

Are you being obtuse?

The definition of obtuse I am referring to is this one, from Merriam-Webster: difficult to comprehend; not clear or precise in thought or expression.

Have you ever visited a website or picked up a brochure that makes you wonder what is really being said? Sometimes there is too much information, sometimes there is not enough and sometimes what is there is hard to understand, unclear. And in certain cases, the information is being presented in a hard to comprehend way ON PURPOSE.

Let me tell you why I am writing this. I ordered my business cards from a place called Overnight Prints. I have ordered my cards there before, and they are of good quality. They are also fast. As the name implies, they print "overnight." Well, I ordered my cards on Thursday and on the next Tuesday, it occurred to me that I had not received a notification that the cards had shipped. I checked my account on line, and it told me that the order was "in process." I wrote an email to their customer service asking why my cards had not yet printed. A few hours later I received a notification that my cards had shipped. Hmmm.

More than 24 hours later I received an email response from customer service telling me that my cards had shipped. I replied telling them that when I checked the cards had NOT shipped, and that I expected they would have shipped by Monday at the latest, and that a more than 24 hour response was not acceptable. The CSR replied that their new policies suggest that if you choose ground shipping (the least expensive choice) your cards are also printed later. I replied that shipping time is not equal to printing time. Amazon, for instance, will ship your book within 24 hours, and depending on how you pay for it, you may get it the next day or the next week. I also told the CSR that perhaps they should make this

little rule of theirs clearer by saying: We expect to print your order on DATE and ship on DATE. Fairly simple and straightforward in my opinion. Well, apparently Overnight Prints is committed to being obtuse. This is the response I got back from them:

Our print and ship time differs by product. Please see charts below for more details. For Business Cards & 4x6 Postcards the print & ship times are as follows:

Shipping Service	Your Order Will Ship...	Your Order Will Arrive In...
Next Day Air	The Next Business Day	2 Business Day
2 Day Air	The Next Business Day	3 Business Days
3 Day Select	Next Business Day	4 Business Days
Ground w/ Priority Printing	Next Business Day	4-6 Business Days
Ground	Within 3 Business Days	5-7 Business Days

Clearly, if you truly want overnight printing from Overnight Prints you need to pony up more money for SHIPPING. If you pay less money for SHIPPING, your PRINTING will also be delayed.

As a customer, I am irritated. I have ordered from this outfit before and I am still paying a fairly high price for printing as well as a high price for ground shipping. I know the shipping will be slower, but the printing should be the same. If you have changed your policies, it is not clear. Your wording is not clear. And when I point that out to you, you revert to your unclear wording. Why endanger a customer relationship over lack of clarity?

In any case, it is a good exercise to try to see what your customers are seeing when they read your marketing materials. Are you being clear? Or are you being obtuse?



Appearance matters

If you work in any aspect of marketing, you know that appearance matters. We look at various marketing materials and we judge whether they look professional, or home-made, cutting-edge or stuck in time. We advise our clients to re-do logos, update brochures, set up Facebook pages. Our goal is to make sure that their appearance is up to par with the expectations in the marketplace.

Recently, I wrote a post saying that you CAN judge a book by its cover. After all, designers spend a lot of time designing that cover to entice you to read it. Perhaps the book won't be up to your literary standards, but as a marketing piece you know the book accomplished its mission (getting you to buy it if not to read it).

In personal marketing, appearance matters even more. Again, I have written about this before, but I want to revisit it. If you are in the market for a job, say, then you are ALWAYS job hunting. If you are going to a networking meeting, you must look professional. If you look sloppy or like you just rolled out of bed then you will be perceived as someone who doesn't care.

Last Friday, I was indulging a guilty pleasure and watching

What Not to Wear on TLC. The episode was about a 38-year old professor of non-verbal communication who dressed frumpily. She actually looked at least 20 years older than her age. Stacy and Clinton (the show's hosts, in case you haven't seen it) kept telling her that she was communicating to her students that she just didn't care about her appearance, and thus did not care about herself. She had a hard time understanding that what she wore, how she wore it, indeed her appearance, was undermining her message that we send out all sorts of nonverbal cues. It was fascinating to watch because here is a case of someone who understands that everything you put out there (clothing, etc.) is communication. In the end, she came around and by the end of the show she looked much closer to her age than when she started. She also looked far more professional and modern.

