

## Chapter 6

### *Straight talk: Talk like you talk, talk like you mean it, talk in these ten new ways*

**W**hy is it often so difficult to figure out how to bring our ideas to life?

The short answer is that we often haven't thought through our idea. We're not clear in our own heads about the purpose of what we want to communicate. The longer answer is that sometimes—consciously and unconsciously—we fall into the following traps:

- \* We haven't taken the time to talk with customers or executives to understand what they want to hear or how they think about the topic.
- \* We start writing or talking about something we don't really understand or believe in. We put down the words, but lacking context and belief, the words are meaningless.
- \* We try to force ourselves to adopt some style that is supposed to be businesslike or the "brand voice," but it's not *our* style, so we get blocked and frustrated and end up talking or

writing in ways that include all the business buzz words but lack a human voice.

- \* We fall back on well-worn organizational ideas and language, not wanting to stir things up too much.

### Are we speaking Doglish?

Our communications often comes across as if we're speaking a kind of marketing "Doglish."<sup>1</sup> We're working hard to convince people just how transformational, revolutionary, innovative, and industry-leading our products are. But customers often ignore us—or, more precisely, they ignore our marketing messages—because we're just not speaking their language.

It's like the relationship between humans and dogs that Patricia McConnell, adjunct assistant professor of zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, writes about in her book *The Other End of the Leash*. "Although humans and dogs share a remarkable relationship that is unique in the animal world, we are still two entirely different species," she says. "Quite simply, humans are primates and dogs are canids. Since we each speak a different native tongue, a lot gets lost in the translation."<sup>2</sup>

A lot gets lost in business communications, as well, even though we and our customers are the same species.

Back in the 1990s, when Jacques Nasser was CEO of Ford Motor Company, he went into the field, meeting with small groups of senior executives to talk about shareholder value and what that means in daily business. After several meetings he experienced the Doglish problem. Despite his genuine passion and commitment to fostering greater understanding of his strategy, his executives didn't know what he was talking about.

"I spent hours talking about financial ratios," he said. "But it

wasn't until someone was brave enough to come up to me afterward and say, 'What's a P/E ratio?' that I realized why so few people in the company were thinking about shareholder value. They didn't understand it as a concept."<sup>3</sup>

Eventually, Ford began business literacy training to reduce the translation problems between Nasser and his managers.

Sometimes misunderstanding is a business literacy or language problem. Sometimes it's because people aren't interested in what we think they should be interested in. Other times, we're just not very excited about our own topic.

As Autodesk CEO Carol Bartz has said, "If you're not excited, how can you get others excited? People will know. It's like how kids and dogs can sense when people don't like them."<sup>4</sup>

Screenwriter Robert McKee, who advises corporations like Microsoft as well as filmmakers, believes that telling too rosy a story actually works against businesses. "You can send out a press release talking about increased sales and a bright future, but your audience knows it's never that easy. . . . Positive hypothetical pictures and boilerplate press releases actually work against you because they foment distrust among the people you're trying to convince."<sup>5</sup>

### **Reset business communications style**

This morning a marketing director called to share this bit of information: "The CEO really likes how you've positioned us. It's clear, accurate, and easy to talk about," he said. "How did you do it?"

The secret is to ask good questions and listen carefully to the CEO's tone and style. Often we think there's a need to use corporate language instead of using the language that people speak.

Does any person ever really say those quotes that we see in so many press releases? Let's not make writing so difficult. Let's use people's beliefs, words, style, and sentiments. Plain, honest, human language—real words that real people use in everyday conversations. One reason blogging took off so quickly is that blogs are written the way real people speak, and people like listening to real people.

Instead of writing to be read, write to be said. Or edit down what someone said, letting people “hear” the person's voice and style. Communications today doesn't need to be perfectly written or produced in slick formats. We need to spend less time on producing perfect marketing “stuff,” and more time communicating in the plain-speak of conversations. The goal is not to be perfect, but to be understood.

Sounds easy, but it's difficult to change. In school and during our careers, we have been taught to write to be read. We were punished for incomplete sentences, slang, and fragments. And, please, omit all passion. That's not how it's done.

