



DAVID BURN

Show, Don't Tell

Prelude to Act Three

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A Prose Poem Campaign



A/B TESTING

Are you writing copy and moving people to a new place? Are you A/B testing what you write and constantly challenging your better instincts? No singular message, no matter its poignance and perfection, will ever be enough today. Mass marketing, meet microtargeting. What if Kurt Vonnegut A/B tested his character's names? Would Kilgore Trout have won out? Iowa City is a literate college town and a strong test market. Vonnegut, a former PR man, named his characters whatever he damned well pleased. Authors do. Copywriters are another story. Copywriters are sensitive to the market's whims and its selective appetites. Paid for fingers on the digital pulse. Wireframes and trend reports are punched up in real-time. Kilgore Trout would be far too weird for a character in a commercial today. In the commercial, we call the man Jack. Jack's real name is Rusty Jacobsen, but we're talking about the character, not the actor. Jack's been craving pimento cheese and now he has some. Trout's never gonna eat pimento cheese. He was in Europe for too long. He's a sardine's man. Jack's better looking than most men, but he's not pretty. Pretty doesn't sell dairy products. Pretty sells five-star vacations and a host of other things that no one needs. Damn right, Jack was A-B tested. Now the client wants him back. Now Jack eats strawberry ice cream. Now he eats mint chocolate chip from the carton. Jack might win an Emmy. Jack and his trophy stash will soon be forgotten. By contrast, Kilgore Trout lives on. The writer knows what the reader wants. Intrigue. Depth. Mystery. Unforgettable characters up against life's toughest circumstances. The reader simply must know how it ends. Nail biters. Passion plays. Historical re-enactments. Vonnegut wrote 'Sirens of Titan' in the 1950s. Malachi Constant on Mars—there's a band name for you. Never accept a ride from a billionaire. Earth is Planet A. Do we need Planet B? Let's not run it by the focus group. Let's not circle back. Planet A already lost the dinosaurs. Now is not the time to flee for deeper space. It's time for a walk in the pines. It's okay, our walk will not be A/B tested against a run. We can sit in silence on a log. No one's heard the creek's song in centuries.



SOCIAL CURRENCY

Like modern plumbing and birth control, money is a necessary invention. A social construct. A way to transfer value to the workers. The idea in its purest state isn't bad. If only ideas were kept under the stained glass of your imagination, instead of traded for dollar bills. Black mirrors. NFTs. Fake followers. Machine-generated text. Stolen art. It's 2023 and social currency is not yet accepted at the grocery store, not recognized by banks, but it gets you and me a front-row ticket to the show. And the show is real. Like I really do have this green yolk around my neck. It's LinkedIn's way of saying that I'm [#OpentoWork](#). For what it's worth, I have never met a person who isn't open to work. Anyway, here I am with this green collar resting on my digital shoulders. Fine. You can dress me up. You can encourage me to dance. What do you think poetry is? A word dance. Feed me street tacos. I'm buying another abstract painting. Also, please put something funky on the non-ironic turntable. Honor the groove! I'm open to work. Show me to your idea people— dedicated people who work for change. Where are you hiding the humanists and hedonists? It's time to fertilize the fields. Time to strike a new vein. Together, we will make it easier for writers and artists to succeed. We will keep coal out of gas tanks and hold space for wolves in the wild. There are few things that an impassioned information worker can't do. But change comes by degrees. That's why I'm down here in the world's largest Social Capital Mine with my pickaxe. People are tired of scraping by on a diet of silicon wafers. Fumes before ashes. Can we bring back charisma? How about charm? I don't see it on TikTok. There's a community of readers there known as BookTok. The stage is a powerful magnet. This isn't the poetry you learned in school. We're free from rhyming couplets and Tweed jackets now. In the Kingdom of No Context, free association is the best passport. Your ticket back to Meaning, the capital city of What Matters. It's good to see you again, Captain. Here are your favorite slippers.



