

HEROES & VILLAINS

The best and worst of corporate speak



An Insight Agents report for
National Storytelling Week 2017

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Introduction: Why companies need to get their story straight

Digital and social media have transformed communications. This is especially true for corporations and brands. Companies can no longer dictate what's said about their products and services. Today, many more voices matter. Anyone with a social media profile and a WiFi connection can influence what people think about organisations. We've moved from unshakeable, unquestioned brand monologue to a more fluid, less controllable dialogue between organisations and those who shape opinion.

In this new world, it's never been more important for companies to get their stories straight. Expressed in simple, straightforward language. Transparent and free from jargon. And sounding like the words were written and spoken by a person. Because whether a company sells to other businesses (often called B2B) or to consumers (B2C), what matters is that companies speak like people speak. Business strategist Bryan Kramer says the terms B2B and B2C are past their use-by date. What matters is that corporate communication becomes genuinely H2H, or human to human.

This is our approach when we write for our clients here at Insight Agents, a corporate and brand storytelling business based in the South of England. And to mark National Storytelling Week 2017, we commissioned the Catalyst team at the University of Sussex Innovation Centre to find us examples of the best and worst of corporate speak. We're sharing their findings in this short report.

What's more, in the process of reviewing a slice of contemporary corporate speak, we've also come up with a set of do's and don'ts to help business storytellers do their jobs better. We're not claiming they're definitive or comprehensive. We offer them as a helpful checklist. Together, we can help businesses to sound more like the real people who are the living, breathing representatives of the organisation; to start making sense.

Sam Knowles

Founder & MD, Insight Agents

February 2017

Eight ways to tell better brand stories

Companies that aspire to be the heroes not the villains of corporate communication should follow these simple principles:

1. Keep it simple

Using fewer words per sentence and using fewer, long words are two simple ways to make your content easier to understand.

2. Beware the Curse of Knowledge

Don't assume that just because you know your subject – your industry, your technology, how your incredible product works – anyone else will.

5. Don't waffle to mask a lack of substance

Style is good, but don't let it come before or instead of real substance.

6. Observe the cocktail party rule – and avoid boasting

If you want to be boring, talk about yourself. If you want to be interesting talk about what your audience wants to hear.

3. Use data and statistics to tell a story

Numbers and facts aren't memorable. But they're a vital foundation if you're going to create an impactful, evidence-based narrative.

4. Don't state the obvious to fill space

This should go without saying, but the democratisation of communications means that some businesses talk more and more, but say less and less.

7. Talk human

Companies are abstract entities, but they're made up – primarily – of people. So, their language should be human, too.

8. And above all, tell great stories

Follow these simple rules of thumb, and the words you use will be the driving force behind your capacity to tell great stories.

1. Keep it Simple

When physicist Richard Feynman was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics, he was asked if he could explain in just three minutes why he'd won the prize. In a rare misstep, Feynman is reputed to have answered: "If I could explain it in three minutes, it wouldn't have won the Nobel Prize." Anything can be explained top line – in an elevator pitch – in three minutes. It should be possible to explain it in a sentence and ideally in a phrase.

Business writing is very often far too complex and difficult to understand.

There are several simple measures of linguistic complexity. One of the most popular is the Flesch Kincaid (FK) 'reading ease' score. The FK score is based simply on the number of words per sentence and the number of syllables per word. FK scores typically range from 0 to 100, although there's a sentence in Moby Dick that scores -146.77 and one in Proust that scores -515.10. Buzz Feed typically scores in the mid-90s, Cosmopolitan the mid-70s, the Guardian the mid-60s, The Economist the mid-40s, and the standard insurance policy about 10. [Find out more here.](#)

The FK score is accompanied by a grade level. This represents the U.S. school grade a reader needs to have attained to be able to understand the text in question with ease.

Essentially, the longer the words and the longer the sentences, the harder they are to understand; to parse, as linguists say. Longer processing time of interminable sentences mean the start of these sentences fall out of working memory. This makes us fail to understand.

Technical topics based on scientific or medical breakthroughs are often full of technical terms. These are often polysyllabic words derived from Latin or Greek that go on for ages. String a few of those together and soon you've got an incomprehensible sentence.

