

1 MARKETING & THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

A GUIDE TO BETTER COMMUNICATION

COLEMAN
PARTNERS

1 MARKETING & THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every day, your customers are bombarded with pitches and pleas that are nearly indistinguishable from one another. It is little wonder, then, that they have sought protection beneath the formidable bomb-shelter of indifference. After all, how many “integrated solutions” does one person need? And if every company in every industry is “world-class” and every suite of products is “comprehensive” and every principle is a “core” principle, then what on Earth can those adjectives even mean anymore?

Effective marketing communication requires words and ideas that are unexpected. Readers remember writing that hijacks their imagination and flies it to foreign lands. Products look best when adorned with the sashes and bows of exotic phraseology.

Unfortunately, many companies are content to drape their wares in such careworn and colorless adornments as INNOVATIVE, VALUE-ADDED, COMPLETE, STRATEGIC and a wardrobe of other, equally unflattering terms. In the minds of customers, this type of undifferentiated communication results in undifferentiated companies. In other words, if companies sound the same, they are the same.

If we accept the fact that marketing communication is a product of marketing departments, and marketing departments are products of the corporations in which they exist, then we must accept the conclusion that internal corporate lexicons have great bearing on external marketing communication. To put it more bluntly: you can't talk one way at home and another way in public.

This paper examines the existence of jargon, cliché and other poor communication habits in the marketing industry, illustrates how these habits have a deleterious effect on external marketing efforts, and explores ways in which marketers can communicate more effectively, with customers and with themselves.

|| A WORLD IN WHICH NO ONE DIES, AND NOTHING IS REMEMBERED

Recently, a spokesperson for Pope John Paul II was quoted as saying, when asked about the Pope's failing health, that "the (Pope's) biological parameters are notably compromised." What an interesting revelation! All this time, we thought we were alive. But in truth, we were merely enjoying an uncompromised set of biological parameters.

Clearly, the spokesperson was trying to avoid using the word *dying*, because that is an extremely emotional word that provokes very specific reactions. It is also an extremely memorable word, and it fits nicely into headlines. If the spokesperson had simply said: "The Pope is dying," the morning newspapers would have read: "Pope dying." As it happened, the papers didn't quite know how to report it. They knew the gist of things, but they couldn't agree on specific terminology. The spokesperson's words are an example of *purposeful* obfuscation: he didn't *want* to be clear.

Inexplicably, modern corporations often sound a lot like the Pope's spokesperson. When Company X wants us to know they've got great computers, great software and great people, it won't just come out and say so. Instead, it brags of its ability to "integrate hardware, software, business consulting and IT services into complete solutions to meet your goals."

This is an example of *accidental* obfuscation: the writer wants to be clear, but he can't quite do it. Instead of describing his subjects in an evocative way, he simply "integrates" them and hopes we won't notice the difference. He then proceeds to create "solutions" to problems we never had and "meet goals" we've never introduced him to. What we are left with is a cluster of words that is extremely unemotional and provokes no specific reactions whatsoever. We get the basic gist of things, but to the extent that we understand it, the sales pitch gets filed away with dozens of other sales pitches that sound more or less the same. There is nothing to remember.

And whether it knows it or not, Company X's biological parameters have been incrementally compromised.

||| JARGON: WHY BAD WORDS HAPPEN TO GOOD COMPANIES

No one sets out to create jargon. When we coin new words or phrases, most of us are trying to fill a perceived void in the language. For example, the first person to utter the word *OPERATIONALIZE* was no doubt struggling to describe a truly unique and specific way of doing something. *OPERATIONALIZE* was not a very elegant choice, but he was in a jam—the lexicon did not provide him with the correct word, so he had to invent it.

Fair enough. But now there is this shiny new toy to be reckoned with. *OPERATIONALIZE* sits there on the shelf, begging to be taken down and played with, even by those who have not yet read the owner’s manual.