It is hard to judge how we appear. We see ourselves day after day and we lose perspective. Same can be said for our marketing materials. This is why we often need to get a third-party opinion. And we need to listen carefully to that third-party. Perhaps they are saying something we don't want to hear. For your graphics and marketing pieces, an expert can do wonders. Sometimes an update makes the difference. For personal appearance, start with trusted friends or associates, and if you are very serious, hire an image consultant.

We are judged by our appearance. And our appearance contributes to how people perceive us. Take control of your appearance. Make sure people perceive you the way you want to be perceived.



What language are you speaking?

Are you by chance speaking in jargon? Why are you doing that?

As a writer and a consultant, I often ask my clients what their “keywords” are. It is helpful, and sometimes crucial, to use the right terminology for any given industry. Especially when you are working in a business to business environment, you need to know how these businesses look for the services/products that they need. But when an outsider lands on one of these B-to-B web pages or marketing materials, he or she will most likely end up not understanding a word. For instance, a client of mine uses the terms “professional services.” For general marketing purposes, this is the emptiest phrase out there, but in the client’s world, it carries a specific meaning.

Setting aside the need for industry-specific terminology, and recognizing the importance of specific terminology in a B-to-B setting, what is going on with language today? Why are so many people talking in gobbledy-gook? Lately, I have heard the following phrases/terms on TV, in conversation and seemingly, everywhere else:

- Drilling down (apparently, this means getting to the heart of the issue or talking specifically)
- Sweet spot (as in where the perfect opportunity lies)
- Being out of pocket (never got this one although it means being unreachable)
- Getting your ducks all in a row (oldie but goodie, means be prepared)
- Leveraging an opportunity (making the most of something)

- Staying ahead of the curve (presumably, leveraging opportunities to get to your sweet spot)

In a sense, these universally used phrases serve as a crutch. Use them and other people will understand what you mean, even when the meaning isn't entirely clear. Sometimes, using touch phrases makes someone look like an insider, someone who is in the know.

In the end, jargon and catch phrases muck up your meaning. It's one thing to use these in conversation where I can stop and ask you what you mean. It's another to use them in writing. When things are written (especially printed) there is no easy or quick way to ask the writer what he or she means.

Catch my drift?

What do Toyota and snow have in common?

Both Toyota and snow are causing lots of problems for people, that is what these two have in common. But that is where the similarity ends.



Although snow does not have an official representative (although lots of people keep talking about Mother Nature), it has a leg up on Toyota. People who deal with snow (utility companies, county government, forecasters) are all telling us what is going on, almost every second of every day of the storm (s). If you live in the Washington, DC area you have no doubt seen interviews with representatives from various organizations involved in snow removal, such as the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT). You have seen the PEPCO (Potomac Electric Power Company) spokesperson explain why power hasn't been completely restored and so forth. You know what is going on.

Toyota, on the other hand, has not, apparently, been telling us what is going on. As you no doubt know, Toyota is having a "few" problems with many of its most popular models, including the Prius. Problems include sudden acceleration and braking issues. Dangerous stuff. Yet, apparently, Toyota was slow to realize there was a mechanical/electronic problem in the cars' manufacturing process. At first, they blamed faulty floor rugs. Now, they have recalled hundreds of thousands of vehicles, stopped production at some plants and have finally taken to the airwaves, paid advertising and even op-ed pieces to explain what happened and defend the integrity of the company.

But the damage has been done. Not communicating with your customers, especially when there is a problem, is a recipe for

disaster. This is the essence of crisis communication. One has to wonder what type of communications counsel Toyota has received. Clearly, it is of the “too little, too late” variety. Of course, there is the possibility that Toyota management ignored communications counsel, which in addition to their inability to realize the problem, says that management is completely out of touch.

More communication is always better than no or too little communication. People want to know what is going on, whether how long the snow is going to last or what to do about their faulty Toyota vehicle.

Super sexist

I watched part of the Super Bowl last night, but really wasn't interested in the game. I wanted to report on the commercials—those famous, expensive spots that seem to make advertising history each year. But, I just didn't have the patience to sit there and watch them. And you know what? The ones I did see offended me. Apparently, advertising agencies have been taught to believe that:

- 1) Only men watch football
- 2) Aforementioned men prefer to drink Bud Light while trying to fulfill every male stereotype out there
- 3) Sexism sells

The absolute worst from the sexist standpoint was the Dodge Charger commercial, where a man is emasculated by having to do everything his wife nags him to do, and makes up for it by taking a ride in this ridiculous car. Close behind is the

always offensive GoDaddy, a company that believes men will buy websites if scantily clad women appear in the ads.