Consider this effort from

[PsiOxus Therapeutics](#):

"EnAD has a number of genomic changes when compared to its parental virus, Ad11p, including a partial E3 region deletion, a smaller deletion in the E4 region, and a chimeric Ad3/Ad11p E2B region. These genomic changes result in a ~3kb reduction in genome size compared to Ad11p which provides significant capacity to 'arm' the EnAD genome with genes encoding therapeutic proteins that enhance EnAD anti-tumour activity. Taking advantage of this, we have developed a novel, efficient cloning system that enables rapid generation of modified EnAD viruses expressing one or several different therapeutic genes that should enhance anti-tumour activity of this oncolytic virus." (FK 14.2)

Or this from [DiscoverX](#):

"DiscoverX® is an innovative company that develops, manufactures, and commercializes reagents, complete cell-based assay kits, profiling and screening services as well as other turnkey solutions for the drug discovery, screening, and life science markets. Our biochemical and cell-based assays enable customers to improve research productivity and effectiveness of their screening, lead optimization and SAR campaigns, thus accelerating the discovery and development of new drugs. Plus, with the addition of the BioMAP® platform of human primary cell systems for phenotypic profiling, DiscoverX offers a powerful tool to deliver physiologically relevant insights and integrated solutions for all stages of discovery from target and lead discovery to preclinical and beyond." (FK -5.5)

But it doesn't have to be this way. There are examples of technical, scientific-based businesses that are perfectly capable of explaining their products and services simply and effectively. In so doing, they open understanding to non-specialists. This broadens their appeal, reach and potential. As a measure of relative linguistic simplicity, the FK score and grade level are good proxies for engagement. Text that is easier to read and easier to understand is likely to drive deeper engagement from more, prospective customers. Choosing to write in this way demonstrates true mastery of the topic, empathy for the audience, and a desire to connect as a human being.

Consider this from [XLN Telecom](#):

"At XLN, we're extremely proud of what we do. However, we're not the heroes here. That accolade belongs to our customers, the small but oh so powerful businesses of Great Britain. The backbone of the economy. The engine of growth. The powerhouse of employment. But all too often these heroes get nothing short of a raw deal from their suppliers, the large, irrelevant, consumer-oriented goliaths. Individually, small businesses just don't have the clout to negotiate fair prices from the big corporations in telecoms, utilities and financial services. But standing side by side, standing tall together, the purchase power of hundreds of thousands of small businesses can rise up against the corporate giants and make XLN savings every day." (FK 53.7)

And this from [HubSpot](#):

"HubSpot is inbound marketing and sales software that helps companies attract visitors, convert leads, and close customers. Buyers are taking control. They're tuning out old-school marketing and sales tactics that are impersonal and interrupt. Turn your website into a magnet. Create content, optimize it for search engines and share it on social media. Then engage your prospects with landing pages, calls to action, personalized email and a personalized website. That's how you market to humans. That's inbound marketing." (FK 55.5)

2. Beware the Curse of Knowledge

When you learn about a subject, you know more than most people. It's impossible to unlearn what you've learned (though it is, of course, possible to forget). The more you learn about it, the more expert you become. And yet the more you know, the harder you find it to explain to others who don't know as much as you do. This is called the Curse of Knowledge, and it can have profound effects on how clearly you write about your passion; about your expertise.

In *The Sense of Style*, one of the best books about writing clearly and eloquently, Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker observes "the more you know, the less clearly you write". Academics often suffer from the Curse of Knowledge, although some display it as a badge of pride, using shortcuts and jargon as a smokescreen to create an exclusive club with a secret language that only the elite few can understand.

Business writers do it too, particularly – though not exclusively – when they're writing about technical products or services that are rooted in science. And while science is complicated, explaining the real-world impact of science doesn't need to be. If your product or service is as good as you claim it is – if it's going to be helpful or useful to as many people as it possibly could be – you need to talk about it simply and clearly.

Avoiding the Curse of Knowledge comes down to empathy; to understanding that those you're trying to influence – your target audience – don't know as much as about the area where you're expert as you do. Which is why they're coming to you in the first place – because you're an expert and because your product or service can take away their pain. They don't need to, and they certainly don't want to see your workings or hear your rationale.

Talk like Apple talks. Talk like Virgin talks. Talk like HSBC talks. And avoid the Curse of Knowledge.

Consider the case of Regen SW. They [describe themselves](#) thus: "*We are an independent not for profit that uses our expertise to work with industry, communities and the public sector to revolutionise the way we generate, supply and use energy.*" (FK 26.9). Not the easiest start, and too much information packed into one sentence. What they actually do (energy supply) doesn't feature until word 30 of 30. And that's before they start getting technical with us, and say:

"Domestic biomass growth indicates depression in April. Forecasting expenditure for biomass is over its depression threshold at the end of November 2014 and therefore requires a 10% depression in April. The question is whether we might see the schemes first 20% depression due to the 'super trigger' being hit." (FK 44.1)

Simon Sinek's *Start with Why* is the second most-watched [TED Talk](#) of all time. This is partly because he's such a good speaker, partly because what he says rings so true, and partly because his message is so simply and elegantly delivered. His thesis is that people don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it. Advice he gives six times in 18 minutes, and advice that Zeetta Networks should have considered before they [wrote this](#):

