



The Gobbledygook Manifesto

By David Meerman Scott

Oh jeez, not another flexible, scalable, groundbreaking,

industry-standard, cutting-edge product from a market-leading, well positioned company! Ugh.

I think I'm gonna puke! Just like with a teenager's use of catch phrases, I notice the same words cropping up again and again in Web sites and news releases—so much so that the gobbledygook grates against my nerves and many other people's, too. Well, duh. Like, companies just totally don't communicate very well, you know?

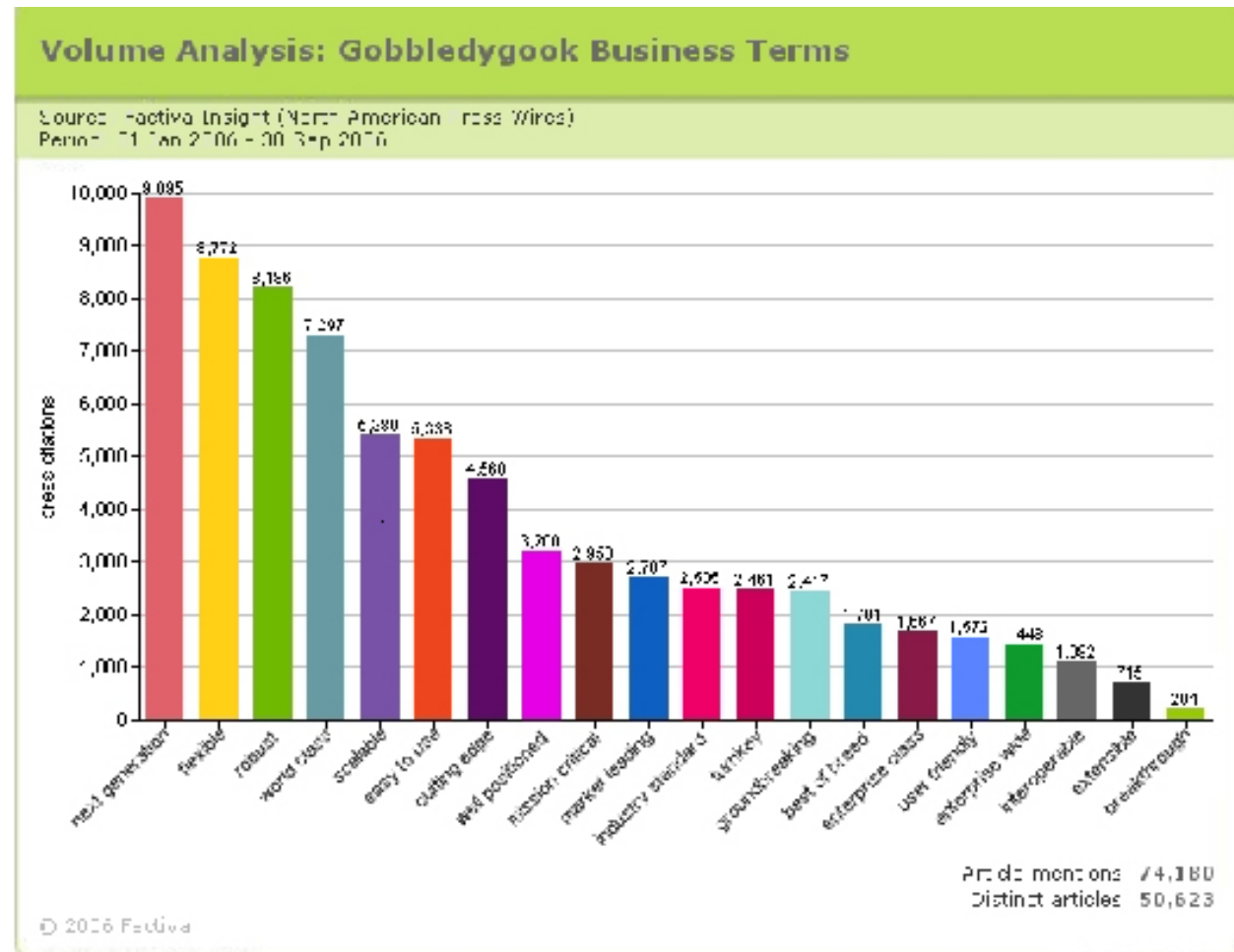
So few marketing and PR people write well. Many of the thousands of Web sites I've analyzed over the years and the hundred or so news releases I receive each week from well-meaning PR people are laden with these gobbledygook adjectives. So I wanted to see exactly how many of these words are being used, and created an analysis to do so.