Before long, *OPERATIONALIZE* is being used to describe a whole array of activities, such as instituting policy, distributing brand guidelines, determining the effectiveness of research and numerous other things. Each time this happens, the word becomes more general, eventually persisting as little more than a bloated synonym for “do” or “use.” This is dangerous on a couple of levels. First, if a word can mean almost anything, how can a writer be sure he or she is using it correctly? Second, how can a reader know if the writer understands *OPERATIONALIZE*, or if he is merely trying to make the writing sound more complicated and impressive?

a THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TECHNICAL TERMS AND JARGON

People who work in specialized trades tend to talk in specialized ways. To an extent, the resulting argot is necessary and excusable. For example, no one faults a doctor for referring to a heart attack as an “M.I.” Those initials significantly shorten the time it would otherwise take to say “myocardial infarction,” which is the full and precise medical term for a heart attack. All doctors know what M.I. means, and the abbreviation makes their communication easier. This is a technical term, and it makes perfect sense in the context of the medical profession.

Now let us consider a phrase that shows up in nearly every marketing presentation: RETURN ON INVESTMENT or ROI. Think about it for a moment. What is conveyed by the phrase “RETURN ON INVESTMENT” that is not conveyed by the word “return”? Or, for that matter, the word “money”? If I want to know the ROI of something, I merely want to know how much money I stand to make. But, of course, money is a term and a concept that is perfectly accessible to everyone; it conveys no specialized knowledge. ROI is a purposefully complicated way of describing something simple, and is therefore jargon. The formulation has spawned a motley crew of corollary acronyms, such as ROA (return on attention), ROE (return on expectation) and ROO (return on opportunity). These may have their place within the context of a financial presentation, but each yields a lower ROJ (return on jargon) than the last.

b THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BAD WORDS AND BAD USAGE

The English language—and any language, for that matter—is an amorphous entity. It grows and shrinks as new words are created and old words fall out of use. It also changes when words that have been contained inside very specific definitions suddenly jump the fence and dart off in new directions.

Consider the example of INITIATIVE. For hundreds of years, it described the ability to begin or complete a project, task or assignment. When we accused someone of lacking initiative, we meant they were lazy.

These days, the word is used as a synonym for PROJECT, PLAN, PROPOSAL and IDEA, as in “it has become necessary to re-evaluate our international marketing initiatives.” If we accuse a company of lacking initiatives, we mean it has no plans, which is probably a symptom of laziness, come to think of it.

But is INITIATIVE jargon? No. It is a good word that has fallen in with a bad crowd. To assist in its rehabilitation, writers should strive for more appropriate words to describe their projects and plans and let INITIATIVE rejoin its old friends AMBITION, ENERGY and GUMPTION.

C WHY JARGON SPREADS

Inside each of us is a tiny voice that whispers: “Maybe I’m not as smart as I think I am. Maybe everyone else at this conference table knows more than I do. I don’t have the slightest clue what we’re all talking about—I don’t know, for example, how to ‘muscle-build’ the organization—but I’ll be damned if I’m going to raise my hand and ask for an explanation.”

Most of us, at some time or another, have felt attracted to words we do not understand. We imagine that inside their glossy shell is a treasure of knowledge. So we pick them up and carry them around, searching for a way to unlock their meaning.

As we will see, these words, despite their promise of intellectual riches, often open to reveal nothing but small, plain ideas that are undeserving of so much effort and expectation.

IV THREE REASONS MARKETERS BOTCH COMMUNICATION AND LOSE THEIR AUDIENCE

Whether our audience is consumers, other businesses or our own colleagues, our writing works best when it is clearest. And yet, in every form, today's marketing prose errs on the side of convolution and bluster.

a THE IZE HAVE IT (AND THEY WON'T LET GO)

Contemporary writers have acquired the unfortunate habit of attaching Latinate ornamentations such as "ate" "ism" and "ize" onto perfectly serviceable nouns, presumably in an effort to overcome some inherent shortcomings in the English language. Writers who want to say: "We will use the brand at all levels of the organization" instead begin with a cumbersome, pre-constructed phrase such as "brand implementation" and proceed to write: "brand implementation will be...(uh oh, now I'm stuck...how am I going to get out of this one...wait...I got it!) operationalized."

