What's 'on time'? It depends on who's asking

People don't organize their lives according to a single timeline. Messaging should reflect their needs at any particular moment.

Matthew Rothenberg

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The origin of the expression "hot take" is cloudy, but it seems to have arisen at about the same time as the web browser. (Merriam-Webster cites political operative James Carville as an early purveyor of hot takes back in 1993.)

That's appropriate, considering how much digital content comprises rapid-fire perspectives on fast-moving events.

The art of the hot take combines timeliness and originality to claim an outsize share of voice. That means you don't get points simply for being first, but for being very, very fast with something that makes you relevant to the conversation.

A brand that posted "RIP Charlie Watts" early on August 24, 2021, wouldn't accomplish much. (In fact, it could come across as pandering.) A brand that posted a picture of Charlie Watts playing its drums or wearing its clothes — that's effective, but not two weeks later. ("Effective" doesn't necessarily mean wise — proceed with extreme caution before risking the impression that you're using the passing of a cultural icon to promote your brand.)

Social media in particular rewards hot takes — instant punditry wins mindshare and traffic for channels that can frame fresh events in a memorable way. Whether the share of voice is controlled by a celebrity or a politician or a brand (or just an individual noted for the acuity of their hot takes), first place is a coveted position in the race for audience.

Enter the brand newsroom. Inspired by the impact of news channels' real-time coverage, brands flocked to organize their own variations on the theme in order to insert themselves, *Forrest Gump*-style, into the events of the day.

Plenty of brands scored share of voice at high-profile moments. (Remember when Oreo reminded Super Bowl fans in 2013 that they could still dunk in the dark during a blackout in the Superdome? Of course you do.)

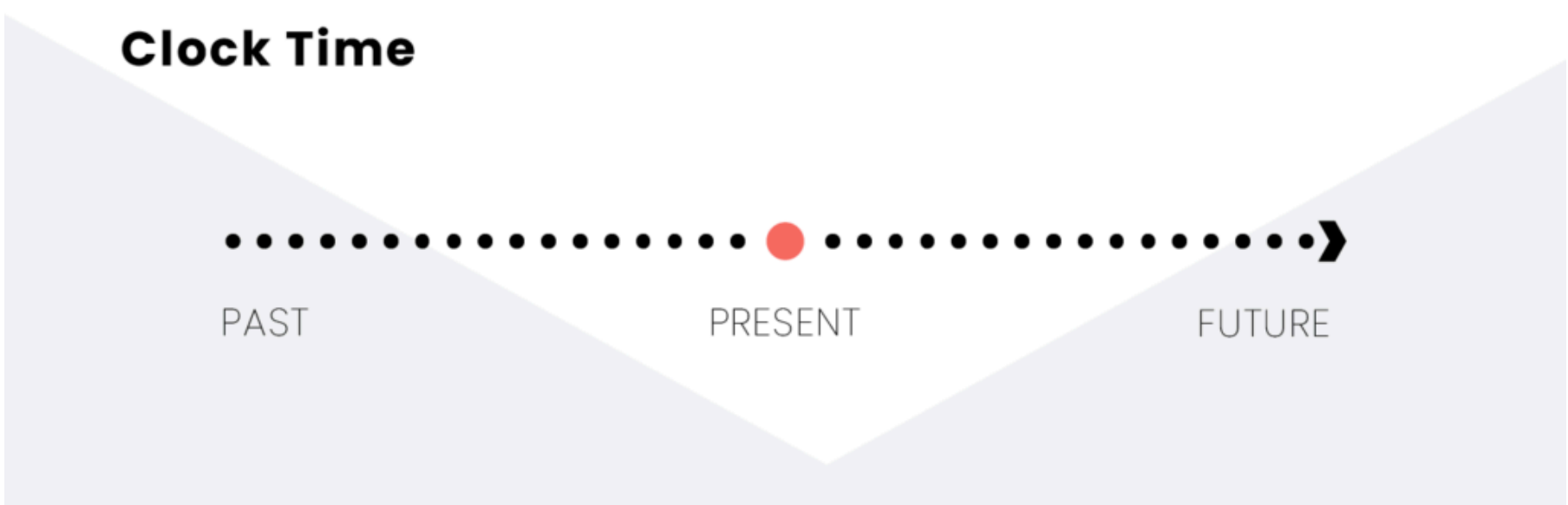
But for every "Dunk in the Dark," hundreds of thousands of signals went unremarked. Worse are numerous examples of hasty communications that went very wrong by striking the wrong note at a moment of public stress or tragedy.