AN ANALYSIS OF GOBBLEDYGOOK

First, I selected words and phrases that are overused in news releases by polling select PR people and journalists to get a list of gobbledygook phrases. Then I turned to [Factiva](#) from Dow Jones for help with my analysis. The folks at the Factiva Reputation Lab used text mining tools to analyze news releases sent by companies in North America. Factiva analyzed each release in its database that had been sent to one of the North American news release wires it distributes for the period from January 1, 2006, to September 30, 2006. The news release wires included in the analysis were Business Wire, Canada NewsWire, CCNMatthews, Commweb.com, Market Wire, Moody's, PR Newswire, and Primezone Media Network.

The results were staggering. The news release wires collectively distributed just over 388,000 news releases in the nine-month period, and just over 74,000 of them mentioned at least one of the Gobbledygook phrases. The winner was "next generation," with 9,895 uses. There were over 5,000

uses of each of the following words and phrases: “flexible,” “robust,” “world class,” “scalable,” and “easy to use.” Other notably overused phrases with between 2,000 and 5,000 uses included “cutting edge,” “mission critical,” “market leading,” “industry standard,” “turnkey,” and “groundbreaking.” Oh and don’t forget “interoperable,” “best of breed,” and “user friendly,” each with over 1,000 uses in news releases.



WRITE FOR YOUR BUYERS

Your buyers (and the media that cover your company) want to know what specific problems your product solves, and they want proof that it works—in plain language. Your marketing and PR is meant to be the beginning of a relationship with buyers and to drive action (such as generating sales leads), which requires a focus on buyer problems. Your buyers want to hear this in their own words. Every time you write—yes, even in news releases—you have an opportunity to communicate. At each stage of the sales process, well-written materials will help your buyers understand how you, specifically, will help them.

Because these writers don't understand how their products solve customer problems, they cover by explaining how the product works and pepper this blather with industry jargon.

Whenever you set out to write something, you should be writing specifically for one or more of the buyers that you want to reach. You should avoid jargon-laden phrases that are over-used in your industry. In the technology business, words like “groundbreaking,” “industry-standard,” and “cutting-edge” are what I call gobbledygook. The worst gobbledygook offenders seem to be business-to-business technology companies. For some reason, marketing people at technology companies have a particularly tough time explaining how products solve customer problems. Because these writers don't understand how their products solve customer problems, or are too

lazy to write for buyers, they cover by explaining myriad nuances of how the product works and pepper this blather with industry jargon that sounds vaguely impressive. What ends up in marketing materials and news releases is a bunch of talk about “industry-leading” solutions that purport to help companies “streamline business process,” “achieve business objectives,” or “conserve organizational resources.” Huh?

Just saying your widget is “industry standard” means nothing unless some aspect of that standardization is important to your buyers.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

When I see words like “flexible,” “scalable,” “groundbreaking,” “industry standard,” or “cutting-edge,” my eyes glaze over. What, I ask myself, is this supposed to mean? Just saying your widget is “industry standard” means nothing unless some aspect of that standardization is important to your buyers. In the next sentence, I want to know what you mean by “industry standard,” and I also want you to tell me why that standard matters and give me some proof that what you say is indeed true.

People often say to me, “Everyone in my industry writes this way. Why?” Here’s how the usual dysfunctional process works and why these phrases are so overused: Marketers don’t understand buyers, the problems buyers face, or how their product helps solve these problems. That’s where the gobbledygook happens. First the marketing person bugs the product managers and others in the organization to provide a set of the product’s features. Then the marketing person reverse-

engineers the language that they think the buyer wants to hear based not on buyer input but on what the product does. A favorite trick these ineffective marketers use is to take the language that the product manager provides, go into Microsoft Word's find-and-replace mode, substitute the word "solution" for "product," and then slather the whole thing with superlative-laden, jargon-sprinkled hype. By just decreeing, through an electronic word substitution, that "our product" is "your solution," these companies effectively deprive themselves of the opportunity to convince people that this is the case.

Another major drawback of the generic gobbledygook approach is that it doesn't make your company stand out from the crowd. Here's a test: Take the language that the marketers at your company dreamed up and substitute the name of a competitor and the competitor's product for your own. Does it still make sense to you? Marketing language that can be substituted for another company's isn't effective in explaining to a buyer why your company is the right choice.