In other words, the problem is often grammatical imprecision. But the result of that imprecision has a consequence that is worse than grammatical. Words like *STRATEGIZE*, *OPERATIONALIZE* and *INCENTIVIZE* create a slippery barrier of vagueness between you and your audience. There's nothing for readers to take hold of. For example, if you write that your company is "providing incentives to its sales associates," readers can picture what you're talking about. You've given them a noun. In their mind, they are seeing a watch, a vacation or a big pile of money, some type of incentive and they can begin the climb toward comprehension.

If, however, you write: "our world-class team of sales representatives is *INCENTIVIZED* to provide top-notch service," a reader will have a vague appreciation for the idea being expressed, but the sentence will waft past like the scent of some exotic, unseen food: "Ooh, that smells good, I wonder if it's—oh, it's gone."

From a management perspective, suffixes such as “ize” have another, equally irritating consequence. If *ANALYZE* can pass as a synonym for “thinking”, then any thinking can pass as analysis. Clearly, as a business owner, you will want to know when people are working hard to understand something and when they are just sitting around, shooting the breeze. But that distinction is lost in the morass of *ANALYZE*.

b THE ADJECTIVE IS DEAD; LONG LIVE THE ADJECTIVE

Adjectives are the starburst violators of language: they point at subjects and shout “look at this! This isn’t your ordinary noun: this is special!” The best adjectives strike like bolts of lightning, momentarily illuminating portions of an otherwise dark and inscrutable landscape.

The problem with some adjectives—particularly as they apply to marketing—is that, no matter how elucidative or jazzy they may once have been, their effectiveness has been mitigated by overuse. Consider this short list of words, pulled at random from the web site of a Fortune 500 Company: *ADVANCED, COMPREHENSIVE, IN-DEPTH, USER-FRIENDLY, WORLD-CLASS, STRATEGIC, LEADING, AWARD-WINNING, INNOVATIVE.*

It would be hard to assemble a weaker, drowsier, more inattentive crew of adjectives than this. Even if these words retained the potency of their original definitions, they would qualify as little more than perfunctory additives, bloating sentences into something resembling (but not actually achieving) thoughtful prose. Of course, the words retain only faint wisps of their original potency. But that is not their fatal flaw.

What that kills these adjectives is dishonesty. The public has become skeptical of products that don’t seem to deserve the glowing adjectives marketers use to describe them. A “user-friendly” toaster? Were toasters ever *unfriendly*? A “world-class” customer service department? How do you know? Did your customer service department participate in some kind of customer-service Olympics?

Readers can see right through this type of gauzy obfuscation. In their minds, a kind of automatic transliteration takes place, turning the marketing hoo-haa into its plain English equivalent. For instance:

Advanced = Not hopelessly outdated

Comprehensive = More than one

In-depth = Pretty deep

User-friendly = Will not kill users

World-class = Currently exists in the world

Strategic = Not just totally made up at the last possible moment while drunk

Leading = Not dead last

Innovative = About average

What is the antidote to these inert and ineffective adjectives? First, make sure your subject even needs a modifier (is it really a “cutting-edge” sponge, or is it just a sponge?). If the answer is yes, then give the reader an adjective or adverb he or she was not expecting, and make it believable.

A great example of this technique is the tagline for Altoids: “The curiously strong mint.” Notice it’s not the “extra strong mint,” or the “mega-strength mint” or even the “innovative breath mint system.” The tagline works because it contains a word most companies deem insufficiently laudatory: *CURIOSLY*. “Curiously strong” sounds, well, curiously quaint in an increasingly “world-class” world.

The dictionary is bursting with perfectly good words like “*CURIOSLY*” that, having been mothballed by previous generations of copywriters, are well rested and ready to do the curious task of communication.

C NOUN-JACKING, NOUN JAMS AND OTHER NOUN-SENSE

Poor nouns. For centuries, they have been hijacked by speakers of the English language and forced to do the backbreaking labor of verbs. Just when a noun begins to relax, confident in its ability to define a person, place or thing, along comes some enterprising writer demanding that it get off its duff and work.

