalizations, metaphors, or flowery description.

- **Tell a complete story with visuals and supplement with words.** Even people who read at the lowest levels seemed to look for words in their communication. However, to be most effective, we needed to tell as complete a story as possible with pictures, using words to add detail and specifics for people who can read.

- **Make any verbal information as simple as possible.** To reach the largest possible audience, the text needed to read at a very basic level.

- **Make the pieces exciting and attention-getting.** The people who were to receive the pieces are not motivated to read or to take the time to learn about child care. We could improve the chances for usability by designing pieces that caught the attention of the audience and invited them in for more.

With these design criteria in hand and the impressions of our visits in mind, we began developing concepts for the communication pieces (see Figure 4). Up to this point, we had not defined what the "communication pieces" would really be. We knew that the form the communication took would be important to making the pieces easy to use and motivating parents to use them. We considered game, poster, and brochure formats. Games and posters were less traditional communication formats and would, perhaps, be more motivating

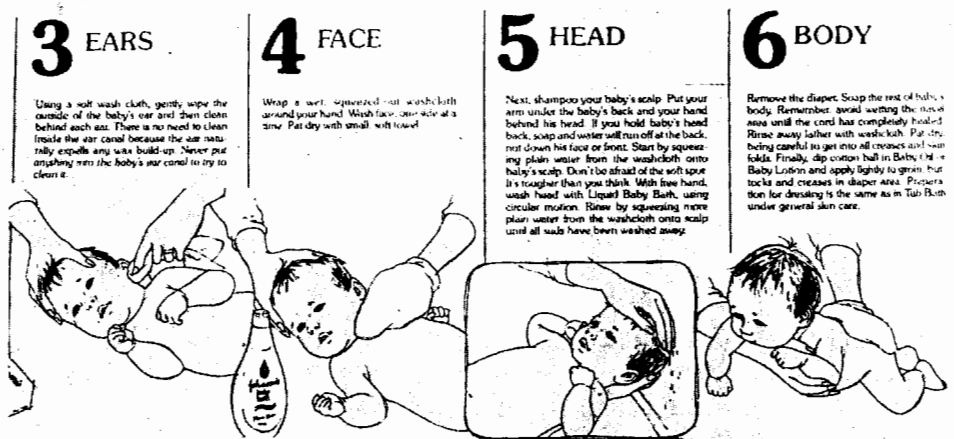


Figure 3. In testing, most parents preferred information sequencing that progressed left-to-right and included numbers.



Figure 4. The developmental activities covered in each poster are limited to four steps. A black-and-white photograph helps establish the context. The steps of the activities are explained with basic illustrations and simple written information.

or approachable for someone who didn't read. Brochures were the more expected format and easier for counselors to use, but might be intimidating for non-readers.

### Taking Our Concept to the Audience

To determine the appropriate communication format, we created concepts for both posters and brochures. We selected the poster format because it could be instructional but also large, colorful, and highly visual. As a large text it could be less likely to be thrown away or ignored. A social worker could work through the information with the parent, hang the poster in the child's room, and ask the parent to keep the poster up and refer to it until the next visit. We also decided to test a brochure format because it was the most traditional format, most like the other kinds of education pieces parents were likely to receive (see Figure 5).

We took our completed full-color concepts back to the audience to test for both preference and understanding. We randomly inserted our concepts in with other existing parenting education materials that ranged from high-quality pieces produced by a baby products company to some low-cost photocopied materials developed by other social service agencies. We asked parents to examine each piece and select the one they liked best. We then used a series of open-ended questions to help determine what parents liked about their choice. We also asked for their second favorite and finally for their least favorite. We followed each with a series of open-ended questions. We recorded each response verbatim.

While the parents were examining the pieces, we also observed their behavior. We tried to observe whether they seemed to be reading information or just looking at the images, and we also noted whether they spent an especially long or short amount of time on any one piece.

After finding out about their preferences, we then focused on information about our concepts. We asked parents for their opinions about the ways that illustrations, sequencing,