Timing is key to effective communication, true. But the *right* timing depends on a social contract with your audience about what kind of time you're communicating in.

Got the time?

Social scientists have suggested two ways human beings perceive time and use it to arrange their lives.

Clock time (monochronic). As the name suggests, clock time is based on a linear, mechanical perception of time in which one event is scheduled after another. As a quantitative metric, clock time can be spent, saved, or wasted. It's the prevailing way Western societies conduct business; it places a premium on being "on time," and it exacts greater or lesser penalties for showing up late.



Think again about "Dunk in the Dark." Racing to deliver a message within a time window that's unexpectedly opened up in the course of a football game based on split-second clock management? Totally monochronic, dude.

Pursuing calendar time on a truly vast scale, consider brands' scramble to keep ahead of the news cycle in March 2020, when COVID-19 upended workplaces, social interactions, supply chains, and our own sense of body autonomy. This was a crucial cultural moment, and nobody wanted to be late to weigh in with their own proof of currency.

While plenty of companies had important things to say about how they were responding to pandemic conditions with changes to their goods and services, a lot of companies didn't have much to offer besides messages of sympathy. Messaging that started with "In these uncertain times … " soon became shorthand for a company clumsily trying to stay abreast of current events.

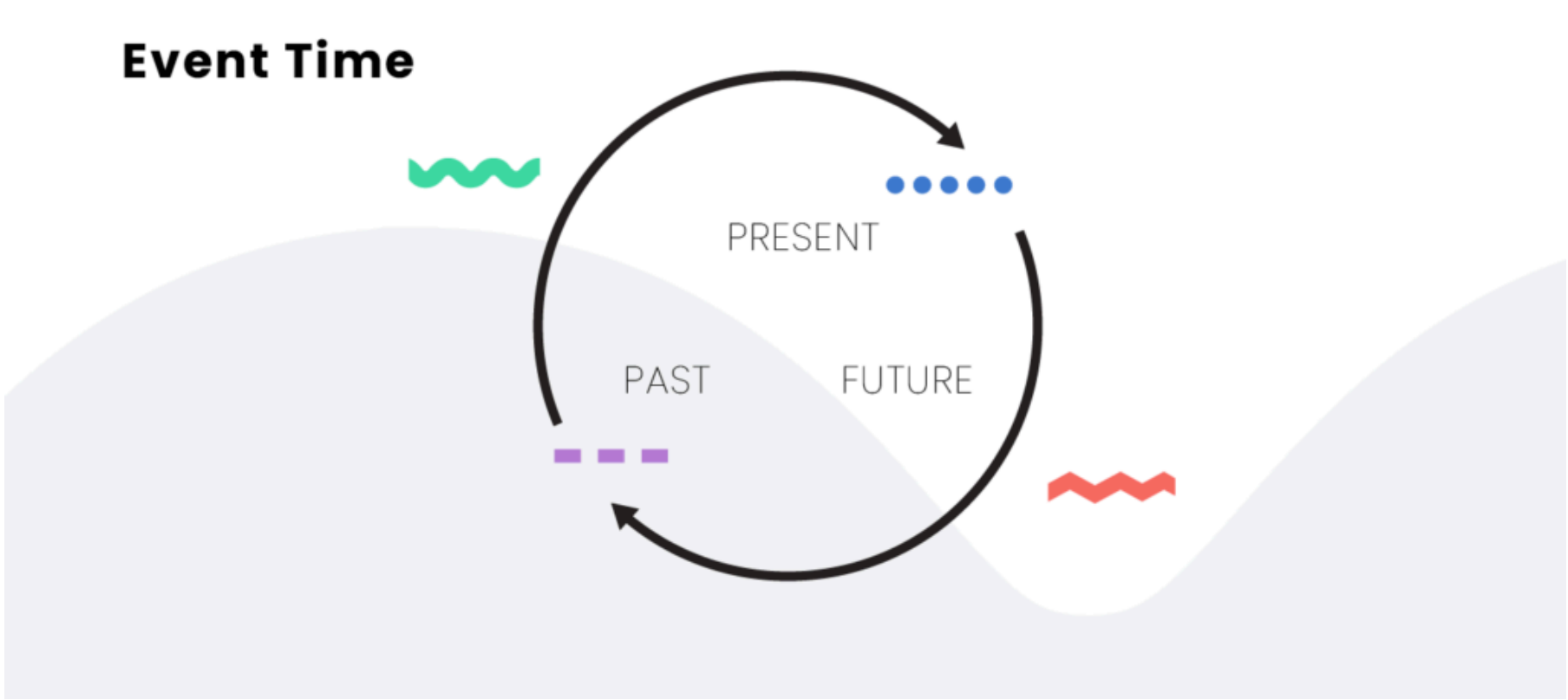
So are monochronic communications a bad idea? Not at all — it's still the defining paradigm for Western cultures, and your audience is going to expect you to deliver the right message at the right time.