In fact, it wasn't so many years ago that I got a negative performance review for being too passionate in client meetings and in my communications approach. Clients liked the work and they liked me, but my boss thought that I should adopt a more “executive, businesslike” communications style. That's what would be required, the alpha fraidy cat said, for me to be promoted. So I quit and my clients came with me, following the passion.

But I digress.

The point is that we live in a talk world and we don't usually talk in grammatically correct sentences. Communications today is about the ear. Writing for the ear and using the ear more to listen to what people are telling us.

So it's not only all right but in many ways it is better to change our style.

## Ten ways to get on the straight-talk wagon

Here are ten small ways to break bad habits and move into a new conversational talk style. I'm sure you know these tips, so treat this section as a quick review.

### 1. *What's the point?*

What are we trying to help people understand? Why should they care? Why is it relevant? What's new or different that you have to say about it? How will the ideas affect the listener?

In the world of marketing, communications often seems muddled. Competing company Web sites say the same things. Presenters at conferences blur. Sales presentations numb. Webinars drag. All because they're throwing a lot of information at us, but lack a point.

One way to clarify your point is to start a conversation, e-mail, meeting, or speech by saying, "My intent is to help you understand why \_\_\_\_\_." Or, "My intent is for us to try to figure out why \_\_\_\_\_." Or, "Here's why I, personally, think this point matters: \_\_\_\_\_." Articulating the intent helps clarify the point.

Always start with a point.

### 2. *Don't be afraid to use the first person*

The easiest way to adopt a conversational style is to include the first person "I" in your communications. Although it may give some English and journalism teachers the jitters, I promise that when used appropriately, the first person will liberate your communications.

When I'm in meetings, I use the first person to talk about what I think. When I write blogs, I use the first person to share

ideas. What about presentations, phone calls, e-mails? All in the first person.

Bob Wyss, a staff writer at the *Providence Journal*, wrote about how uncomfortable it is to shift from the anonymous third person to the first, and yet, in the end, how it makes the story more interesting. “First-person stories always draw far more comments than third person. It is one of the few times readers notice the writer and the byline.”<sup>6</sup>

A Harvard Business School “Working Knowledge” review of the book *More Space: Nine Antidotes to Complacency in Business* criticized the writers’ use of the first person, yet acknowledged that the form made the book engaging. “Some of the writing here is self-absorbed—the most used letter in the *More Space* alphabet is ‘I,’” wrote Sean Silverthorne. “But the risk-taking with form and content ultimately pays off in a very readable, fresh, and insightful collection.” He added, “There is a passion for work and business that comes through.”<sup>7</sup>

People want fresh and insightful. Add more of the first person—“we,” “us,” and “I”—and you’ll deliver fresh and insightful marketing communications better than you would with the anonymous, impersonal third person “him,” “her,” and “them.”

### **3. Create more sound bites and let them go free**

Sound bites help people remember and talk about a point of view—more so than speaking points, messaging documents, elevator speeches, or any other form of communications. These short, punchy phrases are a shortcut to understanding.

Take points of view, turn them into sound bites, and let them go free—to the sales organization, public relations department, investor relations staff, customers, analysts, execu-

tives. They'll love you for it because sound bites help them tell a story, convey the company's value, and show why the organization is different.

Sound bites provide a Cliffs Notes™-like summary of an idea, a strategy, or a story. Some briefly tell the story. Others proclaim a cause, provoke discussion, question assumptions, summarize your value proposition, or use a metaphor to help explain. They are tools to draw people into discussions or to help you quickly convey your point. Some are witty and metaphorical; others simple but memorable.

- \* "Saegis is out to find the 'Viagra of the Brain.'" Saegis Pharmaceuticals, which is developing drugs to treat brain-based diseases like Alzheimer's.
- \* "Clean, safe, reliable. That's how to make money in the airline business." The mantra of Gordon Bethune when he was running Continental Airlines.
- \* "It's the economy, stupid." Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign mantra, focusing his campaign staff on voters' chief concern—economic insecurity.
- \* "Bring humanity back to air travel." JetBlue.
- \* "When tires fail, drivers should be able to pull over, not roll over." James Lampe, president, Bridgestone/Firestone.
- \* "If you make over \$300,000 a year, this tax cut means you get to buy a new Lexus. If you make \$50,000 a year, you get to buy a new muffler on your used car." Senator Tom Daschle.
- \* "To control market conversations, improve the conversations." Hugh MacLeod, blogging expert and consultant.
- \* "Online customer communities are like customer advisory groups on steroids." Diane Hessian, CEO, Communispace.
- \* "Real women have curves." Dove.

