

# Plainly speaking, it is better

What is better is to speak and write plainly, a lesson that is being forced on the U.S. Government according to the Federal Diary column by Joe Davidson in the Washington Post. To make that happen (I could have written: In order to facilitate the transition), there will be a symposium on plain language this afternoon at the National Press Club, held by the Center for Plain Language.

There is no doubt that the government (and many in the legal community) loves to make things complicated. The more obtuse, the better. The more wordy the better. Passive voice? They love it. Big words when smaller words would do, check.

But, more disturbing in my opinion (since I already expect government/legal communications to be convoluted), is that marketing folk are jumping on the complicated bandwagon. This blog post, from the Branding Strategy Insider, claims that "Complex Language Weakens Brands." As the post says:

*A serious impediment to communications is this constant upgrading of the language. No aspect of life is left untouched by the upgrade police. Not only does a term have to be politically correct, it has to be as long and as complicated as possible.*

A great example from the post is that UPS went from being in the parcel delivery business to being a logistics company. How many people on the street instinctively understand what logistics is???? Not many, my friends. The only people who understand logistics are in logistics.

In any case, if you want to be clear, speak and write plainly. Using big words when small ones would do does NOT make you

look more intelligent (if anything, it makes you look less so). From the Center for Plain Language website:

*A communication is in plain language if the people who are the audience for that communication can quickly and easily*

- *find what they need*
- *understand what they find*
- *act appropriately on that understanding*

I think the bullet points above are the point of ANY communications.

And you thought plain vanilla was the boring choice.

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## What's it all about?

This post is about “about” pages. You know, the pages that describe your organization. On blogs, the about pages gives a sense to visitors who the author is. I would say this is crucial information. It helps us judge the trustworthiness of the content. Say that I am a student of public relations, at the PhD level, and I say so on my about page. You may surmise that my content has a scholarly bent based on my research. However, say that I am a student, in high school. And I write about public relations. You may conclude that I am still learning and that my blog is an attempt to explore social media.

I have come across many blogs lacking an about page. That is a mistake. A big mistake. Your about page does not have to be long and fancy. Just tell me who you are and what you are doing. That's it. Use it to build your credibility.

Just today I came across this blog: <http://prnext.wordpress.com/> It purports to be a monthly ezine about PR. It gives some rather dubious advice and info (like PR took a backseat to advertising in the 90s, really? says who?). In any case, I want to know who is behind the blog, and guess what, the about page is blank. Immediately, I think these people do not know ANYTHING about PR if they don't even have any basics about themselves. So, their credibility is challenged.

Take a look at your blog, your website, your LinkedIn. What have you done in the about sections? Have you communicated who you are and what you do, at the very least?

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## Name changes

Electrasol is now called finish. Brinks Home Security is now Broadview. My question is why? Why would two established brands change names? And in this case, the new names are a whole lot more generic than the originals. Electrasol has a lot more stand-alone recognition than finish. Finish, after all, is a verb. It is not a name. Same with Brinks. Every one knows Brinks—why would you become Broadview? That is one of those meaningless marketing names that doesn't really separate you from the crowd. It's as if Hertz changed its name to Roadview. Makes it less memorable.

Brand or company name changes should be few and far between. It is confusing and dilutes your brand/name recognition. Obviously, sometimes a personnel change makes it necessary, as in the band Crosby, Still, Nash and Young, which added/lost Young. But when you have a time-honored name, such as

Electrasol (or Cascade, its largest competitor) you make it harder for the consumer who has been using your brand for years to find you if you change your name. And, I don't think in this case "finish" is going to attract any younger/new consumers.

Perhaps you want to be "cooler" or more in step with the times. We know AT&T stands for Atlantic Telephone and Telegraph, but clearly, they had to lose the Atlantic and the telegraph parts if they wanted to be known as a national telephone company. So they used their initials. Same with KFC. They have not changed their name from Kentucky Fried Chicken but they wanted to be known for more than fried food, so they use their initials instead.