But by the same token, your audience is going to penalize you for delivering the *wrong* message at the *wrong* moment. Don't let the clock compel you to say something you needn't or shouldn't.

Event time (polychronic). Here's another way to think about time, one that dominates many other cultures outside the West.

While monochronic time depends on linear measurement, polychronic time is defined by personal interactions — frequently several at once. Instead of judging the use of time in terms of quantity, polychronic cultures prioritize the quality of time engaged in — and defined by — social obligations.

Communicating in event time isn't a zero-sum game. It's a dance in an elastic space that can stretch to accommodate many partners. Some interactions will be fleeting, others will take a long time to develop. There's no particular rush as long as your audience gets what they want from the interaction.



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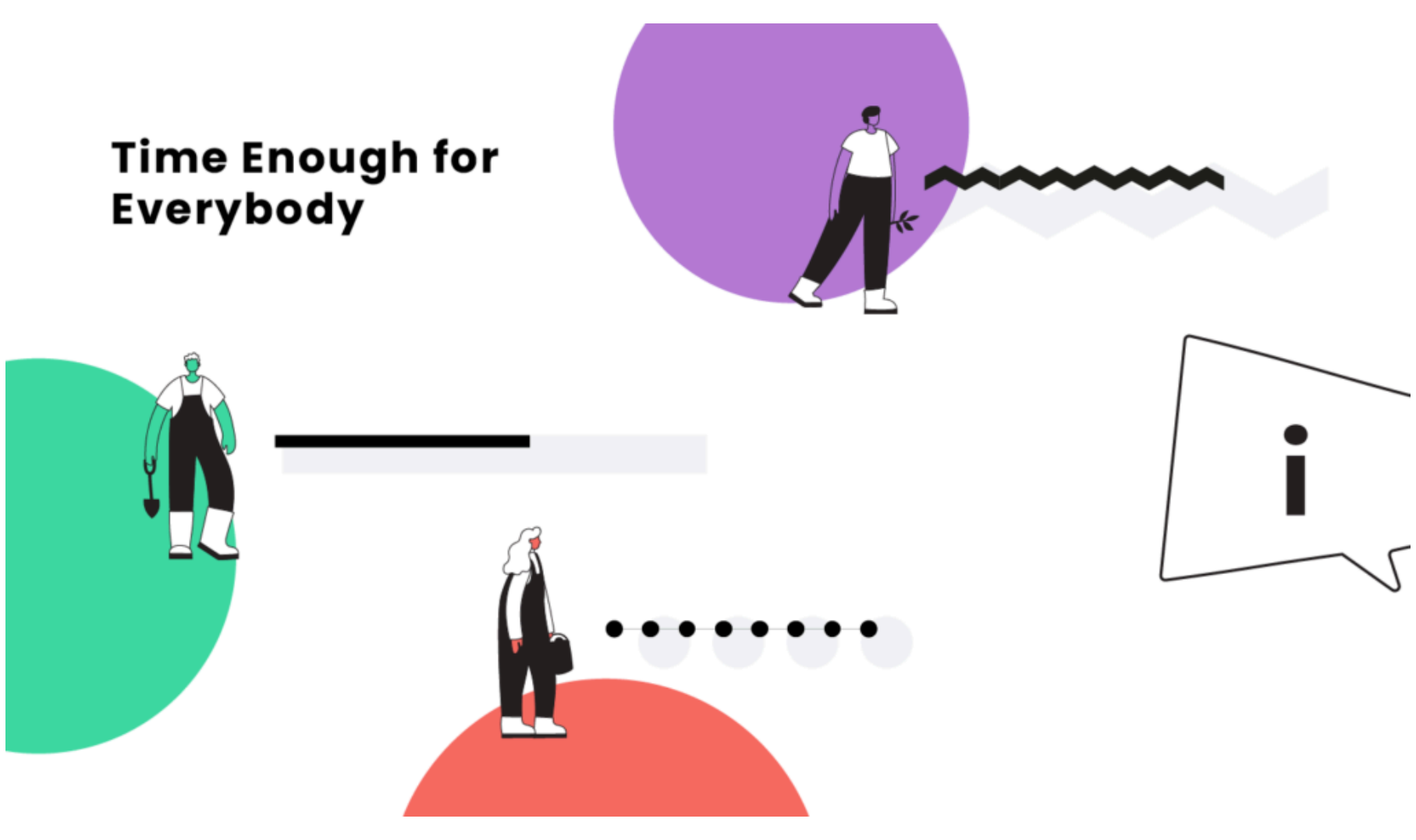
Think about three urban gardeners seeking information from the same home improvement brand.



Gardener #1 is looking for any information about innovations and events in window-box herb gardens as soon as it becomes available.