IT'S ALL ABOUT THE WORK

The lies we tell ourselves. The lies we learn to live with. It's all about the work. The creative director's face is perfectly earnest when she utters these words. She doesn't mean to diminish. She doesn't mean to disturb. It's all about the work. A statement of false values. If it were truly all about the work, we'd all be out of work. A thousand swords would be bloodied by our free falls. Feelings hurt and contracts broken. Private schools would close. Young Buck would have to ride the bus to the fish fry. He'll understand. Daddy has high standards. It's all about the work. No, when the dentist puts a needle in your gums it's all about the work. When the pilot lands the plane in an ice storm, it's all about the work. Making ad campaigns, like politics, is about compromise. In the beginning, there was light. It takes an idea and two hundred fingerprints to make an ad. Four hundred more to make a law. Swimming in self-importance. Dissonant consonants. Top-of-cake figurines. Look, it's a dance competition. Put your tights and your stage face on. Daddy has high standards. Young Buck has never seen this much fried food in his life. Lines, read between them. It's all about whatever work you need to do to survive. It's all about pleasing people and amusing them too. You're the good servant. No need to explain. Keep doing what you're doing. Keep doing the hustle. This is a battle for attention. To win hearts and minds you first must kill your darlings. Can you do that? Can you cut the cutesy? Smart is so much better than clever. You're not checking Slack and you're definitely not looking at Twitter. So many content holes to fill. You don't want to bury the story. You want to make people smile. Smiling people are already listening, they're already on your side. You want to make people think. Thinking people are open to suggestions, open to what's possible. It's possible to know the rules before you break them. It's possible to move people to tears, but there has to be a transaction attached to the minor chord. When the registers ring, bosses sing.



THE HAT FACTORY

I have a big head and curly hair too. Consequently, few hats fit me. The only hats that do fit me well are fitted hats. Seven and seven-eighths. If the cap fits, I wear it. But what about all those times that the hat does not fit? Like the time I started an agency and wore the account director's houndstooth fedora, the strategy director's straw bowler, the media director's beret, the creative director's baseball cap, and the production director's hardhat? There's no way to wear them all well, or all at once. At night, when the hats came off, I wore a sweatband. It was time to invoice and remind clients about unpaid bills. Again. Time to look at the designer's books that the recruiter sent over. Time to clean my inbox. Update the website and social. Port data to the new CRM. The task management tool feels for me. Creative people sometimes believe that they're the engine of the agency business. It's an interesting point of view. Creatives do dream things up, and when the client whisperer at the center of the scene makes it possible, they get to make the things they dream up. Provided it all gets approved up the chain and paid for. Provided it gets called for in the first place. Let us pray. Poetry for the people. Products and services for the people. People who giveth not an iota about your numbers, or the pool of sharks eating away at your market share. So, there's blood in the water. It's a daytime drama. I come to you as a writer. A writer who has also won dozens of accounts for my startup agency. Did you know that Columbia Sportswear (a former client) was a hat factory in the beginning? Columbia Hat Company they called it. Started by refugees from Nazi Germany. Gert's parents. After 13 years, my hat company came apart. I didn't have to let it linger, but I did. Time and heat are fertilizers. At last, a new compost is ready to spread. What was, is, and what is, will soon be what was. Think of the summer sun. This is Texas. Rugged, rocky hills. Lost pines. Ocotillo near the drive. Red Lantana along the walk. Language dry, precise, in places voluble. In Texas, there's room. Hold on, let me fetch the sombreros.



NO NEED TO EXPLAIN

Let me explain. When you make something for other people like a macramé, an advertisement, or a series of stream-of-consciousness prose poems, your creation goes naked into the world. No baby elephant this, your art piece is now on its own. You're no longer there to explain. Your work speaks for itself. Like this note, it needs a natural setting to take root. A primeval forest where fields of poppies bloom. A forest with volcanic soils. Reliable rain. Centuries of good fortune. When I left the agency business, I left no forwarding address. Sent no letters to the editor. Instead, I got in the ring with the snorting beast. Spilled blood at the typewriter. With just 26 letters in countless combinations, I created and carried on. New arrangements of words help us trust each other, know each other, love each other. Remarkable. Saturated in lurid images, our best words continue to be valued by all who know their power. Timeless words from Emerson. "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines." Let's say you are an intelligent being from another galaxy. Is it against your Interplanetary Constitution to help humans learn the folly of our ways? Michael Jackson was making a Pepsi ad when his hair caught on fire. Hollywood star shine is another form of borrowed equity. Here's a better idea...make the product the star of your ads. It starts by identifying what truth your product—and your product only—can tell. A consultant would bill hundreds of hours to help you answer that question. An agency would bill hundreds more to translate the company's story into customer-friendly info snacks. Or you could simply let the DJ drop the needle in the groove. It's what she does. Do you want to see a grown man dance? Give people something to chew on now. If they like it, they'll pocket the rest for later. They'll tell a friend. As it happens, their friends are big on show-and-tell. I'm big on show, don't tell. Big on helping the reader see. Helping the reader know it in their bones. Remember what happens when Tom Sawyer is ashore? He's not adapted to life on land. He fumbles often and hard. So, we stay in the river. In the river, our story is alive and we're alive to tell it.