Speaking of work, let’s consider one of its synonyms: *EFFORT*. Until very recently, *EFFORT* had only one form; it was a noun, and it meant the use of physical or mental energy to do something. If a writer wanted to express his desire that fellow employees keep track of their billable hours, for example, he would have to write: “Please make an effort to keep track of your billable hours.” What a lot of words that is! Through the brutal but effective act of noun-jacking, he can turn the sentence’s subject into a verb and eliminate three whole words. The sentence then becomes: “*EFFORT* to keep track of your billable hours.” Voila!

The irony, of course, is that noun-jacking is caused by grammatical confusion, not a preference for brevity, and rarely results in shorter sentences. The writer in this case would likely turn the sentence into something like this: “Moving forward, management requires employees to facilitate the efficient capture of ongoing revenue by *EFFORTING* to track billable hours.”

Noun-jacking has traumatized a host of respectable subjects. *CONCEPT*, *WORKSHOP*, *CONFERENCE*, *TASK*, *PARTNER*, *IMPLEMENT* and *LEVERAGE* are all once-proud nouns that have been forced, at pen-point, to strip naked and don the garish foppery of a fake verb. Other verbs such as *INCENTIVIZE*, *MAXIMIZE*, *OPERATIONALIZE* and (this is not a joke) *CONCRETIZE*, are nothing more than quiet little nouns, working the levers inside mechanized, verb-like contraptions.

Nouns also figure exclusively in another stultifying aspect of bad writing: noun jams. When a writer is unsure of the precise relationships between subjects, he or she allows nouns to stack up, bumper to bumper, like cars stuck in traffic. The reader, in turn, gets stalled, not knowing which noun is the real subject. Consider the following sentence: “Our drink smart program

speaks to legal purchase age adults about enjoying our products responsibly." The phrase "legal purchase age adults" is composed entirely of nouns. How do they fit together? Which is the true subject?

The problem could be corrected by adding hyphens between the nouns that are intended to modify the true subject, which is "adults." Therefore, the phrase would become "legal-purchase-age adults." Most would agree this is a clumsy construction. A better solution would be to unclog the nouns and distribute them more evenly throughout the sentence: "Our drink smart program advises adults who are old enough to purchase alcohol to enjoy our products responsibly."

V CASE STUDIES

a THE EMPEROR HAS NO POINT

Scott Davis is a branding guru. He is an adjunct professor at Northwestern's Kellogg Graduate School of Management and a contributing editor of Brandweek. His books on brand management are widely read and help constitute the syllabus for any serious marketing professional.

Clearly, Scott Davis knows a thing or two about branding. Unfortunately, his writing does not do justice to the knowledge he possesses. As the following case study will demonstrate, those not already familiar with the tenets of Davis' philosophy will find little cognitive satisfaction in his prose, and will likely be overwhelmed by jargon that they, in turn, will pass along to colleagues and clients.

"EXTENDING YOUR POINT OF DIFFERENCE"

(Excerpted from *Brand Asset Management: Driving Profitable Growth Through Your Brands*, by Scott Davis. The italics are ours.)

With Go-Gurt Yogurt (basically yogurt in a tube), *one of the top* new products of 1998, General Mills' Yoplait leveraged its target market and definition of its business. The new product helped extend Yoplait's benefit within its positioning: the same great product in a more convenient package.

Each time Intel comes out with a faster chip or Microsoft introduces a new version of Windows, they extend the benefits of their brands. Similarly, Blockbuster's new benefit of "guaranteed videos in stock" and FedEx's new drop-off time for *packages of midnight* in some locations are examples of building and extending on the defined point of difference.

EXTENDING THE UN-EXTENDABLE

In mathematical terms, a point is a dimensionless object having no properties whatsoever except location. Therefore, you cannot “extend” it, any more than you can “broaden a focus” or “flatten a needle.” To extend a point is to destroy the value of a point. Even in conversational terms, the value of a point is in its specificity; the more you extend it, the less persuasive it becomes. What Davis probably means is that companies should create additional points of difference, although that is still too grand a headline for the advice he gives, as we will see in a moment.

