

# 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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## Whatever do you mean?

Have you seen signs/logos/headlines that make you stop, and not because you are intrigued, but rather because you are confused? If you have, you know what I mean.

I just say a delivery truck with the following sign:

*Sanford Foods*

*Poultry Distributor*

*Pork Beef Supplies*

The “Poultry Distributor” part was highlighted. So I thought to myself, what is it? Poultry or pork? Yes, I know they distribute all of it, but why highlight poultry? My point is that there is too much contradictory information in a few words. It is not clear. They could have said: Sanford Foods:

Distributors of Fine Poultry and Meats. And that would have been fine.

My advice is to have one overarching message in your logo or slogan. Too much is confusing.

Thoughts? Or better yet, examples?

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## Don't try the same trick over and over

Here's a tip: if something does not work the first 50 times, don't do it again. Seriously. Stop. Re-evaluate. Don't waste your efforts.

Sure, practice makes perfect, if you are headed to Carnegie Hall. With marketing, practice (repetition) can lead to annoyance and disconnect.

Last November, I started collecting all the marketing mail that relates to FIOS, Verizon's fiber-optic service. To date, I have received nearly five pounds of direct mail and many robo-calls (although I finally got them to stop the robo-calls). Here's the clincher though: I have not signed up for FIOS. Verizon keeps sending me the same marketing pieces, over and over and over and over. Most egregious is the one that is marked: **Important Information About Your Verizon Service**. Really, how many times do you think I am going to fall for this? Once, maybe twice, but not dozens.

I am not sure what Verizon's strategy is here, but in my case, they are wasting tons of money and not to mention, killing many trees (yeah, I know you want me to switch to paperless

billing, but I bet if you just cut out excessive direct mail you would save a ton).

My other example is from a online listing service I used to pay for. It changed, without informing me, and suddenly, I was getting no inquiries or even visits to my website from it. I stopped paying for the premium service. I tried to inform them why. No feedback form or even email address was available. And the guy who runs the service sends me emails at least twice a week asking me to sign up again. The same exact email, twice a week. I am not exaggerating. Again, why would you continue to do something again and again if you are getting no results from it? Do you think I missed the email the first 25 times?

In any case, marketing communications is about strategy and tactics. You use certain tactics to implement your overall strategy. The thing is, you have many tactics at your disposal and you should fine tune your tactics so that you are achieving the result you want. If a tactic does not seem to work, shelve it. Put it away.

Your adaptability will help set you apart. Trust me on this. Don't waste your resources with tired tactics that don't work.

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## Elements of a successful event

Do you attend many networking events? I have gone to my fair share. Some are better than others. Here's what I think makes a good event:

1) **A topic.** I appreciate that happy hour events draw people

interested in getting a drink after work, but they don't inform or give you anything to talk about. Having a topic and a speaker gives events an edge.

2) **Allocating time to networking.** Many times there is a speaker and/or a meal and no time to meet and mingle. Specifically allocated meet and mingle time is very important.

3) **Easy access.** If you are asking people to drive to your event, make sure there is plenty of parking (preferably free). If you want people to take public transport, then be close to the bus/subway stop.

4) **The right price.** Too expensive can be a real turnoff to people. The price should reflect the value, but it should also be within the range of other similar events. This morning I saw an event about social media that was comparable to other events I have been to/seen advertised, but was priced twice as much. Would I go? No.

5) **Organizational ambassadors.** Some people are shy. If you are hosting an event, have members of your organization or group be hosts: greet people, tell them about your group and introduce them to others.

6) **Choosing day and time carefully.** Your event can be derailed by competing events. If possible, try to avoid conflicts.

Update: How could I forget this one?

7) **Food and drink.** There is nothing worse than going to an event that offers nothing. I once went to a wine and cheese that had neither wine nor cheese. Instead, we got leftover SoyJoy bars from another event and water. I kid you not.

What would you add?

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# Business cards

## Dos and Don'ts

**Do have a business card,** even if you don't yet have a business off the ground. There is nothing worse than people who go to networking events and don't have business cards. Go get plain cards with your name, phone and email at the very least. When you are more set up then spend more money.

**Do use both sides of the card.** The other side can hold more information about your services. It is extra real estate space, use it.