Gardener #2 just moved into a building with a backyard and could use a course of curated information about how to expand their gardening efforts beyond potted plants.

Gardener #3 wants periodic gardening tips throughout the year that correspond to growing cycles.

Some communications can be quick and direct, while others unfold much more slowly. But the point of the exercise is to be present at the time your audience needs you, regardless of the clock or the calendar.

That means less sprinting to be first, but more focus on the nuances of different, simultaneous conversations. Polychronic communication doesn't require you to manage the clock. Instead, it requires you to manage expectations about the quality of the communication.

Ultimately, that means a more complex social contract with an audience that's going to explore a topic — and your role in it — along branching paths. Take the time to understand the rhythm of those interactions and the social triggers that initiate them, and you can achieve a more strategic position in the marketplace of ideas.

Matthew Rothenberg

Matthew Rothenberg is a veteran tech journalist and strategist who's been slinging content since the dawn of the digital age.

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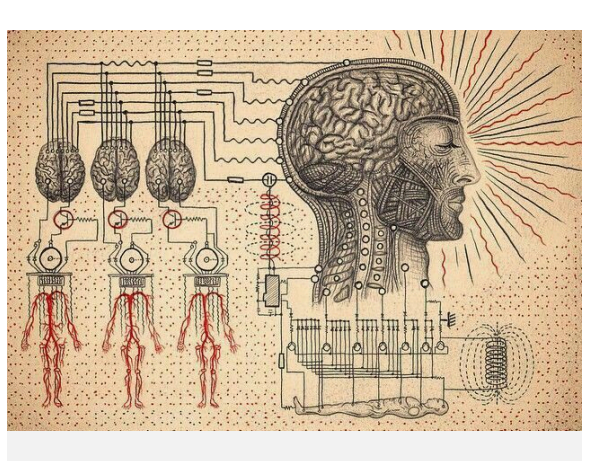

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