

Does your audience get you?

An exponential mistake?

Several years ago, when I was just starting out, I was hired by a new client to write a sales pitch letter. The letter would promote a hotel reservations software that the client was selling to small (non-chain, independent) hotels.

The client hated the letter I wrote. He didn't even want to pay me for it! His main complaint was that I used language the hotel owners wouldn't understand. Specifically, I had used the term "exponential growth," and the client thought most people would not understand the word "exponential." I was completely taken aback. To me, "exponential growth" sounded good. You'd want your business to experience it by simply buying a new software, right?

Whether this client was right or not about "exponential," the takeaway is that you have to use the language that your audience will get. If your audience talks at a sixth-grade level, you can't use university-level language and hope they understand what you are saying.

Trump gets it (or maybe doesn't know better)

According to the article "Donald Trump Speaks Like a Sixth Grader. All Politicians Should," by Allison Jane Smith and published this past Sunday in the *Washington Post*, part of Trump's success in the presidential primaries can be attributed to his ability to communicate with the swath of Americans who have low literacy skills. As you probably have heard, Trump always uses simple words, and repeats them constantly.

Smith writes:

When speaking to or writing for a broad audience, it's a best

practice to speak at an eighth-grade reading level. More than 40 percent of Americans have only basic literary skills, according to a 2003 assessment. And even highly educated people prefer to read below their formal education level.

Adjust your language

In other words, speakers (and writers) who want to communicate more widely would do better to simplify. Using big words when most people don't get them will only hurt your cause, perhaps exponentially.

Of course, if you are trying to communicate more narrowly, or to a very sophisticated audience, you will have to adjust your language accordingly.

Your job as a communicator is to make sure your audience gets you.

Have you ever read marketing material that you didn't understand? Do you think it was a language choice issue? Let me know in the comments.