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Stunningly Awful Demo Communication – *Unencrispening the Demo*

The higher the customer's job title, typically, the stronger is their desire for vendors to be crisp, focused and precise in their communications. "Get to the point!" is what many senior managers are thinking, even if they don't say it out loud. Instead, their actions often speak louder than words, as they quietly get up and walk out of the demo after just a few minutes...

Here are a few areas where we can likely improve our verbal delivery in demos:

Mixed Metaphors

"This will help you knock it out of the park and out-flank your competition...!" says the vendor.

"Huh?" thinks the customer – who misses the next several sentences as he chews on the verbal gristle he was just served... If you are going to use a metaphor, stay with it! Don't swap horses in the middle of the meal! (How's that for a bad one?) Here are a few more, just for illustrative fun:

"I don't think we should wait until the other shoe drops. History has already shown what is likely to happen. The ball has been down this court before and I can see already the light at the end of the tunnel."

(*Detroit News*, quoted in *The New Yorker*, November 26, 2012)

"I knew enough to realize that the alligators were in the swamp and that it was time to circle the wagons."

(attributed to Rush Limbaugh)

"The committee was tired of stoking public outrage with fortnightly gobbets of scandal. It decided to publish everything it had left, warts and all. Now everyone is tarred with the same ugly brush, and the myth that forever simmers in the public consciousness--that the House shelters 435 parasitic, fat-cat deadbeats--has received another shot of adrenalin."

(*Washington Post*, 1992)

"I've decided to put down roots and send up a trial balloon – I'm throwing my hat in the ring...!"

(anonymous, for now)

Blech and gack.

Inappropriate Analogies

“We eat our own dog food...!”

Ick, really? Why *would* you do that? Instead, contemplate communicating the same idea with a gentler version, “We drink our own champagne.” Much more palatable!

Your vs. You’re

This is just sloppy writing and proofing – but how many times do you see someone use “your” when they should have written “you’re”? Just saw an example recently: “Your really going to like this upcoming release!” Sigh.

Don’t you wish your word processor had a “reality checker” in addition to its spell-checker and grammar checker?

Colloquialisms

A few years back I was hosting a visit to our facilities by a group of Japanese customers, whose English was fairly good (but not complete). At one point in the discussion our head of development responded to a question regarding timing for delivery of a specific capability – he was then asked, “How did you come up with that timing?”

He replied, “Oh, I just pulled those numbers out of my butt...” I watched our customers’ faces as they contorted, trying to make sense of his answer... Fortunately, one of our guests was able to understand the idea and provided his colleagues with a more accurate (and less literal) translation – and smiles and nodding heads replaced the perplexed (and slightly frightened) expressions.

Many U.S.-based sales, presales and marketing people communicate as if the rest of the world has fully adopted our version of English. They are, of course, in error. They have missed the pitch, dropped the ball, fumbled the handoff, and simply not make the extra point. (How’s that for a combo with mixed metaphors?)

Solution? When presenting to international audiences, consciously choose vocabulary and word phrases that are simple, clear and as internationally universal as possible.

Two Countries Separated By a Common Language

This famous quote by Winston Churchill highlights additional differences in English spoken in different locations. A number of years ago, we had a Marketing Communications (MarCom) group that was not particularly well-beloved by the field sales and presales organization. The result was this rather embarrassing story:

The MarCom group typically provided “give-aways” for the various trade-shows that we attended. In one case, they produced a particular piece of apparel complete with our logo brightly imprinted for a trade-show in London. Now, in the U.S. this particular item is called a “Fanny Pack”. In the UK, “Fanny Pack” has, well, a different meaning (you are welcome to look it up yourself...!).

Our MarCom group generated signage for our booth at the show, emblazoned liberally with “Get Your Fanny Packs Here!” The signage was installed at the booth and when the show opened it certainly attracted more attention than our MarCom folks had anticipated...! An (embarrassingly high) number of UK customers came to the booth and asked, rather loudly in many cases and with great mirth with others, “Can I please have a fanny pack?”

Sigh.

Regional Differences

You, Y’all and All Y’all: Which is singular and which is plural?

Add these to the list above... But wait, there’s more...!

Slinging Slang: That Dog Don’t Hunt and Other Homilies

In San Diego, “Gnarly, Dude...!” is an expression of appreciation (and/or the presence of large, thin-lipped, glassy, tubular waves – or exactly the opposite: slow, blown-out mushburgers).

In New Hampshire, you may be told, “But it won’t do you no good, you can’t get there from here...” (pronounced “heah”), meaning your directions are faulty.

In the Carolinas, “That dog don’t hunt” indicates that your suggestion likely won’t work.

In Texas, “It’s fixin’ to rain” is a weather forecast and “fixin’ to...” indicates that something is likely to happen.

In Hawaii, “Da kine!” is what you want to hear, in conjunction with an accompanying “shaka.”

