

Jargon busting

By Linda Julian

Don't pollute your communication with clients and prospective clients with unnecessary or unhelpful jargon.

Straightforward, clear language will take you much further than jargon and corporate-speak.

Some studies have shown that using jargon is likely to earn you the labels of "rude, obnoxious, arrogant, and out-of-touch". Clear communication is far more likely to identify you as "energetic, friendly, and one of us - in touch".

Straight-talkers (on all levels) are more likeable, overall. And being persuasive is substantially a function of being likeable and resonating with your audience.

More dangers attach to jargon than mere alienation - it's so easy to get jargon wrong.

Jargon hazards

Many words are indigenous to a particular industry. Be certain you know your audience before you toss them into the language you choose for a meeting or presentation.

Take, for example, "redundancy". It has a particular meaning - and positive connotations - in technology. Not so in scores of others. Outside their element, some words take on entirely different meanings.

Rather than impressing your audience with jargon, focus on informing them and avoid the risk of getting jargon not quite right or "off-key".

Jargon dates, and may date you.

Once, a quick, unscientific test of potential success of an idea or product was "to run it up the flag pole". Now, it's the "smell test". Plain old "follow-up" or "getting back to me" is rapidly morphing into "circling back". "Prohibited" or "not allowed" is now jargonised as "circle slash" (the oral equivalent of a circle with an oblique line through it - like road sign). Suddenly, it's fashionable to "empower" your offside rather than to just plain "delegate". You can be certain many of these will date quickly.

Savvy, passionate professionals don't need obscure language and "clever" jargon to communicate. Rather than conforming to transitory fashions in jargon, which can usher you into obscurity, clear communication is plain to all.

Overcome the jargon epidemic and speak with candour and clarity.

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Buzzword backlash

Many people are tired of the disingenuous management-speak which flows freely in business. Ensure your next meeting or promotion isn't hung-over with jargon.

Clients and prospective clients often switch off when they hear mere catchphrases like "solution", "results driven", "win-win", "go off-line", "get on the same page", "value proposition", and "value added".

There's even a chance that you became successful with adept use of the same vocabulary which represents this mindset and is now becoming a negative.

Today, simpler language and clearer communication - words and expressions which don't require that you're "in the know" to use and understand - should be the stuff of your everyday conversations with clients and prospective clients.

Reasons to avoid management-speak and buzzwords, include:

- it's boring, generic and insufficiently specific
- often it doesn't sound sincere or real
- it may make some clients feel distanced or inferior
- it does little to differentiate or distinguish you from many of your unimpressive competitors
- it can make you look as though you're obfuscating.

Clear communication

Every profession creates its own jargon. Besides allowing insiders to communicate in shorthand, it produces a great barrier to others. Many legal professionals have invested considerable energy in breaking down these shibboleths, and converting legalese to technical terms to plain English documents.

Too often, though, in the quest to look knowledgeable, these same professionals have been overly eager to adopt the mantra of modern management and corporate culture, only to create a whole new set of problems for themselves, and their clients.

Rather than merely mentioning that you have a "value proposition", state what is !

Don't turn your clients off with near meaningless buzzwords.

Watch it: as the CEO of one of Australia's top companies recently said to me "when our people use management buzzwords, I'm irritated - when our external lawyers get into corporate-speak, I want to tell them to take their jargon and stick it in their core competency !"

There are exceptions: a few clients are completely wedded to management-speak, and worship at the shrine of buzzwords. When with them, follow their lead: ape their jargon. It will change with time - keep up with their fashions.

Never be caught out using yesterday's buzzword !

About the author: *Linda M. Julian is a director of Julian Midwinter & Associates, strategic practice development consultants to the legal profession. Nearly three decades experience working with legal practices throughout Australia, Asia, and the Pacific, place her in a unique position to advise on strategic management and practical business development issues. Her down-to-earth, pragmatic approach to the critical business issues facing the profession, combined with creative ideas and pragmatic advice, make her a popular conference speaker, regular contributor to professional journals, and an in-demand consultant and advisor.*