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by Joan Lowery, M.Ed

JAR GON

It has become a public relations nightmare leading to misinformation, disinformation and misunderstanding by journalists, customers and the public

a new PR staff member working with a high-tech team of marketing and engineering professionals was caught off guard when she heard one engineer say, "Let's take that on a bilateral bus off-line." Translation: "Let's talk about it after the meeting." Or as someone else who lives in the jargon-as-English camp might have said at the same meeting, "You know, I just don't have the bandwidth to go into that space right now." Translation: "I don't have time to explore that issue at the moment."

By the way, just for accuracy's sake, my engineering

friends tell me that "a bilateral bus off-line" isn't exactly correct usage. And they're only too willing to offer me the correct technical way of delivering that simple, yet very complex, message. But the point I'm trying to make here is that jargon has so infiltrated a number of professions that it is used not only to explain technical data in unintelligible ways to the uninitiated, but also to communicate basic everyday messages in ways that frustrate and alienate those who aren't part of the inner circle. In short, it has become a public relations nightmare leading to misinformation, disinformation and misunderstanding by journalists, customers and the public.

Another popular form of "jargoneering" is what I call "the parade of acronyms." It includes terms like BIOS, PCMCIA, RAM, ROM, USB. The list is endless. The third type of jargon, which is probably less harmful but still quite irritating, is the rampant use of clichés, such as "latest and greatest" and "the goodness of the PC." Excuse me for being impolite, but I wasn't aware that the PC holds moral sway in our society!

the problem

Jargon in the high-tech world, where I spend most of my working hours, has reached epidemic proportions. It's used



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indiscriminately and pervasively without careful consideration of whether or not the person hearing the jargon understands the messenger. If you do ask someone to explain what a jargon word means, you're likely to be met with more jargon in the explanation. The poor receiver of the message doesn't know where to begin deciphering the terms.

Perhaps the saddest part is that the person using the jargon often doesn't realize that he or she is being misunderstood or written off as yet "another geek" who can't communicate. The well-meaning communicator, in opting for jargon, has lost a valuable opportunity to communicate about his or her passion with a potential customer base. In short, jargon has become another way to separate "the in-group from the out-group." Knowingly or unknowingly, jargon has become the lazy man's way to avoid wrestling with how to communicate clearly, concisely and with passion to others who may not understand the concepts that some of us live and breathe each day.

The result? Multiple missed opportunities for educating customers, consumers, journalists, investors and the general public. In the case of journalists, if corporate spokespeople use jargon, it's left solely up to reporters, who may or may not be technology experts, to define these words for their readers. Take the combination of a potentially less than adequate understanding of jargon with a race to meet story deadlines, and you have a recipe for inaccuracy.

In the case of potential customers, poorly defined jargon can easily result in a lack of appreciation about what the product or technology can really do for them. If they do not understand the terms being used to describe its advantages, it's hard to get excited about the breakthrough that it represents. There will very likely be missed opportunities to sell products, technologies, ideas that could benefit both business and personal users. Ultimately we all lose out when we do not clearly understand what these terms mean and, more important, what benefits they will bring to our lives.

the "so what?" solution

The solution to this sorry state of communication lies in a simple notion: Know Your Audience. Effective communicators in any environment must understand the knowledge base of their audience; they must know what the audience is interested in; and they must be capable of stating clearly why a particular audience should actually care about the topic. In other words, what are the specific, tangible benefits that are available to this audience if they buy this product, technology, specification or idea?

A senior-level public relations professional from a leading high-tech organization I've worked with takes great pride in calling herself the "So What? Lady." In her organization, when people come to her with what they consider to be a great new story idea they want her to promote, she puts it through the "So What?" test. "So What" will it do for the people we are trying to target our communication toward? "So Why" should they care about this new idea, product or technology?

Just imagine if we held ourselves to this same practice when it comes to using jargon! "So What?" I would ask you when you spout off your latest technical babble. What if you were to exercise the discipline to explain that word clearly and concisely — not only what it means, but why I, your audience, should care about it?