Ownership changes bring about name changes as in the case of New England Telephone, which later became Nynex and now is Verizon.

In sum, some name changes are necessary and some are just gimmicky and maybe even plain stupid. In my eyes, finish and Broadview fall in this category.

What do you think?

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## Random thoughts

### Radio Commercials

Does it seem to you that every time you are listening to the radio, and a commercial break comes on, you get commercials on all other stations as well? Does it also seem to you that commercial breaks/DJ gab fests on radio go on for way too long?

It's great that there is still so much advertising on radio, but I think that by making the commercial breaks so long radio stations risk losing their listeners. If I am listening to station, and a long commercial break comes on, I switch stations until I find one that is playing music. If these breaks were shorter, there would be less risk of alienation, IMO.

### Different name, same location

Why is it that store owners think that by changing the name of a store they will get tons of new business? I was just walking home and saw that a day spa/salon just changed their name (and to something a lot more utilitarian). I thought, well, the problem was not the name of the salon, it is the location! Hard to get to, off the beaten path, etc. I don't know if the salon was sold to another owner, but in any case, when I see too many names on the same store front I tend to think problems.

### As if we thought Iran was democratic

I am not sure why Iran bothered to hold elections. Why pretend they are a democracy? Let me point out that the actual leader of Iran is not the president but the Ayatollah, the so-called Supreme Leader. Anytime you have someone ruling a country who is not elected and calls himself the Supreme Leader you are not dealing with a democracy. The problem is that the west wanted to believe that elections=democracy. They do not. It is not good marketing for Iran to hold elections and then repress the protests when it appears the election is a sham. Talk about a public relations fiasco!

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# The answer to your marketing needs

I recently read that to get leads for your business, white papers are the answer. (For those that don't know, white papers are backgrounders, in-depth write ups about a subject area.) For one second I thought, yeah! that is the answer and I was about to put it on my to-do list. But wait, I thought, there is never ONE answer to marketing. That is the magic bullet thinking that gets lots of people in trouble.

Marketing should be about using a mix of strategies and tactics that can promote your service or product to its target audience. For instance, say you are marketing denture paste. You could advertise in the AARP magazine (if the budget allows) or in a local seniors newspaper. You could sponsor an event targeting those 65+. You could do many things, but you wouldn't necessarily advertise in Blender Magazine or choose a skateboarding teen as your spokesperson. You have to go where your target audience goes.

So, my advice to you is that if someone tells you that to market your business, all you need to do is this one thing, walk away. Walk away fast. There is never a one-size solution nor any kind of magic bullet. Marketing is about creating awareness and that can take time and many forms.

I had a client once who was looking for the magic bullet. So, he hired me to re-do some copy, and he hired a PR guy to get some publicity, and he redesigned his website. He thought that each thing he did would bring a huge influx in business. And none of it did. Sure he got a better website, and good publicity, but because nothing was strategic and everything was a quick response to I need to get more business, it didn't work. And he kept wasting money wanting to find the one thing that would work instead of working on many different tactics

that would give his brand cohesiveness. I could never make that client happy because one piece of copy or one press release is not going to turn you into a million dollar business.

A couple of nights ago, I was watching CNBC and they had a show entitled The Oprah Effect. As you no doubt know, anything that is seen on Oprah, almost automatically becomes a bestseller. You may think then that Oprah is a magic bullet. Well, yes and no. It does get you tremendous exposure, but in order to get on Oprah, you have to have a good product, good marketing and a good story. Those are part of the marketing mix. You also have to be ready to play in the big leagues. What if you can't deliver? Then your business is going down the tubes.

In sum, stop looking for one solution and look at the whole picture. What do you need to do to give yourself a marketing boost?