“ONE OF THE TOP”

The word top means “the uppermost part” or “the zenith.” Strictly speaking, there can only be one top; it is a singular noun, after all. You shouldn’t say “one of the top” any more than you should say “one of the champion.” But even allowing for some colloquial leeway, the phrase reeks of obfuscation. Is Go-Gurt one of the top *selling* products? One of the top *rated*? Was it stored on the top *shelf*? If Davis wants us to accept his assertion that Go-Gurt is a product worthy of emulation, he should take pains to define its success.

“PACKAGES OF MIDNIGHT”

No wonder FedEx has extended their point of difference! Imagine what kind of success it will enjoy when it can drop off “packages of noon” or “boxes of six a.m.” Obviously, this is a problem of sentence construction; Davis meant to say that FedEx now allows senders to drop off their packages as late as midnight, in some locations. Most readers will probably figure that out, but why should they have to work so hard? Careful writing would make his meaning clear and his argument more persuasive. Which brings us to the next point...

AND YOUR “POINT” IS....

The headline “Extending Your Point of Difference,” despite its problems, at least purports to explain something important: how to make your company even more different from the competition. But instead of clear instructions, such as when and how to launch new products or services, he is content to offer anecdotes, and spurious anecdotes, at that. Is there proof that the Yoplait brand benefited from Go-Gurt? Is it really true that Microsoft’s brand is burnished by every Windows launch? One would like to believe Davis, but he’s making it very hard to do.

The worst that can be said of this type of writing is that it masks its own irrelevance. Phrases such as “extending on the defined point of difference” are like Trojan horses of meaning: they’re big, wooden and strangely alluring in their complexity. But once you bring them inside and open them up, surprise! They’re not about branding at all; they’re about product development. And that’s not the book we intended to buy.

b “DRIVING” UNDER THE INFLUENCE

How much jargon does it take to push a piece of prose past the legal limit? There are no hard and fast rules, but as the following sample demonstrates, even moderate amounts of unclear writing can make communication unsteady.

“ABOUT US > STRATEGY”

(From a letter written by Jim Beam Brands Worldwide President & CEO Thomas J. Flocco, as posted on jimbeambrands.com. The italics are ours.)

Our goal at Jim Beam Brands Worldwide is to *grow* our premium and super-premium portfolio by investing in our brands, our people and our processes. In doing so, we will grow our revenue and profits, thereby enhancing the value of Jim Beam Brands Worldwide to our shareholders.

Looking ahead, our future success rests on our ability to deliver against the following priorities:

- Drive underlying volume growth of the Jim Beam brand
- Continue momentum on DeKuyper and Super Premium brands
- Deliver Starbucks liqueur on time and on budget
- Drive growth in International markets
- Continue to refine Sales/Marketing execution
- Put in place and *systematize measurements* for key functions
- Muscle build the organization

UNSIGHTLY “GROWTHS”

Have you ever grown a tree? What a lot of work that is! First, you have to plant a seed, then you have to sit there, doing absolutely nothing, for ten or twenty years. Whew! It wears a person out just thinking about it.

You get the point. Growth is, by definition, a relatively slow and organic process—not exactly the most apt metaphor for executive management strategy. Certainly Mr. Flocco does not plan to just sit around, watching his “premium and super-premium portfolio” get bigger of its own accord. And yet he chooses the word “grow” as the main verb for each of his first two sentences.

Probably, Mr. Flocco means that he will *build* his business, by painstakingly making the correct decisions about who to hire, where to make investments, what new products to develop and launch and hundreds of other specific actions. In this context, the word *build*, which is a fairly listless verb in its own right, is far superior to *grow* in terms of its ability to communicate deliberate action. Building is something that’s *done*, growing is something that *happens*.

Even better, Mr. Flocco should choose verbs and phrases that convey specific actions. In the first sentence, he might write: “Our goal at Jim Beam Worldwide Brands is to *acquire* new products to add to our premium and super-premium portfolios,” if that is, in fact, what he intends to do. If, instead, he simply wants to sell more of the products *already* in the portfolio, he should write: “Our goal at Jim Beam Worldwide Brands is to generate more revenue from our portfolio of premium and super-premium brands.”