If you were to actually use the "So What?" challenge to test your communication, you would be exercising a vigor we seldom witness. You would be gearing your message for the target audience and speaking in language that I, your audience, could understand and appreciate!

What if we were to take this process of clearly and responsibly defining our terms a step further and use this definition as a true marketing opportunity? What if we were to use our definition also to establish our product and company's leadership position in the particular arena we play in? What if we were not only to explain the word

clearly so that our listener could understand it, but also to establish the benefits of this term firmly in the listener's mind, while putting in a powerful plug for our particular organization in the process? Now that would be clear, concise, compelling and relevant information with a marketing focus.

How could that be done, you ask? We must first understand the differences between how technologists and lay people process information. Then we can create a strategy for dramatically improving communication between the two groups.

the source of misunderstanding between technologists and non-technologists

Working closely with technology and scientific types, I have discovered what I believe to be at the crux of a great deal of the misunderstandings that regularly occur between technologists and lay people. More than anything else, it has to do with the difference between how scientists approach information and how generalists approach information. Surely, then, addressing this communication issue effectively is worthwhile, because it can potentially give a company a decided competitive advantage. It can affect whether a company succeeds or fails to win more customers. Approaching this issue with energy and commitment can subtract from or add to a company's ultimate bottom line. Now let's take a look at the inductive and deductive methods of communication and how each affects the jargon phenomenon.

the inductive approach

Scientists and technology types are trained in the inductive approach. Webster's New World Dictionary defines inductive as "reasoning from particular facts to a general conclusion." This is represented most clearly by the scientific method, in which we are very detailed in our thinking to arrive at a clearly supportable conclusion.

Try asking an engineer or other technology professional for a definition of a jargon word, and he is more than likely to launch directly into the tried-and-true inductive approach. It's not only a question of how techies think, it's also a professional integrity issue for them. Technologists are, after all, very concerned with accuracy. They feel that it is their moral obligation to set a comprehensive, highly accurate context for any information that they are going to stand behind. Their commitment to data accuracy is both honorable and essential to their work. But when it comes to communicating with a non-technical audience, it can result in some serious miscommunication because the details often confuse the listener, rather than help.

For example, ask an engineer who hasn't worked with audience-focused jargon translation to define a word such as *bandwidth* to a non-technology type and you're likely to get these types of long-winded answers:

"In order to understand *bandwidth*, we must understand how information moves around both within and between devices. For example, in a PC, there are several different technologies at play that impact bandwidth. There is the..."

The approach above is contextual and is setting us up for a long and very likely rambling explanation. It does not offer us an outright definition.

Alternatively, the technologist may say something like "Bandwidth is like the difference between a four-lane highway and a two-lane highway, or the difference between a garden hose and a fire hose."

These are great analogies that can be used to help the listener better understand the importance of bandwidth, but they should come after the basic definition, not before it. Otherwise the analogy tends to leave the uninitiated listener confused about where the conversation is headed and no clearer about the actual definition of the word.

translating jargon into english for generalists: the deductive approach

By now, you've noticed that nowhere in anything that's been stated so far is there a clear definition of the term *bandwidth*. In choosing to take an inductive, or detail-oriented approach, the communicator has chosen to present details

instead of getting to the heart of the matter by simply presenting the requested definition.

For getting to the point and answering the question "What is bandwidth?" we are better off using the deductive, or what I call the "Headline News" approach. Webster's New World Dictionary defines deductive as "reasoning from general to specific." Why is this "get to the heart of the matter" approach more effective for our listener who wants to know the definition of bandwidth? Because it allows us

to answer the question clearly, directly and without confusing him with a lot of details.

