



## CorpSpeak is a barrier to understanding consumers

THE HEADS-UP FROM the SVPHR (senior vice-president, human resources) put it so well. It said: "Pre the organisational transformation process, the absence of a sustainable enhancement model was occasioning situations including low involvement from collaborators, lack of agile systems for ongoing people development, an elevated incident index, and high rotation in our operations. Via a new organisational transformational model, we homologated ongoing enhancement systems related to productivity, in parallel with our corporate vision: Global-Class process-centered flexible plants focused on business results with motivated multi-capable people for exceeding consumers' expectations. Tracking of process advance was optimally leveraged via technical and human diagnosis."

Great, eh? Terrific. Splendid. Yeah! Everyone clear?

Actually, no; 99 and counting percent of us are not clear at all. For those of you who (like your columnist) need a translation of the above incomprehensible gibberish into real English, it actually means: "Our workers were getting bored, sloppy and demotivated. After a few accidents, absenteeism rose and people started leaving. We fixed the problems, boosted morale, and the business got noticeably better."

Okay, try this one: "An opportunity was identified to make [Company X] part of the authority-mandated solution for the increasing obesity issue in the country. By directly contributing to the introduction of new ethical norms, [Company X] has reaffirmed its commitment to the health of its consumers and to the development of responsible citizens and conscientious consumers."

Translation: "To avoid nasty legislation, we're voluntarily telling people our food products contain quite a lot of sugar and they should eat less of them to avoid getting fat."

As manufacturing companies never cease to tell us, in that particularly plummy tone they adopt when they feel pleased with themselves: "Here at PDQCorp (or wherever), the Consumer is King." Try to find a trading company today that does not claim to be "customer-centric in everything we do".

But, dear corplings, eager-beavers and apparatusiks (not to mention HR SVPs), if you are really going to "put consumers at the centre of your world", you are going to have to learn to talk like them, rather than addressing the mirror in a language that only you can understand.

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I speak as someone who spends much of his life going through strategies, mission statements, "holistic global platforms", "must-win battle-plans" and the like from some of our planet's largest corporations. It can get depressing, and remarkably samey. My sympathetic daughter recently gave me a rubber stamp bearing the legend "Complete And Utter Bullshit", with a little red ink-pad to go with it. I have to confess that I apply it, in the privacy of my upstairs office, with disquieting frequency to the upper right-hand corner of high-flown documents and briefs that cross my desk.

I call their language CorpSpeak. Why express yourself clearly and directly, the thinking goes, when you can vastly impress your underlings (and probably yourself) with sonorous, jargon-filled sentences like: "Our growth algorithm continues to be predicated on specific, tangible and aggressive initiatives for leveraging our CSD and NCB portfolio." (Or, for simpletons like you and me: "We make money selling soft drinks.")

The curious thing is that so many companies think they have found a unique, infallible and fundamentally 'right' way of describing the world - or, perhaps more accurately, 'their world'. The acronyms may be different from company to company, (actually, less different than you'd imagine), but the twaddle and verbosity seem numbingly the same.

Not only is CorpSpeak a barrier against effective communication, but it rapidly becomes a barrier against thought itself. By insisting that every aspect of our wonderfully eccentric and human world can be encapsulated in an acronym or a jargon word, the meaning itself soon gets irretrievably lost. You hear the sentence. You think you understood it. But then you're scratching your head, wondering if you really did. Trust me, in many cases there wasn't much there to understand in the first place. Even when messages do lurk amid the piffle, waiting to be deciphered, they often turn out to be dim and mysterious glimpses into the obvious - grandiose 'revelations' of stuff we already knew.

If marketers are looking for a New Year's resolution worth adopting, this column's recommendation would be to start counterbalancing your 'communication skills' with listening skills. Leave off tinkering with your "Go-To-Market Paradigm" and your "Consumer Journey Matrix" for half a day, and go listen to a real consumer or two. Sit behind the mirror at a focus group session, for instance. You will probably hear the participants say disarmingly direct things like "well, we don't necessarily trust your company that much", or "your products are basically the same as everyone else's", or even "your ads seem a bit condescending".

There's plenty to focus on in statements like that. You might actually want to get your corporation to do something about them. Or, if you prefer, you can revert to lofty phrases like: "A number of consumer perceptual KPIs still need fine-tuning," and carry on as usual. Your choice. ■

Charles Dawson is chief executive of Pi Market Research and Pi Consulting  
[charles.dawson@pi-consulting.com](mailto:charles.dawson@pi-consulting.com)