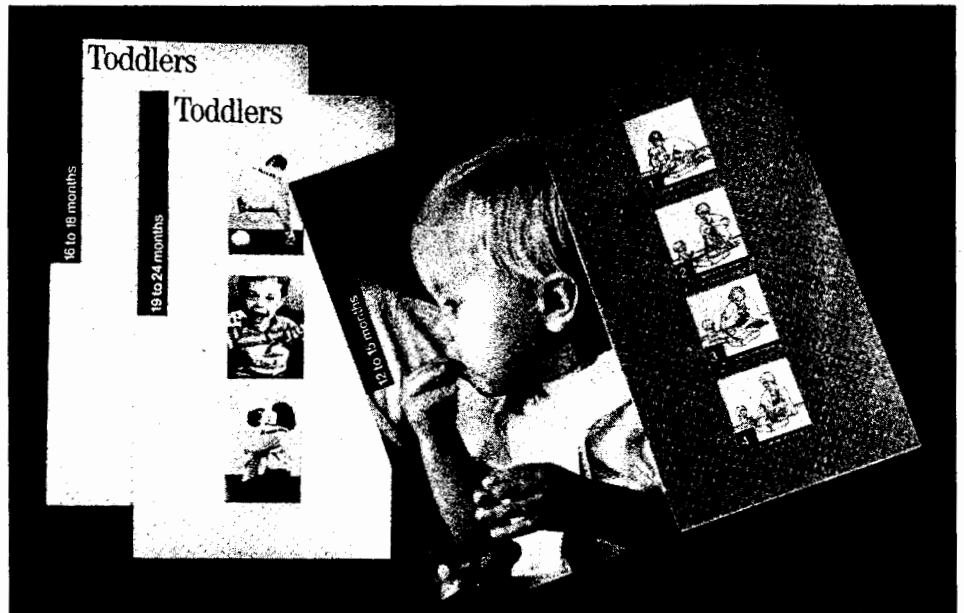


Figure 5. A brochure concept was also tested with the target audience. As anticipated, nonreaders were not attracted to a traditional brochure format.

and color were used in the two different concepts. We then tested for comprehension by asking the parents to explain in their own words what was happening in several specific sequences covered in the concepts. We also looked for opinions and comprehension of three specific communication elements: the way we represented a dialog between parent and child in the samples, the size and readability of type, and the use of written text.

While not specifically asking about it, we also looked for overall comments about the racial and gender depictions in the pieces. For the project, we very consciously used a mixture of boys and girls and various racial groups representative of our audience. In the concepts tested, however, the children we used for our photos and drawings happened to be white boys. None of the people interviewed made any comments about racial or sexual bias.

In the concepts we all attempted to address the problem of sexist language. Because we knew our audience was very literal in the way they read things, we wanted to avoid the use of the generic "he." The text of the posters described activities and milestones that apply generally to children of a specific age. However, these is-

ues are illustrated with a specific example of one parent and child interacting. The purpose and use of the pieces made the use of "he" inappropriate for several reasons. Most importantly, in half the posters, the parent-child interaction would be demonstrated with a girl. But also, we wondered whether parents who are very literal would understand that the same things apply to their child even if their child is not of the same sex as the child shown in the picture.

After considering alternatives ranging from the contrived (avoiding any pronouns at all) to the simple (using "he" if the poster featured a boy and "she" if it featured a girl), we settled on a solution that is used commonly in conversation, but less frequently used in print. Instead of using "he" or "she," we used "they." In this case, "they" often referred to the singular noun "your baby." One poster, for example, included the following statement: "Your baby is making big changes. They are starting to be more like a big kid." While this construction may seem awkward in agreement, it represents a conversational technique that is used by many people—and is especially familiar to the parents we were writing for. While some of our design team had hesitations about using something that was non-standard

on the posters, our work with the audience led them to understand that making the communication work was more important than using schoolbook English.

When we showed the concepts to the parents, we found that none of the parents took any notice of our gram-

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matical liberties. And we made other interesting observations that guided our final design. Importantly, we discovered that parents preferred our poster format over any of the other communication pieces they saw. The comments ranged from "I could sit and look at them all day" to "I like this. It's for my kids. This is how my kids eat." Many of the parents specifically mentioned that they liked the large photographs, happy kids, and bright colors.

The parents also helped us recognize a need for some modifications. We had conceived of the posters as a series of nine pieces, each covering a specific age group between the ages of birth and two years. We discovered that we were correct in assuming that parents only wanted to see information about their child's specific age. Parents with children in the age groups covered by the concepts responded well and related the information to their own children. One mother related to a sequence explaining that older toddlers like to dress themselves, even though they may not be very successful at it: "He's so rough. He likes to take his own clothes off." Another mother related to a sequence explaining that playing with spoons and sand helps children learn the motor skills needed to feed themselves: "The sand helps them get ready for using the spoon. My Cory gets so that

she wants to feed herself. That's good."

The parents' favorable reaction to another poster, produced by an infant products company, helped us discover a missing element in our posters. The infant products poster used a stair-step chart to show child development. This technique helped provide some context for where a child was in the overall development process. Parents found it a valuable information tool. Positive reactions to this piece included "This shows how your baby grows. I have something like this from my (parenting) class. I kept it with all my papers," and "I like this because it tells stages your baby goes through." These responses helped us recognize that our posters gave a very isolated picture of the ages and skills we were covering. Because parents would only receive one poster at a time, they wouldn't necessarily have a point of comparison for how their child grows developmentally or where they are going. We decided, therefore, to incorporate a developmental chart that would appear on the back of each poster showing developmental stages from birth to age two. This addition helped our posters focus on specific age segments on the front of the poster and provide an overall child development context on the back.

From this input, we decided that our poster format was the type of communication that most appealed to our audience. With the addition of content on the back and other minor modifications, we were able to proceed with developing communication pieces that seemed most likely to meet the needs of our audience.

#### **Other Research Findings**

Most of the input that guided our design and writing came directly from the audience. However, as mentioned above, we did build several other research methods into the process to help us evaluate the effectiveness of the pieces.