And here’s a beauty that combines several items from the topics above:

“I conclude that the city’s proposal to skim the frosting, pocket the cake, and avoid paying the fair, reasonable, and affordable value of the meal is a hound that will not hunt.”

(a labor arbitrator, quoted by the *Boston Globe*, May 8, 2010)

Solution? Again, choose verbiage that is as neutral as possible – particularly when working with international groups or customers from diverse U.S. locations.

International Equivalences

“It’s awesome!” in the U.S. is the same as “Ja, well, it is adequate” in Germany and the UK’s “That’s brilliant!” (but it is likely that the UK offering was really meant to be sarcastic...).

Listen closely!

Cloudy With a Chance of Feature Obscuration

Vendor says, “For this next new feature let me explain our thinking and rationale for development...” followed by “and here’s the underlying architecture, schema and data organization...,” which leads to “the seventeen options for configuration and set-up,” “the three different ways of accomplishing the same task” and the “hundreds of pre-built templates and reports we’ve generated...”

The customer, reeling under this onslaught of verbal rubbish and useless details, wonders “Where is this going...?” followed minutes later by “When will this be over?”
Solution? Start with what good things the new capability will enable – the relevant deliverables – and then offer explore it in as much depth as the *customer* is interested in seeing...!

Note that the affliction above often develops into a more violent and virulent form, known as...

Expert’s Disease

Many of us with technical backgrounds feel obligated to explain *how* things work – before providing the simple answer desired by the customer. For example, your customer asks, “What time is it?”

You respond, “Well, in order to tell you the time, let me first explain how a watch works. Now in *this* watch, the time is metered by a small quartz tuning fork that vibrates at a constant frequency – assuming, of course, that it is in a sealed environment, because the density of the surrounding medium *will* impact the actual vibration frequency. Now the older manual watches used a coiled spring and an escapement mechanism, which operated on the principle of an impulse action and a locking action, actuated generally with either a pendulum (in large, standing clocks) or a rotating balance wheel and um... sorry, what was your question again...?”

A solution? Answer the immediate question right away – and then test (ask) if your customer desires further elucidation.

Kinda, Like, Sorta, Ya Know?

As noted at the beginning of this article, the higher the job title, typically, the stronger is that person’s desire for vendors to be crisp, focused and precise with their communications. Imagine the reaction of a 55 year-old Senior VP to a vendor saying, “And like here, kinda, are the types of reports that we, like, sorta do, ya know...?”

Instead, be precise: “These are three examples of reports you can produce with our tool.” Much better!

The Content-Free Buzzword-Compliant Vocabulary List

In a demo, the vendor states, “Our powerful software is flexible, intuitive, easy-to-use and integrates seamlessly with your other tools. Robust and scalable, your organization can enjoy the benefits of our best-of-breed world-class offering – the most comprehensive solution available.”

What have you learned so far? Nothing, other than this person is clearly a talking marketing brochure (and that you may be able to declare victory in “Buzzword Bingo...”)! Vendor credibility drops precipitously and the audience furtively starts to check email and the sports scores on their smart phones...

Robust, Powerful, Flexible, Integrated, Seamless, Extensible, Scalable, Interoperable, Easy-to-use, Intuitive, User-friendly, Comprehensive, Best-of-breed, World-class – any to add to the list?

[Pet peeve: “Most comprehensive”? Impossible! Something is either comprehensive or it’s not!]

A solution? Convert these meaningless buzzwords to concrete, fact-based statements that can be supported by evidence – where the evidence is the capabilities and processes you demonstrate.

Faux Fictional Names

“In our demo we’ll be using the following characters for our storyline:

Mary the Manager	Andrew the Admin	Ulysses the User
Oscar the Occasional User	Ernie the Expert User	Theodore the Third Party
Sean the Senior Manager	Victoria the VP	Alex from Accounting ...”

This tactic has two drawbacks:

First, one of our objectives in a demo is to *suspend* disbelief – and anything that is obviously fake *hurts* our cause. As a result, I don’t recommend fake names such as those above.

Second, asking the audience to remember the relationship between “Mary” and her job title has the additional negative impact of consuming the (far too) limited number of memory slots we humans have available.

Solution? Use the wonderful pronoun (and its derivatives) “You”:

“So, here *you* would see the report you need to manage this process...”

“*Your* team would then receive this alert...”

“And here’s where *you* and *your* expert users could configure the system...”

Your objective is to build a vision in your customers' minds that *they* are using the software.

Fabulous Phony Fictional Names

I've seen databases populated with the names of Hollywood stars, movie characters, comic-book creatures and sports figures. Don't. Just don't – it's even worse than above and screams "fake"!

Encrispen!

Our demos need to be clear, concise and compelling. To achieve this, we need to focus carefully on both what we show and how we present it.

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