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## Thoughts about a rebranding

You've probably heard of the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure, right? Well it doesn't exist anymore. It changed its name to the Susan G. Komen GLOBAL Race for the Cure. This is the second year I participated and I think the rebranding is bogus and confusing. From a marketing perspective I understand why they would do it. After all, now they are able to call it the "first ever" global Race. But that is BS. It is not the first Race and anyone who has ever participated knows that.

What this rebranding accomplish? Not much that I can tell. In

fact, this year the Race here in the Washington DC area had fewer participants (45,000 vs. 50,000 last year) and raised less money. Last year, Cynthia Nixon and Condoleezza Rice addressed the participants, and participated in the Race. Also, Mayor Adrian Fenty raced. This year, the only “celebrities” were Jill Biden and her husband.

In any case, I think that any established cause or organization needs to carefully evaluate what it aims to get from a rebranding. Is it worth the cost? Is it worth the confusion?

Ultimately, I felt that the “Global” Race for the Cure was very disorganized compared to last year. I did not feel appreciated for raising money or participating and I don’t think I will participate next year. And I did not get that it was global in nature (other than the very long and ridiculous speech by some “royal” from Bosnia). In fact the whole point of Komen is to raise funds for the LOCAL community.

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## How to: Develop a tagline

Does your business have a tagline? If yes, does it accurately convey what you do? If not, why not?

Every business should have a tagline, no doubt. **A tagline is an additional bit of information that clarifies what you do to your potential customers.** Now, a tagline is not a motto. Webster’s defines a motto as “a short expression of a guiding principle.” A motto could be something generic, like “we always do our best,” which can be seen as something your



employees rally around but that does not communicate anything about what your business does.

**What is a slogan?** Webster's gives three definitions: 1) a war cry; 2) phrase used to express a characteristic position or goal; 3) attention-getting phrase used in promotion. Clearly definition number 1 is not what we are after. And the difference between two and three is really the difference between a slogan and a tagline. A slogan should be unchanging, something that is more universal (your goals or your purpose) and your tagline can change for a particular ad campaign. And yes, a slogan and a tagline can be one and the same.

For instance, if you are a hospital or clinic, your slogan might be your commitment to a healthy future for all. If you are running an ad campaign, you might focus on a certain aspect of your practice like cardiology and your tagline might focus on helping patients achieve heart health. All the while your motto could be something about maintaining the highest standard in hygienic practices.

So, how do you develop a tagline? First make sure you are not developing a motto. Be more specific about what you are trying to communicate about your product or service.

Steps:

1) **Understand your product or service and its USP.** This seems fairly obvious but you would be surprised at how very few people can communicate succinctly what they do. You might start with a short description of your product and service. Think about attributes, descriptors and differentiators

2) **Brainstorm.** Write out 10-20 short lines (5-10 words) about your product or service. Incorporate some descriptors and attributes from above.

3) **Evaluate.** Which is catchy? Which is comprehensive? Which is too generic? Eliminate anything that is cliché, generic, or

just doesn't say enough.

4) **Narrow down your list** to 3-5 choices and show them to your principal stakeholders.

5) Have a **vote**. Generally, one tagline will emerge as the best one.

One more thing. People often confuse logo and slogan. A logo is a GRAPHIC representation of your slogan/motto. A logo is never a written piece. And logos are best left to design professionals. I would strongly counsel you to not try doing this at home!



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## On doing things piecemeal

**Are you a small business with a tight marketing budget?**

If you are, you probably have fallen prey to the idea that you should do (marketing) things as you can afford them. You know, an ad here, a brochure there. Budget-wise, this may make sense. After all, you can't afford a large campaign, or an ad agency. Branding-wise, not so much. It's tough to build up an image on unconnected pieces of the puzzle. The missing link is the connection, or the reason, behind each piece.

**Think strategically**

In business, there is strategy and there are tactics. Often companies fall into tactics without thinking about the strategy. Many people can't tell the difference. Here's a quick example: sending a press release is a tactic, achieving positive publicity is a strategy. Ideally, tactics should

follow your strategy.

