COSMOS
Navigate the Compliance Universe

Creating Great Compliance Training in a Digital World
Introduction: We Are All Professional Creatives Now

I started my career as a journalist.

Well, technically, I started my career as a fiction writer who worked at Starbucks until it dawned on me that it might be a better strategy to at least get paid to write...but it's fair to say that I moved to journalism quickly.

You know the first thing you learn as a journalist?

You need a hook.

After you convince your editor to run the piece, you need to give readers a reason to pay attention.

You need to be interesting. Or relevant, or provocative, or frightening, or fascinating, or angry, or inflammatory—but, no matter what, you need a new angle, fact pattern, or point of view that your audience cares about. And never, never be boring.

In journalism, you're only as great as your last story and your next pitch.

Even when you're great, your story is birdcage liner the next day. And when you're not great? Consistently? When you don't have anything to say?

You don't get asked back.

As many writers say: Writing isn't typing. Most of the work happens off of the page. **I believe the same applies to creating great compliance training today.**

In our digital world, compliance training can take many different forms—from online courses to printed resources to live sessions.

But whether you are creating a handout, a PowerPoint deck, a policy, an online course, a Code of Conduct, or any other piece of compliance-related communications, your work will be stronger—and your impact will be greater—if you can think and create in some of the ways that writers do.

Looking back, the mid-1990s was a low-content world.

Back then, grabbing people's attention was mostly a problem for professional creatives—like authors, journalists, advertising executives, or movie producers. People whose fortunes rose or fell with TV ratings, box office draws, magazine subscriptions, and ad sales.

Today, in a world of Facebook and endless cat videos, grabbing people's attention is a problem for *anyone* who has to get a message out—whether you're an advertising copywriter or a compliance training manager.

So if you create or deliver content—in *any* format—and you want that content to *matter*, you have to operate like a professional creative (or find vendors or team members who can).

Start by assuming you have a completely uninterested audience and it's your job to make them pay attention. You

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have to get your ideas straight and then work hard to craft your message, so it's appealing, interesting, even visually well-designed.

Even when you're able to make your training mandatory—maybe even especially then.

Your Audience Is Busy and They Don't Care . . . Yet

Shortly after I launched my company, Rethink Compliance, I read a great book by Steven Pressfield called*Nobody Wants to Read Your Sh*t: And Other Tough-Love Truths to Make You a Better Writer*.

The book is worth a read—particularly if you create content for compliance programs (or hire or supervise people who do).

As Pressfield puts it:

> Here's the #1 lesson you learn working in advertising (and this has stuck with me, to my advantage, my whole working life):
>
> Nobody wants to read your shit. . . .
>
> It isn't that people are mean or cruel. They're just busy. [1]

Pressfield (who eventually left advertising and wrote books and movies like *TheLegend of Baggar Vance* and *TheWar of Art*) explains:

> There's a phenomenon in advertising called Client's Disease. Every client is in love with his own product. The mistake he makes is believing that, because he loves it, everyone else will too.
>
> They won't. The market doesn't know what you're selling and doesn't care. Your potential customers are so busy dealing with the rest of their lives, they haven't got a spare second to give to your product/work of art/business...
>
> When you understand that nobody wants to read your shit, your mind becomes powerfully concentrated. You begin to understand that writing/reading is, above all, a transaction. The reader donates his time and attention, which are supremely valuable commodities. In return, you the writer, must give him something worthy of his gift to you.[2]

What if everyone who created compliance training started by asking themselves: "How can I create something that people *want* to read (or see or hear)?" We would have a lot less deadly dull compliance training.

For instance...

- We wouldn't have spent the early years of the industry wringing our hands about whether the new 45-minute antitrust course was substantive enough compared to the three-hour in-person presentation it replaced.
- We wouldn't have had subject matter experts who routinely take out their red pens and turn three-sentence statements into a five-paragraph essays.

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- We wouldn't have created a world of 60-page Codes of Conduct that read like contracts and are impossible for everyday employees to parse.
- And we wouldn't have waited years to introduce humor, creativity, and fun, or worried that making a topic interesting, funny, or clever would undercut its seriousness.

But compliance training didn't start out as an audience-driven communication form. It started as a regulator-dictated communication form, and that fact shaped our choices.

So let's begin here, with a few assertions that drive much of what follows. Regardless of the content you create, *even* if that content is more or less legally mandated, remember that:

- Writing (or making any creative product) is a transaction.
- If you want an audience to donate their time and attention, you need to give them a good reason.
- Your audience doesn't want to know everything YOU know about the topic—they want to know what THEY should know.
- It's possible to identify what is relevant, important, or interesting about your topic and screen out everything else—but doing this may feel awkward or even risky at first.
- The techniques in this book can help.

And, finally, a secret: Once you start to zero in on what makes compliance interesting, creating compliance training gets easier and a whole lot more fun.

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