

ASK THE EXPERTS

Communication is not just about words

QUESTION | How do I cut down on industry jargon and communicate clearly?



JOHN NIEUWENBURG | Business coach, W5 Coaching

Thomas Levitt, a professor at Harvard Business School, had this insight: "People don't want to buy a quarter-inch drill. They want a quarter-inch hole!"

Often entrepreneurs who are hoping to sell their product or service focus on what they do instead of how they help. Your clients, investors and potential business partners are only interested in having their needs met. Your audience has needs in the form of problems, fears or frustrations that they want solved. No one wants a drill for its own sake. They want a drill so that they can make a hole and then they can put up a shelf. Your product or service (and the associated industry jargon) is not relevant to your client, investors and potential business partners unless it meets and satisfies their needs.

Secondly, you can't solve a need if you don't know what it is.

So stop talking about what you do and start asking your clients, investors and potential business partners questions. Use these questions to help uncover, define and articulate their needs. When you have discovered their needs you can then match your features with those needs so your clients derive a benefit. Now you are speaking the language of your clients instead of your own. That's when the jargon becomes relevant. Stop trying to communicate or sell by making it all about you. Instead, make it all about them.

Or as Dale Carnegie put it: You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you.



KEVIN STEWART | Senior lecturer, Beedie School of Business, Simon Fraser University

Technical terms and acronyms can act as types of shorthand between those "in the know."

Such specialized language improves efficiency and builds respectful, productive relationships when both the writer and the reader understand it.

However, when you use technical language that is unfamiliar to a reader, it becomes jargon. Jargon can cause feelings of frustration, alienation and distrust, undermining efficiency and creating a barrier between you and your audience.

Instead of using jargon, choose plain English: familiar, concrete words that are accessible.

Tips for cutting down on jargon:

Plan ahead. Think about your overall purpose, and consider how well your audience knows the subject matter and any related technical language. Don't start writing until you have a clear focus on why you are writing and who you are writing for.

Say what you mean. Replace specialized words with ones that are more familiar and concrete, or, even better, eliminate them if they don't add any meaning. Explain technical terms that cannot be replaced or eliminated.

See through the reader's eyes. Review your writing and imagine that you are the reader. Or have a colleague give you feedback. Does the language improve understanding, or does it get in the way?

Transparency is crucial to communicating well with your audience. How can you write more clearly? Think, revise and review. Repeat. This process helps you to avoid using language that shuts people out. It helps you to communicate in a way that gains reader attention, understanding and – most importantly – trust.



CISSY PAU | Principal consultant, Clear HR Consulting Inc.

All industries and professions are full of jargon, acronyms and industry-specific information that can be unfamiliar and daunting to the uninitiated.

We work in the world of human resources, which is often full of jargon and "consultant" speak. While "onboarding", "organizational development", "change management", "consideration" and "undue hardship" are a few of the terms that human resources professionals regularly use, it is unlikely that the average small-business client or employee easily understands these terms.

Use simple and easy-to-understand language: Your clients and employees are smart, but you need to make sure communication with them can be easily understood by the average person, not just industry experts. Use regular, everyday words rather than jargon. For example, "recruitment and selection" can be simplified as "hiring," and "compensation" can be easily described as "pay."

Educate: Where industry-specific language is necessary, make sure to explain to others what it means. For your employees, provide training sessions and define critical acronyms and industry language in your employee handbook, and keep them apprised of industry changes. For your clients, don't assume they understand your business as well as you do. Explain your company in easy-to-understand terms.

Practise: One way to practise clear communication is to talk with a child. If a 10-year-old does not understand what you are trying to get across, you need to simplify. This is not meant to reflect on clients or employees, it's meant to change your thinking. If you can explain whatever your business does to a 10-year-old, your customers and employees will understand and can buy in.

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