**You must know what you want to accomplish so that you can figure the steps to make it happen.**

Often, small business owners are overwhelmed with trying to do everything: managing staff, invoicing, doing the books, buying inventory, negotiating. Marketing may be a distant thought, something to do when there is down time. This is unfortunate because marketing will bring business in. Neglecting your marketing will result in a business downturn, for sure.

### **Develop a basic marketing plan**

The easiest thing to do is to devote some time to thinking about what you want to accomplish. Perhaps you want more female customers, or larger organizations. Write these goals down. Figure out who your current customers are. Figure out how much budget you can afford to devote to marketing. See what you already have and what you need.

Here are some elements of a marketing plan:

- Current situation/Situation analysis
- Goals
- Target audience
- Budget
- Tactics for reaching target audience (and this is where your ads, brochures, press releases fit in)

Remember, doing marketing piecemeal will only result in getting small chunks of your target audience.



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# Personal marketing and communications

Although we think of marketing communications as mostly printed and electronic promotional pieces, there is one part of the communication process that is completely personal—you. Most of us represent our companies or even ourselves, if we are looking for a job or a project. We may have nice business cards but what else are we doing to market ourselves? Yesterday, I attended a networking/educational event where I saw Kate Perrin, a fabulous networker and business person. We discussed (among other things like the Daschle debacle) how people present themselves. This area, which I consider personal marketing, is rarely addressed but it is crucial nonetheless.

Why is your personal presentation a part of marketing? Simply, because *all marketing is about perception*, and how we look (how we are dressed, our body language, our demeanor in general) determines the perception others have of us. If I show up to an interview in sloppy clothes, doesn't it seem that I didn't put any effort in and that I really don't care what people think? Similarly, if I go to a business event where everyone is wearing "business attire" and I am wearing flip-flops and shorts, don't I look out of place? Creative people generally dress creatively and corporate people also tend to dress in corporate attire. There is a reason for this—they are branding themselves. This extends to business cards as well. A lawyer probably will hand you a linen embossed card and a designer might give you a colorful one.

A few months ago, I attended a networking event. The woman in charge was a business owner, and had a direct marketing firm. She talked about email campaigns and such. However, I was distracted from her message because she was dressed in a suit circa 1985, and had unstyled long hair. She was clearly stuck

in an earlier era, so my impression of her was that in no way could she conduct a 21st Century direct marketing campaign.

Of course not everyone should be cookie-cutter, dressed in navy blue suit and showing no hint of personal style. But there are some generalities about personal marketing:

- Clothing style reflects your brand—what do you want your brand to be?
  - Sloppiness never looks professional
  - Business cards are part of your personal marketing package
  - Your handshake speaks volumes about you
  - A smile goes a long way
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## Brand versus Price

How important is price when you are shopping? Do you ever buy store brands (also known as private labels) to save money? If you are like many Americans, increasingly the answer is yes, price is important. More and more, private labels are gaining market share, as is reported in this [New York Times article](#). As the article points out, people are flocking to store branded staple items and sticking to brands only for certain items. One such item, the article points out, is Heinz ketchup. I would bet other legacy brands like Tide detergent, Crest toothpaste and Coke are still doing well. For certain things, like milk or eggs, brand does not mean much. For others, brand means quality or taste.

What is interesting about the private label versus national brand struggle, is that it probably depends on the particular private label. Those who have experienced Wegmans probably have no compunction buying Wegmans brand. On the other hand,

are you as likely to buy private label products from a lesser quality grocery store? Here in DC, we have Safeway, Giant, Harris Teeter, Trader Joe's, Whole Foods and a couple other markets. I wonder if the "cache" of each store translates into higher private label sales. For instance, would you be more likely to buy Whole Foods canned tomatoes than Giant tomatoes, prices being similar?

The bottom line is that price-sensitive consumers have always bought the cheaper alternative. But in tough times, everyone has become more price-sensitive, and thus willing to check out private labels, giving them increasing market share.