- \* “We’re going to eliminate the digital divide.” Sun Microsystems’ CEO Scott McNealy.
- \* “The medium is the message.” Author Marshall McLuhan.
- \* “If it doesn’t fit, you must acquit.” Lead OJ Simpson defense attorney Johnnie Cochran.

The test for a sound bite is that people make meaning from it. They have a better understanding of your perspective or unique position after hearing it. Marketers need many sound bites to help people understand multiple aspects of their company. In this way they are not tag lines.

As an aside, tag lines too often are so general and vague that they end up saying nothing about a company; they don’t help you understand anything. I’ve seen three organizations use “Now more than ever” as tag lines. Two completely unrelated businesses use, “Wouldn’t it be great?” What does that mean? It doesn’t help me understand anything.

Sound bites help in engaging people in conversations. Don’t try to force them to be all-purpose tag lines. For that matter, try to foster understanding by spending more time creating sound bites than tag lines. After all, on any given day, more people may talk about your company than read or watch its ads. Yet businesses spend a disproportionate amount of time and budget creating tag lines.

Some sound bites are clever, some are straightforward. Most are ten words or less. Some are just three mantra-like words. All should help people better understand the point of view.

#### **4. *Cut to the chase, say less***

Get to the point. Keep sentences short. Say less. Edit judiciously. Ask more questions. Use more pictures. Length and heft have little to do with value. Make sense?

### **5. *Get help from your invisible friend***

Many three-year-olds make sense of their worlds by talking to invisible, imaginary friends. The same approach can help marketers. Step back and think about how you'd start a conversation with a real person who is likely to buy the product or service.

For example, when I'm working with technology clients, I think of my neighbor Keith, who is a chief information officer of a multibillion-dollar company. Thinking about what he cares about, how he talks, and just how skeptical he is, helps me avoid jargon and focus on the one point he would find most interesting to talk about.

I imagine having a conversation with Keith. "Hey, Keith, what do you think of this new technology?" That's the helpful starting point. Sounds kind of juvenile. But it helps us mentally ditch the old all-about-the-company-nothing-about-the-customer style of corporate-speak.

### **6. *Tell more stories***

Stories are the oldest form of spoken communications. Use them more. People like, remember, and enjoy talking about stories in conversations.

"Stories are the large and small instruments of meaning, of explanation, that we store in our memories. We cannot live without them," says Joe Lambert, director of the nonprofit Center of Digital Storytelling. "So why is it that when many of us are asked to construct a story as a formal presentation to illustrate a point, we go blank?"<sup>8</sup>

One reason we go blank is that we try to make our stories say everything—and end up not saying much at all. Marketers often try to jam every product feature and benefit into customer stories. The stories end up more like convoluted, corporate-talk case studies—neither interesting nor memorable.

Stories don't have to be larger than life, showing how the company faced a dramatic turning point, summoned heroic courage, and succeeded where none have triumphed before. Many good stories are small personal stories that illustrate a point.

In fact, sometimes stories work better when they're less abundant, illustrating one company value, one unique product feature, one particularly appealing point of view, or how far your company goes to deliver on its promises.

A story that's become legend at Sapiient, a business and IT consulting firm, is how the company went to the mat to help a competitor meet a mutual client's deadline—all because of Sapiient's brand promise to deliver the right business results on time and on budget.

Sapiient and one of its competitors were working side by side on a large, complex IT project for a major corporation. Each was responsible for doing a part of the project. The project depended on both firms implementing their part of the job. But as the client deadline loomed, Sapiient realized that the other consulting firm had incorrectly scoped the project and was going to miss the deadline.