The fact that those two alternative sentences are so different in terms of meaning should serve as another reason why “grow” is such an ineffective verb: it is far too general. When a writer chooses it, we have to wonder if he actually has a plan, or if he is just the business world’s version of Johnny Appleseed: throwing out ideas in the hope that a few of them might take root and “grow.”

SYSTEMATIZING MEASUREMENTS

Even in corporate communication, where obfuscation is not only tolerated but rewarded, it is rare for a sentence to actually mean nothing. The writer can buffet the reader with squalls of nonsense, but inevitably a clear image pops through—a noun perhaps—to which the reader can cling, like a shipwreck survivor clinging to a steamer trunk. But Mr. Flocco manages to drown every last splinter of meaning when he writes of his intention to “put in place and systematize measurements for key functions.”

At best, the sentence is merely saying is that Jim Beam Brands Worldwide plans to measure the things it does. If that’s the case, I understand why Mr. Flocco felt the need to cloak his intentions in doublespeak. After all, shareholders would be pretty upset to know that, until now, the company has not been measuring what it does.

And by the way, if one were to systematize measurements, wouldn’t one end up with a measurement system? And don’t we already have several of those? For example, the Metric system?

V | THE TRUE COST OF BAD WORDS

Attracting and holding the attention of our audiences is an extremely difficult task. The exponential increase in advertising media has resulted in consumers who are impervious to marketing messages. They lie in wait, cynical and battle-hardened, searching our messages for the slightest misstep, the word or phrase that signals we are too full of ourselves, too contemptuous of their intelligence, too out of touch.

Companies willingly spend millions of dollars developing better, faster, bigger, more exciting products and services. They will subsequently and without hesitation invest heaps of cash and man-hours into market research. They will meticulously choose color schemes and logos designed to hollow out an expanse of recognition in the minds of consumers. And then, when all that work has been done, when all the money has been spent on being, looking and feeling different, they will spend almost no effort in *sounding* different.

Unless you work to remove the narcotizing effects of jargon from your business conversations, employee's ideas will consist of pre-cut phrases, tacked together like pieces of plywood. When this happens, it becomes increasingly unlikely that your employees will come up with ideas that are significantly different than the ideas of your competitors. After all, they're shopping at the same jargon store.

THE INSIDIOUS POWER OF LANGUAGE CONVENTION

Imagine the following scenario: the CEO of a candy company is in a conference room with nine marketing directors. He tells them he wants to unfold a "brand umbrella" to live above the company's "vertical value propositions," which will "grow their business" and "provide value-add" for their customers.

In that meeting, the CEO's jargon-rich directive is perfectly fine, because the individual pieces of jargon represent code words for larger concepts that each of the participants is paid to understand. The jargon provides convenient bridges over vast rivers of information with which the participants are already familiar.

However, imagine the series of subsequent meetings that must take place in any large corporation: the marketing directors meet with the marketing managers, the marketing managers meet with their support staff of project managers, the project management team meets with the advertising or design agency, and so on.

By the time the CEO's directive reaches the people on the tactical level, the pieces of jargon that were so handy to high-level management are no longer bridges over common understanding, but bridges over incomprehension. Employees don't know what needs to be done, they just know what it needs to be called.

It is at this point that the possibility of good marketing communication begins to deteriorate. Marketing professionals who do not possess a plain-English understanding of the company's goals and strategies will be ill-equipped to explain those goals and strategies to the marketplace. They will inevitably reach for the pre-approved, pre-constructed phrases that have been set before them. And customers will be forced to contend with vertical value propositions, when all they are interested in is candy.

Which brings up another incontrovertible fact: when it comes to marketing communication, customers will not contend with very much. They will not study your ad or brochure, trying to figure out what you are really trying to say. If your message is not carefully prepared in language they understand, your customers will ignore it. When that happens, your strategy will be like a tree falling in an abandoned forest: its wisdom is a moot point, because there's no one around to hear it.

