

## How the Tiny Soapbox methodology helps relieve information overload.

by Tracy Allison Altman, PhD

Information overload conceals good ideas and slows innovation. By setting higher expectations for how information is presented, we can help fresh ideas rise to the surface. Here's how I approach it:

### 1. Treat it as a design problem: Focus on quality, not quantity.

Too much information flow is a serious problem. But poorly designed, low-quality information also deserves our attention. The process of presenting and finding innovative ideas will always be messy, but things could improve. Many people still write monolithic, free-form narratives that smother key points, even though better options are available. Formats can be designed to divide content into easily digestible, XML-tagged chunks that can later be combined into comprehensive documents -- technical documentation organized according to [DITA](#) (Darwin Information Typing Architecture) is a good example. Methodologies that generate so-called atomized content increase reusability and make better search results possible.

### 2. Organize information around ideas.

I use the "idea" as an organizing principle to foster innovation, improve transparency, and relieve information overload. What do I mean by that? An idea is a discovery, recommendation, or finding that links an *action* or *occurrence* with a specific *outcome* -- this could be a recommended action linked to an expected result, or a completed action linked to its actual outcome. To make this a reality, I design patterns and user interfaces to structure information around ideas. My methodology is called [Tiny Soapbox](#). Each tiny soapbox has three key characteristics: It conveys a **concrete idea**, it provides **evidence** to support that idea, and it does all this in **few words**. By requiring a certain amount of rigor in the presentation, Tiny Soapbox reduces information overload by filtering out unsubstantiated ideas.

Freemium pricing model → More paying customers

Search marketing → Higher ROI

webinars → more leads

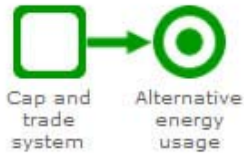
**Freemium pricing model**  
→ More paying customers

**cathy** says:

- This is based on an **internal report/presentation**. The info was put together using **summary statistics**, and comes from me.
- I believe there's a **very strong connection**.

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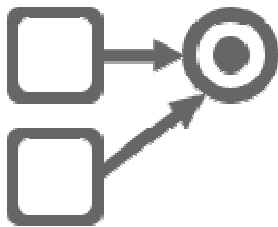
Example, Please. This graphic shows three business ideas formatted according to Tiny Soapbox principles. In the top one, a software product manager, Cathy, has an idea: She's recommending that her company adopt a freemium pricing model. She fully expects this action to result in more paying customers. As backup information, Cathy references a research report. This example is especially tiny --- the recommended action and expected outcome are represented with small graphics, and the supporting evidence is displayed in a mouse-over. The Tiny Soapbox methodology doesn't necessarily mean creating something this concise, and graphics don't have to be used. Specifics depend on the context: For instance, ideas about medical treatments might be presented very differently from recommendations for a software architecture. What all tiny soapboxes do have in common is that they are at-a-glance views of ideas, findings, or insights (actions or events associated with outcomes).



**boxer** says: "The US should create a cap and trade system for greenhouse gas emissions. This will give industry a free-market incentive to reduce its carbon footprint"

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Energy Policy Strategy & Implementation. This approach can be applied to bigger problems, too – such as public policy issues. The Tiny Soapbox shown above is advocating that the United States adopt a cap-and-trade program for greenhouse gas emissions. But the process doesn't stop there, with a single individual expressing a single point of view: People's soapboxes can be combined to capture a range of ideas within an online community, as shown below. Eventually a diagram will emerge to represent a set of ideas on a complex subject.



Brevity + Patterns = Good Stuff. Twitter has its problems, but I like how it limits people's contributions to only 140 characters. However, good ideas deserve more: We need structure to make innovation happen faster, and that's why I organize content around specific ideas. Others are doing similar things to manage information. Sales management is a good example, where they structure information around individual opportunities. This allows people to quickly focus on the highest quality prospects, and controls chaos by organizing details around an associated opportunity. Another example is software design patterns, where developers create reusable structures and group them into categories depending on their functionality.

### **3. Put on fuzzy slippers.**

As the saying goes, "It's easier to put on a pair of slippers than to carpet the world." I suppose that's a folksy version of Gandhi's "Be the change" quote. Something we all can do -- starting right now -- is set good examples. When someone's developing information for us, we can guide them in how to present it most effectively, emphasizing the key ideas. And when we are presenting information to someone else, we can assemble it so the audience gets its essence right away.

#### **About the author**

Tracy Allison Altman, PhD is with [Ugly Research](#), designing new ways for busy people to tell each other about innovative ideas. She also writes [Evidence Soup](#), a blog about practical ways to support evidence-based management.