Instead of explaining to the client that the other company had messed up and that was why the project would take longer, Sapiient, quietly and on its own dime (or tens of thousands of dimes), assigned several of its people to help the competitor. Both company teams worked together, pulling several all-nighters to get the project done by the promised deadline.

The story helps people in the company understand that “on-time, on-budget” is not just a marketing line. It's a core belief. And all employees have the freedom to do whatever it takes to deliver on that belief.

Or consider this legend at Best Buy. “We had helicopters come to dry the pavement so the Detroit location could open on time. That’s folklore now,” said Steve Prather, vice president of internal communications for Best Buy.<sup>9</sup>

Timberland, the rugged footwear and outerwear company, has always prided itself on being an independent spirit company, doing things differently from its competitors. In explaining how he interviews potential employees to make sure they fit into the company culture, Timberland CEO Jeff Schwartz tells the story of how he asks job candidates to dress passionately and wear their favorite outfit (but no Timberlands!) to interviews with him. Schwartz says, “Once I had a guy show up in a really tight navy-blue suit. He said, ‘I got married in this suit. . . . I remember every single instant of my wedding.’ I said, ‘I love this guy!’ I can’t wait to have a creative discussion with him, because he’s going to fight for what he believes in.”<sup>10</sup>

How to capture and share more stories, more easily? Here are two simple ways.

First, give people a few questions to help them tell stories. Try not to use the typical, boring business questions such as “How did your company benefit from using the Acme router?” Or, “How would you quantify the return on your investment with us?”

Instead, use questions that open people up to sharing more specifics and more feelings. (Remember, emotion is the super-highway to meaning making.)

- \* “What surprised you the most about changing the way you do X?”
- \* “What does it mean *to you* personally to be able to run your business this way?”

- \* “Do you really think the change involved was worth it?”
- \* “How did it make you feel being able to do Y?”
- \* “Having done it, what advice would you give to people just starting out?”
- \* “What three words would you use to describe the experience?”
- \* “Would you recommend it?”
- \* “What annoyed you about the process?”

The second thing is to select someone to be in charge of collecting and organizing stories. Assign someone in marketing to create a database of company stories and anecdotes and classify them by topic so they're easy for people to find and use. Ask each sales rep to share at least two stories a year, and the CEO to share six.

Set up a special telephone number where people can call in stories as they hear them, otherwise they may forget them. Edit judiciously. Let the real words live. And, like sound bites, let the stories go free, making it easier and more interesting for people to talk about the company.

Hold a digital storytelling workshop at the annual sales or marketing meeting, with a competition among small teams to create two-minute digital movies that tell your value proposition in new ways. At the last day of the meeting, show the team movies and have an *American Idol*-style contest to vote on the three best movies. Then, make copies of the best movies for everyone in the sales force to use with customers.

You will be amazed at the buried talent in your people and the magic that they can create with a 250-word script, digital images, and a soundtrack. The nonprofit Center for Digital Storytelling has helped more than ten thousand people of all ages

and backgrounds, and all types of organizations, make these kinds of movies. Our firm produced one of these ten thousand stories. In three days, we learned how to convey what our firm is all about through just 278 words, 12 images, and a funky guitar soundtrack.

Fewer words. More stories.

### **7. *Be sincere and frank***

Mean what you say and say what you mean. When in doubt, leave it out. Heeding these old adages still makes sense.

In his book *Winning*, Jack Welch laments that the pervasive lack of candor is “the biggest dirty little secret in business.” He explains, “Too many people—too often—instinctively don’t express themselves with frankness. They don’t communicate straightforwardly or put forth ideas looking to stimulate real debate. But when you’ve got candor, everything just operates faster and better.”<sup>11</sup>

Former New York governor Mario Cuomo, recognized as one of our country’s most superb orators, says that sincerity and tapping both the head and the heart are the secret to delivering moving speeches. “The most important thing in oration is to be sincere,” he explained. “You don’t have to use extravagant metaphors and Kennedy litanies. You don’t have to be William Buckley to find the right language. And if you speak only to their hearts and you slight their minds, then they’ll come away offended. And if you speak only to their minds, then you don’t come away with a moving speech.”<sup>12</sup>

Intellectual food fights, candid debates, and frank perspectives help speed understanding. Don’t hide behind overly polite language, “safe” topics, and accepted business jargon. It clouds rather than clarifies.