"Hold on," you might say. "The technology industry may be dysfunctional, but I don't write that way." I'll admit that the gobbledygook phrases I chose are mainly used by technology companies operating in the business-to-business space. If you are writing for a company that sells different kinds of products (shoes, perhaps), then you would probably not be tempted to use many of the above phrases. The same thing is true for nonprofits, churches, rock bands, and other organizations—you're also unlikely to use these sorts of phrases. But the lessons are the same.

The fact is that there is equivalent nonsense going on in all industries. Here's an example from the world of local government. *"The sustainability group has convened a task force to study the cause of energy inefficiency and to develop a plan to encourage local businesses to apply renewable-energy and energy-efficient technologies which will go a long way toward encouraging community buy-in to potential behavioral changes."* What the heck is that?

Here's the rule: when you write, start with your buyers, not with your product.

Or consider this example from the first paragraph of a well-known company's corporate overview page. "...[Company X] has remained faithful in its commitment to producing unparalleled entertainment experiences based on its rich legacy of quality creative content and exceptional storytelling. Today, [Company X] is divided into four major business segments... Each segment consists of integrated, well-connected businesses that operate in concert to maximize exposure and growth worldwide." Can you guess the company?

EFFECTIVE WRITING FOR MARKETING AND PR

Your marketing and PR is meant to be the beginning of a relationship with buyers (and journalists). This begins when you work at understanding your target audience and figure out how they should be sliced into distinct buying segments or buyer personas. Once this exercise is complete, identify the situations each target audience may find themselves in. What are their problems? Business issues? Needs? Only then are you ready to communicate your expertise to the market. Here's the rule: when you write, start with your buyers, not with your product.

Consider the entertainment company paragraph. The marketing and PR folks at Disney (Did you guess it was [Disney's corporate overview page](#) I quoted from above?) should be thinking about what customers want from an entertainment company, rather than just thinking up fancy words for what they think they already provide.

At each stage of the sales process, well-written materials combined with effective marketing programs will lead your buyers to understand how your company can help them.

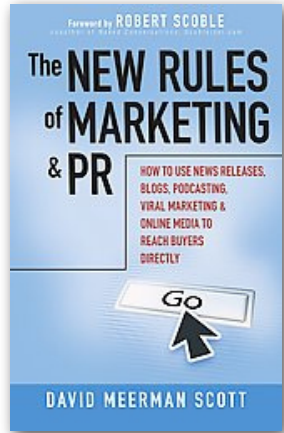
Why not start by defining the problem? Many television and cinema fans today are frustrated with the state of the American entertainment industry. They believe today's films and shows are too derivative and that entertainment companies don't respect their viewers' intelligence.

Next, successful marketers will use real-world language to convince their customers that they can solve their problem. Be careful to avoid corporate jargon, but you don't want to sound like you're trying too hard either—that always comes across as phony. Talk to your audience as you might talk to a relative you don't see too often—be friendly and familiar but also respectful: *Like our audience, we care about and enjoy movies and TV shows—that's why we're in this business in the first place. As such, we pledge to always...* Now I have no connection with Disney and don't know about the Disney business. But I have purchased a lot Disney products: movies, TV shows, videos, and passes to theme parks. It might seem strange to people at Disney to actually write something like I suggest. It might feel strange for the PR and marketing people at Disney to use a phrase like *movies and TV shows* rather than *quality entertainment content*, but that it's absolutely essential to establishing a relationship with customers.

Your online and offline marketing content is meant to drive action (such as generating sales leads), which requires a focus on buyer problems. Your buyers want this in their own words, and then they want proof. Every time you write, you have an opportunity to communicate and to convince.

At each stage of the sales process, well- written materials combined with effective marketing programs will lead your buyers to understand how your company can help them.

*Good marketing is rare indeed,
but a focus on doing it right will most
certainly pay off with increased
sales, higher retention rates, and more
ink from journalists.*



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Get more details or buy a copy of Scott's [*The New Rules of Marketing and PR.*](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[David Meerman Scott](#) is an online thought leadership and viral marketing strategist. The programs he has developed have won numerous awards and are responsible for selling over one billion dollars in products and services worldwide. He is the author of *The New Rules of Marketing and PR: How to Use News Releases, Blogs, Viral Marketing and Online Media to Reach Buyers Directly*, a number one bestselling book in the PR and marketing category. Scott has lived and worked in New York, Tokyo, Boston, and Hong Kong and has presented at industry conferences and events in over twenty countries on four continents. He blogs at www.WebInkNow.com.

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