My vote is that as marketers we stop paying heed to this one time event. We give these commercials too much power by endlessly commenting and analyzing them. The bottom line is that it is a one-time deal that proves certain companies have outmoded advertising ideas—thinking that by advertising during the big game they will get so many eyeballs they won't have to do much else.

Your thoughts?

Improve your email marketing!

Our inboxes are cluttered with hundreds of email messages—some from friends asking us to join for dinner and most from companies looking to sell us something. We may have signed up for a few newsletters. We may have met some people at networking events. Regardless, our inboxes are overwhelmed with email.

In the past week, my company sent out its newsletter. It got two unsubscribes, one report for spam (the person who did it may have had some sort of personal vendetta, not sure) and a fairly good open rate. I am going to call it a moderate success. The newsletter did not have a call to action, so it is hard to measure its effectiveness.

In the past couple of day, I got two emails from two sources. Both caught my eye for different reasons. The first was from someone I met a while back who just started a new business venture. The subject line said “Hi Deborah.” The body was the following (with identifying info cut out):

Dear Mr. Sample:

Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is XXXX, Director of Media Services for XXXX and XXXX— two truly groundbreaking companies that have recently joined together to become one of Washington's newest and most innovative full-service production resources. If you're in the neighborhood, I hope you'll stop by for a tour of our facility, just off XX here in downtown D.C.

Our owner-operators are award-winning media professionals with more than 25 years of experience, and our list of long-term clients include companies like X, Y and Z, together with advertising and public relations agencies, corporations, associations and government agencies, both local and nationwide.

We'd like to show you exactly what we can do. By addressing your creative and technical needs with our deep expertise in all forms of broadcast and corporate production, creative editorial, 2-D and 3-D graphics, sound design and audio mixing. With our detailed approach to client service, we can easily guide your next project from concept through completion.

Feel free to look through our demo reels and check out the bios of our skilled artists, editors and producers. Just go to (website) and (website) to find out more. Or give me a call personally, at 999-999-9999 I'll be happy to answer your questions or set up a convenient time when you can pay us a visit. I look forward to the opportunity to meet you in person.

Warm Regards,

What is wrong with this email? First, the personalization is not working. Second, the formatting was off. Third, there are several grammatical mistakes (and at least one typo). The

first paragraph is a waste. The sender could have mentioned a reason that I would be interested in this email and new venture. Instead it is an “introduction” to someone I met already. The email was sent out in plain format—and this is a multimedia production company? Why not make it look pretty and professional? There is no signature from the sender. No way of opting out of the email. No permission. I could go on and on.

The other email I got was announcing a group trip. But guess what? No dates were listed for the trip on the email, forcing me to go to the website. Maybe this was on purpose, to get a click-through to the website. In my opinion, when you don't give people some basic information, you lose them at hello.

Lessons about email marketing:

- Have a call to action.
- Mind your ps and qs—details like grammar are important.
- Include relevant information: dates, locations, contact information, pricing (don't make me work so hard to figure it out).
- If possible, personalize.
- Make it look nice (there are many newsletter/email marketing companies out there at various price points).
- Be careful with SPAM laws. Give people a way to opt-out. Explain why they are receiving your email.

What drives you crazy when you get an email?

Hello there social butterfly!

Are you a social (media) butterfly?

Social media and social networks are not new anymore. In fact, there is talk of a Web 3.0. Social media is mainstream. After all, you have the White House and most television anchors tweeting and lots of businesses have Facebook pages. I bet your grandmother is on Facebook and your grandpa is blogging. Social media has served to connect lots of people, across demographics and geography.

With the rise of social media, and its usefulness in “friend” raising, being social is becoming a bigger asset. How social are you?

Take the following quiz to gauge your sociability:

1. Do you read blogs regularly?
2. Do you use a reader? (extra points if you can define RSS)
3. Do you ever comment on other people’s blogs?
4. Do you have a blog? If so, do you blog regularly, or was your last post last summer?
5. Do you have a Twitter account? Do you actually tweet?
6. Do you know what Foursquare is?
7. Do you use a service to post your blog content to your Twitter stream? If so, have you customized the settings?
8. Do you respond to @ tweets and DMs?
9. Have you met anyone from your social media world in real life?
10. Have you ever been to a Tweet-up?

If you answered yes to all 10 questions, you are a certified social media butterfly.

If you answered yes to at least five questions, you are earning your social media wings.