*Readability Testing.* After writing the concepts and taking them to the target audience, we also looked at the readability of the pieces. As our in-

teraction with the audience suggested, the pieces scored well on readability tests: at grade level 2.5 on Spache, at grade level 3.7 on Gunning Fog, at first-grade level on Fry, and at or below third-grade level on Raygor. The fact that the pieces scored somewhat unevenly could probably be attributed to the use of vocabulary like "cooing," "toddler," or "Cheerios" that were not part of the word lists used in the formulas, but were familiar spoken vocabulary for parents of small children.

We used the readability tests simply as a way of confirming our efforts in a minimal way. The formulas could not assess the contributions made by the visuals in the pieces. Nor could they consider the discourse-level issues of using simple sentences or using "they." Therefore, we considered the readability scores primarily as objective support of the methods we had undertaken to make the posters easy to use. We did not use the readability evaluation as a criterion for refining the posters. Our audience analysis provided much clearer and more specific indications of potential usability problems that went well beyond the word and sentence level.

*Evaluation by Professionals.* As the final pieces were printed, professionals who would be using the posters received copies and were asked to evaluate their effectiveness with clients. The comments from professionals told us a great deal about the social and political contexts in which the posters were used. The comments were strongly positive, ranging from "Easy for parents to comprehend and relate to. Parents love them" to "I like the steps that demonstrate how the child develops" to "I think we should use these posters with all parents, not just low-literate parents." However, several professionals commented on the importance of maintaining a racial and sexual balance in the posters. Comments included "I have problems with the all white/male format" and "Leaves me with the impression you are only concentrating on white male children." Even before these strong comments, we had planned that the nine posters would include a balance of boys and girls and would represent

an ethnic mix representative of the audience. Several professionals also commented on the "lamentable grammar" demonstrated with our non-standard use of "they."

**Effectiveness Testing.** As the final method of gaining input from the target audience, professionals who work with the audience evaluated the effect of using the posters on producing changes in parenting behavior. In the evaluation, 18 families served by the Child Guidance Center were given a pre- and post-test, "Home Observation Measurement of Environment." Areas observed included the emotional and verbal responsiveness of the parent, the avoidance of punishment, the organization of the child's environment, the appropriateness of play materials, the involvement of the parent with the child, and the indication of appropriate daily developmental stimulation. Half the families received only one-on-one parenting counseling. The other half received the same counseling plus the First Steps posters. After 60 days, both groups showed improvement. In her evaluation, the Child Guidance Center's development expert said, "The addition of low-literate materials augments and reinforces the home-based instruction. The materials meet the needs they were designed to fulfill—encouraging parents to become involved in their child's development and enhancing their child's environment."

The effectiveness testing was based on subjective evaluations of family situations. Therefore, its value was largely in demonstrating that the posters are being used positively in counseling situations. The testing was not designed to be statistical, but it did provide a look at the use of our communication pieces in the hands of the audience.

## CONCLUSION

Almost two years after our first arm-chair evaluation of the audience, we completed the entire series of nine Project First Steps posters that are now in use by thousands of families in Central Ohio.

The discoveries I've made during

this process are quite a bit more complex than I assumed at the start. Most importantly, I've discovered that there is a difference between "knowing about my audience" and "knowing my audience." At the beginning of the project, I had a rather vague picture of what the people I was writing for might be like. And I assumed that most of my blanks could be filled in by reading what the "experts" had to say about child development and low-literate audiences. After visiting parents in their homes, seeing their children, asking questions, listening, observing, talking, and testing, I now have a richer picture of the real needs and attitudes of my audience. I can now attach specific names, faces, incidents, comments, and anecdotes to my assumptions about who this audience is and what they need. I also now recognize that my audience is made up of individuals, each of whom will interact personally with the material I write. Such individuals understand things very literally, read pictures more carefully than words, and prefer communication that talks to them in their own terms. I've also discovered that research can be an exciting process of discovery that has its place *throughout* the information-design process, not just at the beginning or at the end.

Mostly I've been reminded that communication design is a process in which information needs to flow *both* from the writer to the audience and from the audience to the writer.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## Taking It on the Chin

A few years ago, I handed my supervisor my first document to review. I should have also handed him a new red pen for all the bleeding he was about to do on it. When I got his review copy back, the document was more red than black or white. It was not easy to take the criticism. I saw my first document as a direct extension of me and it was me who was wearing all of that red ink.

I read and re-read his comments, trying to see where they fit, but I was blinded by my ego. Hey, I wrote this stuff, so it must be good. "Well," said the little voice in the back of my head, "this won't be the last time you get comments, so if you want to keep this job and your sanity, you better toughen that skin."

I looked at the comments to see if they were justified. My supervisor had not edited on a whim. He had edited my style to fit our company's style, some grammar, and yes, a few typos. His criticisms were justified. After integrating his comments, the document read better, looked better, and was more usable for the customer.

The point is, I now know that I have become a better writer through document reviews. I don't know everything there is to know about writing, and I appreciate what other people do know. Taking justified criticism is not always easy, but I know that the document and I will be better after the review. So the next time you get a review copy back, take it on the chin; it's not you wearing the red ink, just the paper.

Charles Bottoms

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