**Don't make your cards super unusual.** Cards that are odd sizes, vertical instead of horizontal or folded are hard to put away easily. Most people either put them in a Rolodex of some sort or scan them. If your card is too small or too big for these applications it will get lost. I particularly hate vertical cards and folded cards.

**Do use a professional design.** When possible, hire a graphic designer to do your entire letterhead package. It looks nicer.

**Don't go too cheap.** Unless you are brand spanking new, don't go for the cheapest black ink on white crappy paper cards from your inkjet if you can all avoid it. It looks, well, cheap.

**Don't use other people's cards.** If you work for yourself do not under any circumstances just fill out your name on someone else's card. Looks bad.

**Do make sure you have the correct information.** By this I mean, your card should have your name, company name, phone number, email address, at a minimum. You can add street address, fax,

cell phone number, Twitter handle, and other info.

**Don't sacrifice legibility for information.** If you have to use a ridiculously small point size to fit in too much information on the card, forget about it. The point of the card is to let people find you EASILY, without the help of a magnifying glass.

I have said it before and I will say it again, if you are in business of any kind, you need a business card. It is an easy way to provide other people your information. Before you go to your next networking event, take a look at what you are giving out. Does it help or hinder you?

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**Why a thank you is good marketing**



Thank you for reading this post, and thank you for reading my blog. I probably haven't thanked you before, so I apologize, because this post is about how thank you is really a marketing tool.

We've all heard of customer appreciation. Often, it is a deal available to new customers. Sometimes it is a gift with purchase. In many cases, the customer has to do something additional to get appreciated—sign up for a new service or buy more.

What about customers that just use a service, like a gym, cable, phone and have been using it for years. Do they ever get thanked? No, they often don't. Why? Because companies take the bulk of their customer base for granted. They imagine that if they are providing the service, and there is no problem, the customer will remain loyal. But in fact, customers are not always loyal. They will switch for lower prices, or better

service. They may also switch because a company does not seem to appreciate they have a choice in service providers. This is why more banks and customer service agents start any conversation with you by saying things like “thank you for banking with us.”

The bottom line is that saying thank you is about expressing appreciation. And most everyone likes to be appreciated. And yet, thank yous are sometimes hard to come by.

In your personal marketing or personal branding, saying thank you may be even more important. Think about it: What are you saying when you don't say thank you? You are communicating that you are uninterested, unappreciated, or that you take the gesture for granted. It makes you seem rude and self-involved. Some people will claim they are too busy to respond. Are you too busy to make sure that you are perceived properly?

Remember, no one is forced to be your customer unless you are a monopoly. And no one is required to help you out unless he or she wants to. It is simple to say thank you. Saying thank you boosts the perception that you care, that you are aware that what the customer or friend has given you has some value.

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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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## **Are you hosting an event?**

When you host an event, you want people to attend, right? If you don't think so, just ignore this post.

So, how do you get people to attend your event? It may seem self evident, but many organizations do not follow these promotional tips:

**0) Before you start, be sure to have all the following info for inclusion: title and purpose of event, date of event, hours of event, exact location and directions to event, cost, contact information, whether you need to RSVP or not (and who the RSVP contact is). You would be surprised at how many invitations miss some of this critical data.**

1) Invite people. Be sure to send out an invitation to all members, interested parties, people who have attended your events in the past, etc.

2) Post the event on your website or blog or both. Ask a third party to check and see if you have included all necessary information.

3) Send a calendar item listing to your local newspaper, event aggregator, tv station.

4) Include in your newsletter. If it is an annual event, add to your signature line on email and include on all communications, internal and external.

5) Remind people. There are many events competing for people's attendance, so be sure to send reminders. This is where social media like Twitter could be useful.

6) Create an event page on Facebook or other social media sites.

7) To be really efficient, you may want to use an electronic event management database to help you to keep track of attendees, send out invites and take RSVPs. Two that come to mind are Cvent and EventBrite.

A note about timing: You want to give people enough time to plan to attend, but not too much time so that they may forget about the event. Perhaps you can invite three to four weeks in advance, and remind people two weeks and one week before the event.

Again, the most important thing about publicizing an event is to provide all the information somebody would need to attend the event. Don't take this for granted. I can't tell you how many events I have seen listed that lack basic info such as DATE!

If I have overlooked anything, please remind me in the comments!



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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.