DO THE HUSTLE

Kurt Vonnegut, one of the funniest and best fiction writers of all time, first worked as a PR man for General Electric. He also worked as a newspaper reporter. Before he finally made it as a writer of beloved American novels, he was the owner and manager of a Saab dealership in West Barnstable, Massachusetts. Writers find themselves on the hero's journey. Writers find themselves on an island. We all have our hustles. I'd like to know where you got the notion. Here's a question for the professors: How are you supposed to fit writers and artists into the corporate squeeze? Look at them, the poor misfits. I once had a colleague who would drink on the job and then take naps in his cubicle. He was promoted to associate creative director. I never did see his timesheets, but I imagine they were as creative as he was. Same workplace, different day. I stood on stage in front of my colleagues and recited a poem called, "Creative License." Do you ever have that dream where all of a sudden, you're naked, and everyone can see you? I'm here to report that some dreams do come true. I'm dreaming again. There's a hammock and a gentle breeze. Detective stories to unravel. Mezcal maturing in a clay pot. The Mexican Gray Wolf does not seek an opinion. He looks to the sky. The kettle of hawks is circling. This is the woods at night. Bright stars for guides but even the stars can't make sense of it all. The Brand Called You makes no sense. Corporations are not people. There is no body politic. No limit to what you can do. But there is the sniff test at the end of your bottom line. Your customers want to believe your true story. For instance, "Arby's has the meats." Arby's also has those tasty potato cakes. If I haven't eaten, I might pull over for those potato cakes. People sometimes say that poetry is a puzzle. You know what? The customer journey is a puzzle with several missing pieces. This piece can't be missing for long: the customer is hungry for simple truths. How well your company tells its elusive but basic truths is the difference maker. It's much harder than it sounds. Simple and compelling always is.



SURPRISE AND DELIGHT

I am surprised and delighted when the band comes back for a second encore. When drinks are on the house. When the mostly deserted beach is also home to wild horses. Now, George, the agency's account director is speaking. He says we have to dig deeper in order to surprise and delight the clients. Are we miners or clowns? I'd rather dig for treasure than paint my face. George says we need to stay late and over-deliver. I hear hollow gestures with a false ring. Later when Henry the assistant account exec comes in with sushi, our hunger for raw fresh fish interrupts our harsher judgments. We're all on a team here. And we're on a mission (to not fail). But who orders Lobster Tempura Rolls with extra edamame? It's okay, I can always catch the 10:30 train. We have time to cook up some new ideas, but there's no time for them to simmer. The clients will be here at 9:00 and they're never late for a big meeting. Kevin, my art director partner, wants to play ping-pong while we think. He's active like that. Always up and bouncing around the room and drawing things on the whiteboard. He also eats the quail eggs. I don't want those things. I want Hamachi and some rice. I want the end of convention. See this empty white box? You can't see it now because it's full. I filled it with words that go on and on. Do you think this is long form? It's 392 words. That's not long form. That's flash fiction. That's a prose poem. An inverted want ad. A proof point. George says our ideas are off strategy. He says we're out of ideas and out of time. Dour faces on the men who doubt. I had an everything bagel on my way to work this morning, plus a 16-ounce Americano. I'm the writer, but Kevin likes to present. The dude's a control freak if you ask me, but I love him, and he can draw. He was going to become an architect, and to me, he is an architect. We all are. We're building interest. We're building the brand house. We're building interest in the brand house. This headline is a hammer. This illustration is a nail. Soaring ceilings and arched window frames. A lovely tile for the floor.



REWARDING WORK WANTED

At this unusual time when machines are writing copy and copywriters are mimicking the machines that write copy, I'm looking to return to work as director of brand voice, a.k.a. communications director, at a labor union, arts organization, a foundation, school, or a company with an innovative service or product. Brand voice is such a powerful asset. It's one of the primary ways that a company creates meaning for its customers, along with its look and feel. To make a brand voice powerfully magnetic, a company would do well to employ a hard-working poet with a family to feed. Not many companies ever find this person—they're nowhere on the company's radar. Why would they be? What do literary nerds and renegades know about conducting business? This they know: it makes people happy when they hear a human voice, a voice with pain and struggle in it along with joy. Yes, a brand voice can contain all these things. Poets also know that formulas and funnels are mostly sad, tired attempts that have lost currency. Formulas like how a line must be crafted to drive interest and clicks. Maybe every line doesn't need to carry that load. Maybe everything's not for sale all the damn time. Maybe some things remain sacred, even the lowly sentence. Sure, this is a rant, but it's short and there's no need to nod off just yet. Like you, I'm against boredom. Pretty much everyone is, which is why it takes someone with the heart of a lion to walk into a multi-million dollar per year operation and suggest a new or different way. The old way made you rich, right? The old way is something people in the room can agree upon. So why take risks? Why hire someone who doesn't check every single box? To get different results. To keep things interesting. To prove once again how liberating it is to think for yourself. To make progress.



Thank you for reading.



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