A deductive approach to defining bandwidth might be:

Bandwidth is the rate and amount of information that can be passed between two or more electronic devices—such as between a PC and a telephone line that connects you to the Internet. The more bandwidth you have, the quicker the information can be received. So, for example, if you're downloading photos, charts or video from the Internet, you want greater bandwidth. Increasing bandwidth is a critical issue in enhancing the quality and effectiveness of communication and (company name) is a leader in introducing

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products and technologies that dramatically expand bandwidth. Our latest (product or technology name) increases bandwidth 10x, making conducting business across the Internet faster, cheaper and far more efficient.

A brief analysis of the preceding deductive definition reveals that not only have we clearly defined what bandwidth is, but in the process, we have also accomplished a number of desirable outcomes:

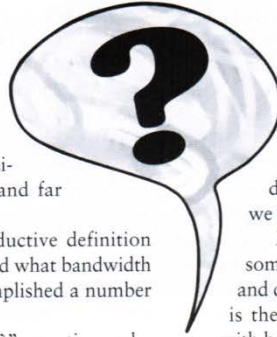
- We have addressed the “So What?” question, why bandwidth is important.
- We have provided some relevant examples of the value we get from higher bandwidth.
- We have created a marketing opportunity by connecting the speaker’s company name with the latest products/ technologies that expand bandwidth.
- We have clearly presented some of the important benefits to users of the product or technology with higher bandwidth.
- Within the simple definition we have established the company’s leadership position.

By making our last statement compelling, we have gently led the listener (or reporter) to ask the next question that we want her to ask.

In the example above, the likely next question would be: How does (product name) manage to increase bandwidth 10x? The speaker now has the opportunity to talk further about the advantages of the new product or technology. You’ll notice we have achieved all of this in only five sentences! In many cases, the clear answer, combined with a marketing plug, can be accomplished in as few as two or three sentences. Instead of alienating the listener with an obtuse definition, by using the deductive process the spokesperson has piqued her interest to explore the issue further.

Although the jargon translation process may look easy, it is no simple task. We all have a tendency to absorb and later explain things in ways that are fairly habitual for us. For better or worse, when asked to give a definition, many of us tend to opt for presenting the history or context of a product or technology rather than simply defining it.

The tendency to go for an inductive, and often confusing, approach to defining terms becomes stunningly clear during the jargon sessions I conduct for clients. After struggling to become more deductive in their communication, at some point someone usually has that delightful “aha” experience. “Ah,” he says, “this reminds me of what my wife often tells



me. She says that whenever she asks me the time, I tell her how to build the clock!”

That is exactly right. When someone asks for the time, we should simply tell her the correct time. When someone needs to know a definition in order to follow our conversation, we must supply him with the definition.

Mastering the jargon translation process takes some effort, but the good news is that with practice and discipline it can be learned and mastered. Practice is the key word. Many of the groups I’ve worked with have told me that they now incorporate the jargon translation method directly into their marketing. They work together to create clearly thought-out definitions that also include compelling marketing messages. For fun and flexibility, they’ll throw out the latest jargon terms at their gatherings and practice using the translation process spontaneously and creatively.

the communicator as educator

The role of today’s effective communicator is that of an educator. To achieve the desired learning, marketing, or sales outcomes, all educators must understand their audience. They must be able to speak to the specific concerns and interests of that audience and be benefits-oriented in their presentation. So the person who is addressing a group of analysts will use language and definitions that make sense to analysts. That same communicator may at other times be talking to someone within her own company who is critical to getting buy-in for a new technology or product. She may be talking to a reporter, or a customer, or maybe to the ultimate consumer. Each of these audiences has very different needs, and it’s the communicator’s responsibility to speak the language of each specific group and to take a benefits-oriented approach that responds to that particular group’s concerns.

Jargon translation provides yet another opportunity to tailor communication to the knowledge, interest and need levels of a variety of audiences. It moves communicators out of the elitist approach into a more responsive, consultative framework. Ultimately, it makes the whole interaction more interesting and meaningful for everyone involved. With clear, benefits-oriented communication, our chances are improved for meeting the worthy goal of gaining widespread market acceptance of our product, technology or idea.

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