

# Wise to the Words

**Bull backfires in business communications. Cut it and capture your audience.**

By Chelsea Hardaway and Jon Warshawsky

**S**on, it is imperative that you optimize your newspaper delivery methodology to maximize its value-add and generate significant cash reserves, which you can then earmark for the bicycle procurement initiative.

Imagine if we used our workplace voice to tell our kids about the real world. They would think us even bigger idiots than they already do. In fact, it would be impossible to get them to do anything. Yet this is the way many business leaders communicate with employees, customers and shareholders. From bloated jargon and monotonous memos, to syrupy slogans and deadily dull presentations, bull has become the language of business.

A quick glance through the bulging Unread Deleted Items folder of our email box confirms this: "Total Value Initiative" reads one subject line. "Enterprise Realignment," another one cheers.

Of course, there are reasons we talk the way we do. Fear of litigation inspires a shield of disclaimers, caveats and legalese. Fear that internal documents will wind up in the hands of a journalist (or posted on the Internet) inspires an impersonal corporate drone that is long on generic language and short on specifics.

The main reason we talk this way, however, is that we learn to do it in business school, and then we become immersed in a corporate culture that reinforces it. Yet there are companies large and small—Google, Apple, Amazon.com, Flickr and Berkshire Hathaway, to name a few—that manage to avoid all this pressure and instead speak with a voice that is candid, loaded with personality and sprinkled with humor. People listen when the message is clear, while bull-laden language only turns them off and makes them want to tune out.

Speaking bull is not an easy habit to break, but we have seen it done. It starts with hearing ourselves from the listener's perspective. Consider, for example, these common traps that ensnare well-meaning leaders on a daily basis:

## THE OBSCURITY TRAP

*This is the kind of synergistic, customer-centric, out-of-the-box, best-of-breed thought leadership that will help our clients track to true north. Let's fly this up the flagpole and see where the pushback is.*

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The listener hears this spiel and figures it must be a smoke screen. The speaker must not really know what he is talking about. Beyond jargon, the Obscurity Trap also includes evasiveness—that is, the businessperson's obsession with avoiding anything specific. Ask someone in HR whether he likes chocolate ice cream, and he will tell you there is room for all kinds of flavors in any ice cream parlor, and that it is all the different flavors working together that unleash the ice cream parlor's global competitive advantage.

## THE HARD SELL TRAP

*ACME Widgets, the world's leading widget supplier, announces a new bleeding-edge, evidence-based, high-quality solution.*

For some reason, when we get to the office we are in constant sales mode—about our company, about our initiatives, about our products and about our performance. But everyone knows everything is not always perfect. And the epidemic of good news, positive spin and self-aggrandizing actually works against us.

People hate to be sold to, but they love to buy. They like to look at all the data and draw their own conclusions, so all the back-patting and chronic spin actually backfires. It does not make anyone like us more to know that we think we have done a good job. In fact, it makes them like us less. Better to crawl into the listener's mind, paint the picture in terms that are meaningful to him and let him draw his own conclusions.

The fallout from all this obscurity, evasiveness and hard sell is a growing sense of outrage. When the verbal dust settles, the audience has not learned anything, and they have had ample time to think about other things—like how annoying it is that the speaker thinks we are going to sift through all this bull.

We all want leaders who can capture our imagination, stir our enthusiasm and tell us the truth. To capture the ears of everyone in the room, short-circuit that 50-page PowerPoint presentation and instead tell a memorable five-minute story. Skip the kumbaya session and cut right to the nasty problem that everyone already knows about. ■