If you answered yes to less than three questions, you are a social media wallflower.

Yep, you can judge a book (or your oatmeal) by its cover

You can judge a book by its cover because it is what initially attracts you to even pick it up. In a bookstore with thousands if not millions of titles vying for your attention, a boring cover will make you pass it over. But the cover is also the title, and this is also why titles (and headlines) that grab your attention are so important.

However, I am not here to write about books today. What I want to talk about is packaging and how important it is. Packaging helps sell a product, and yet, I bet, nine out of ten times, packaging design is NOT handled by the marketing department.

Sometimes, product packaging needs a redesign. Much has been written about Tropicana's redesign (last year) where the familiar Tropicana interface was replaced with a minimalist approach, which some thought looked generic. Redesign is important, but companies need to be careful not to alienate their core buyers.

I am a huge McCann's Irish Oatmeal fan. I have been eating it for years, and thus buying the boxes for a long time. This is what I have always bought:



McCann's Irish Oatmeal
Before Redesign

The other day, I was getting my supply of oatmeal, and I was momentarily confused when I saw this:



McCann's Irish Oatmeal
Redesigned Packaging

Is this what I have always bought? It doesn't look the same, nor does it tell me that it is a new packaging design anywhere. In fact, I think McCann's not only redesigned the package but changed the contents slightly. And they did not bother to tell me. As I mentioned, I am a long time consumer of McCann's and there was no indication of whether this was the same Quick Cooking Irish Oatmeal.

In any case, the moral is definitely, redesigns can be good, but tread carefully. Don't confuse your customers or you may lose them.

How you say it

We've all heard it before, "it is not what you say, but how you say it." Well, in my opinion, it is both. What you say is also important, but how you say it makes the difference in how it is received. One person who does not seem to understand or care about this is President Obama's press secretary, Robert Gibbs. Gibbs is forever being snarky, sarcastic and just plain unpleasant. I would lay bets that most, if not all, of the White House press corps despise his guts.

In my opinion, Gibbs is one of the worst press secretaries I have ever seen. He can't answer questions straight on, he uses big words he doesn't seem to understand, but worst of all, he seems bored and above the job. This morning, I read a great column on Gibbs in the Washington Post, by Dana Milbank. Most of the time, Milbank's own sarcasm and unpleasantness make his column a must-skip, so imagine my surprise when he points out his own apparent dislike of Gibbs' snark. Here's an excerpt from the column:

Gibbs acts as though he's playing himself in the movie version of his job. In this imaginary film, he is the smart-alecky press secretary, offering zippy comebacks and cracking jokes to make his questioners look ridiculous. It's no great feat to make reporters look bad, but this act also sends a televised image of a cocksure White House to ordinary Americans watching at home.

This is the most visible manifestation of a larger problem

the Obama White House has. Many Obama loyalists from the 2008 race still seem, after a year on the job, to have trouble exiting campaign mode. They sometimes appear to be running a taxpayer-funded rapid-response operation

If Obama is sinking in the polls, and his agenda is failing (and now he has managed to lose a historically Democratic Senate seat, although that may have had more to do with the Democratic candidate's lack of campaign skills –Read this great blog post on it by my friends over at Fresh Ground Communications). It may have something to do with HOW the White House is communicating its message, which is poorly. Gibbs' holier-than-thou approach to everything and everyone is not helping one bit. If Obama wants to regain some footing I would suggest he replace Gibbs with someone a bit kinder, a bit gentler. Replace Gibbs with someone who gets that how you say things really does make a difference.

What are your thoughts? Do you like Gibbs? How about a poll:

[poll daddy poll=2560587]

Got clout?

I am not sure if it is just another way to establish your influence or another popularity measure on Twitter, but now there are several tools to measure your rank and influence on Twitter.

This post from CIO presents five options to measure your Twitter clout.:

- Buzzom
- Topsy

- Twinfluence
- Twitter Grader
- Twitter Score

Two other tools not mentioned in the article are:

- Klout
- Twitteranalyzer

I tested my score on a couple of these. I liked both Twitter Grader and Klout, although they do not coincide. According to Twitter Grader I have a 95 out of 100 whereas on Klout it is 25. Hmm...

I did not like Twitter Score. Twinfluence tells you who has the most followers and does not really help you with your own effectiveness.

In my opinion, the most important measure for your communications effectiveness is how often you are being re-tweeted. If you share good material, people will share it.

Did you try any of the above? What is your take?