### 8. *Use good headlines*

Using a good headline helps in three ways. It forces us to summarize the point of what we want to say. It focuses our ideas for a presentation, or helps shape a meeting agenda. It also helps as a subject line in e-mails, blogs, and online community postings, those highly conversational media that just happen to be written.

A headline isn't meant to be written exactly how we talk. Headlines are shorthand; they lack words we'd use in conversation, but they help readers get the point quickly. The elements of a good headline include the following:

- \* Grabs attention while also summarizing your point: *Do men lack ambition?* versus *10-year behavioral research study explores male attitudes toward work.*
- \* Uses present tense, active verb: *Acme Industries nets software contract* (present tense) versus *Software contract netted by Acme Industries* (past tense).
- \* Is brief: *U2 rocks.*
- \* Readers get it on the first take: *Read my lips. No new taxes.*
- \* Provides specifics: *Acme revenues up 18 percent; profits soar to 30 percent* versus *Earnings released at Acme Corporation today.*
- \* Uses short, common words. *Fed raises rates.*

### 9. *Eliminate worthless buzzwords, phrases, and adjectives*

Eliminate the groaners—those overused buzzwords and phrases that add little value. Here are some favorite offenders, collected by writer and public relations adviser Nathan Silverman and featured by BuzzKiller.net, a site formed by business journalists in the late 1990s to showcase the inanity of corporate jargon.

<b><i>Buzzword, overused adjective</i></b>	<b><i>What it really means</i></b>
Strategic	We do the same stuff as everybody else, but “strategic” sounds impressive.
Aggressive	Given a chance, we’ll annoy everybody.
Full-service	We’ll try to sell you anything.
Leading supplier	No one has ever heard of us, but if you look at this tiny niche in which we’ve positioned ourselves, we’re practically a Microsoft.
Have-to-have	You folks fell for “peer-to-peer” and “business-to-business,” so surely you’ll fall for this mumbo jumbo.
Ramping	We’re getting ready to introduce a new product, but we’re six months behind.
Major breakthrough	We finally figured out how to deliver on all the promises we’ve been making for the past couple of years.
Robust	This product works big time. It’s no weakling, wannabe. Really.

Other business drivel to avoid:

Core competencies

Best practices

24/7

On the ground

Win-win

Results-driven

Empower

Mission-critical

Turnkey

Fast track

Value-added

Synergy

Solutions

All verbs and nonsensical words that have “-ize” tacked onto them, e.g., “incentivize” and even “utilize” (“use” works better)

### 10. *Write it down*

A late-night talk-show host asked prolific “redneck” comedian Jeff Foxworthy how he got his material. Foxworthy said that he watches everyday life and writes everything down.

One of his jokes is: “If you’ve ever slow danced in a Waffle House, you might be a redneck.” He got the joke one night while waiting for a table at a Waffle House. “You ever eaten in a Waffle House, like one in the morning?” he asked radio DJ Paul Harris. “You have the people waiting for a booth to open—and if you’re waiting in line at a Waffle House you’ve had a toddy or two. The jukebox was playing and I guess this couple got bored and they started slow dancing and I said, ‘Hand me a napkin, I’m writing that down.’”<sup>13</sup>

Foxworthy believes that more people could write funny material if they just got in the habit of writing things down. Foxworthy jots copious notes and ideas as he sees them. Other writers use the same technique. That’s why they have so much good material, drawn from real-world observations and events.

The same technique helps in business. Jot down phrases, language, metaphors, stories, and ideas that you hear in conversations as soon as you hear them. Carry index cards and put one idea on a card as the ideas come. Or set up an idea place in your

PDA. Capture them before they escape. These notes are the clues to what people are talking about—and how they’re talking about them, in context and in style.

**The language of conversation is  
the language of understanding**

Why include a chapter that reviews much of what we already know about the value of straight talk? Because plain-speak is the language of conversations; conversations are the language of understanding; and creating understanding is the purpose of marketing.

Chapter 7 explores how to deprogram from the “talk at” marketing mentality and adopt a conversational marketing mind-set.