VII HOW TO REDUCE JARGON, INCREASE MEANING AND BE A BETTER MARKETER

The first step in reducing jargon is learning how to spot it, in yourself and others. When formulating written communication, be rigorous in your dedication to meaning. Use the simplest words you can find. Construct pictures in your mind and then describe those things. Before you use the word “OPERATIONALIZE,” for example, think about the steps involved in doing what you believe you are talking about, then take the time to describe the steps. If, once you’ve reduced the concept to its simplest state, you no longer find it profound or interesting, then it was *never* profound or interesting—its banality was merely disguised behind a mask of jargon.

Though there are no hard and fast rules for writing well, here are a few guidelines for constructing clearer prose:

1. VISUALIZE YOUR READER.

Instead of writing for a general audience, try to imagine you are crafting a letter for a specific person. It might help to make that person someone other than your boss or colleague. For example, visualize your spouse reading your words: what would he or she understand? What words or phrases would need additional explanation?

2. FIND THE SIMPLEST WORDS FIRST.

Sometimes your writing will have to include jargon in order to pass muster with colleagues. However, the clarity of your meaning can be safeguarded by choosing simple words first. If necessary, you can add your *bona fides* later.

3. COUNT SYLLABLES.

This may seem ridiculous at first, but it helps. It is the nature of jargon to artificially complicate and expand sentences. If you find the average length of your words exceeding a couple of syllables, you have likely strayed into unnecessarily ornate writing.

4. READ YOUR WRITING OUT LOUD.

Our eyes can play tricks on us, especially when it comes to our own writing. Sentences that are clumsy on the page can be smoothed out in our minds—we know what we meant to say. By reading your writing out loud, you can more easily recognize sentences that are too long or rhythm that is broken by thuds of acronyms, technical language or jargon.

When you do this—when you take conscious steps to mean what you write and say—you will feel weird and alone, especially in conference rooms awash in jargon. It will be difficult not to participate in discussions of DEEP DIVES, TIPPING POINTS, BUCKETIZING, VERTICAL and HORIZONTAL MARKETS, INCENTIVIZATION, STRATEGIC INITIATIVES, CUSTOMER-CENTRIC INTERFACES, MISSION-CRITICAL FUNCTIONALITIES and LEVERAGED POINTS OF DIFFERENTIATION. But whenever possible, resist. Moreover, demand plain English translations. You will be amazed at how often the simple act of explanation sheds light on the insufficiency of jargon and, subsequently, helps clear up misunderstandings.

By simplifying our writing, and by training ourselves to demand clarity from ourselves and others, we can create an environment rich with meaning. From that fertile soil evocative, memorable and effective marketing communication will sprout in abundance.

VII GLOSSARY OF TERMS (TO AVOID)

BASED: It seems more and more companies are strategy-based, ethics-based and knowledge-based. This raises interesting questions. If a particular business is, say, knowledge-based, why isn't it knowledgeable? Why is it only based in knowledge? Why isn't it knowledge-steeped or knowledge-infused? Why did knowledge show up at the beginning and then skip out when things got tough? Likewise, if something is strategy-based, why isn't it strategic? If it's ethics-based, why isn't it ethical? Before adding hyphenates such as -based to your nouns, make sure you really want to call attention to their shortcomings.

INNOVATIVE: Nothing signals to the marketplace that you are peddling yesterday's widgets quite like the word innovative. Overuse has not only stripped innovative of its original meaning (which is: "new or happening for the first time"), it has turned it into its own antonym. By now, everyone knows innovative is just corporate code for "the same thing everyone else is doing."

INTEGRATED: Integrated does not mean "casually lumped together" or "connected by association." It means deliberately unified for the sake of creating a whole. Therefore, an "integrated suite" is a redundancy; a suite is, by its nature, a unified entity. You don't need to further unify it.

REVOLUTION/REVOLUTIONARY/REVOLUTIONIZE: Your software may, in fact, be very cool. It may have technology geeks atwitter with glee. But, unless heads of state are being deposed, mobs are rioting in the street and blood is being spilled, your software did not start a revolution. It is therefore not revolutionary, nor did it "revolutionize the way people think about software." People think software is a complicated arrangement of ones and zeros, which is exactly what they thought before you introduced your version. Revolution is a powerful word; let's save it for situations that merit its use.

SIGNAGE: Except pretension, there is nothing communicated by the word signage that is not communicated by the word signs.