"Zeetta Networks is a spin-out company from the University of Bristol developing and marketing Open Networking solutions for heterogeneous networks based on Software Defined Networking (SDN) and Network Function Virtualisation (NFV) principles. The company's main product is NetOS®, a Network Operating System which offers a "USB-like", plug-n-play management of all connected network devices and enables the construction of virtual "network slices" (i.e. separate logically-isolated sub-networks) for the deployment of B2B or B2C services such as Ultra-HD video distribution, City-wide Wi-Fi, Internet of Things (IoT) and M2M deployments, etc." (FK 22.3)

By introducing difficult concepts more simply and straightforwardly, these companies could have made their products and services very much easier to understand. But by assuming the readers knew almost as much as the authors, these businesses have made themselves less accessible.

3. Use data and statistics to tell your tale

In their very readable book *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*, brothers Chip and Dan Heath quote the following statistic with self-conscious irony: “After a presentation, 63% of attendees remember stories. Only 5% remember statistics.”

Businesses selling to other businesses often use statistics to obscure from potential customers why their products or services exist. It’s as if they think throwing numbers at an issue will make it obvious how they could help. They could learn a lot from consumer-facing businesses, which routinely use data and statistics as the evidence-base to justify the value of what they do and why they do it.

Businesses like Dove, whose Campaign for Real Beauty for was born from consumer research that showed that only 2 percent of the world’s women would describe themselves as beautiful.

Businesses like Tesco, with its “Producers as heroes” campaign celebrating farmers and Britishness.

Businesses like AVIVA with its “Safest driver” campaign which turned safe driving into a game.

And businesses like [McDonald’s](#), whose straightforward, grounded language makes light work of a lot of statistics. By using numerical values familiar to consumers, set in context which offers a meaningful comparison with other values, the fast food giant is genuinely advancing consumer understanding.

“A lot can change in 10 years. For us, it’s been our relationship with salt. We’ve seen less salt across our menu – including in a typical Happy Meal. Compared with 2003, the total amount of salt in a typical Happy Meal (Chicken McNuggets, Fries and Fruit Shoot) has been reduced by 47%. Or to put it another way, 0.92g of salt in 2015 compared with 1.75g in 2003. We’ve come to realise our Chicken McNuggets actually taste just as good with less salt in the coating. The same goes for our Fries, as we now add less salt than we used to after cooking, taking the total amount of salt in a portion of small Fries from 0.91g in 2003 to 0.44g in 2015.” (FK 80.7)

As screenwriting coach Robert McKee is fond of saying, “A business leader should think like an author about their brand.” This is particularly true when it comes to using data and statistics to shape their corporate storytelling.

4. Don’t state the obvious to fill space

The internet has democratised communications. Anyone with a web-enabled device and connection can become a commentator, an opinion-former, a journalist. This has been immensely positive and liberating for many, from mommy bloggers to the Arab spring. Perhaps not so positive are the Twitter feed of Donald Trump and the rise of fake news widely shared through social platforms, most notably Facebook. But on balance, giving everyone the opportunity to share their opinions is a force for good in a freedom-of-speech world.

That said, many businesses are guilty of stating the obvious just to fill space. Professional services firms do a lot of this, and among the worst offenders are law firms. [Bird & Bird](#) are typical:

“Today, the depth of experience in each sector, and the fact so many of our 1,000 lawyers and legal practitioners around the world have worked in-house or have relevant degrees that complement their legal qualifications, means that our clients find they are working with a legal team that already understands the challenges they face.” (FK 22.2)

Government – often the home of Orwellian Newspeak – is also a repeat offender. [This paragraph](#) from the Department of International Development achieves almost nothing but waste our time.

“With Africa now home to the world’s fastest growing population, Ms Patel set out the importance of generating productive jobs and sustainable livelihoods, opening up markets, stimulating economic growth and increasing business opportunities to make the most of a

young, vibrant working population. This provides a better alternative to risking the dangerous journey to Europe or turning to extremism, therefore tackling migration and instability, which is firmly in the UK’s interests.” (FK 5.2)

The two examples here demonstrate the all-too-common use of language as a space filler. It hardly needs stating that a legal practitioner might have relevant qualifications, nor that issues of extremism and instability are in a government’s national interest.

One final point on this issue. Although both these examples score poorly on the Flesch Kincaid score, it is possible to produce copy that is perfectly comprehensible in terms of reading ease calculations and yet ultimately means nothing. This is another example of business stating the obvious to fill space, like this example from [Origen Private Client Solutions](#), awarded a Golden Bull Award by the [Plain English Campaign](#) in 2015.

“All you need to do at this stage is to confirm our ongoing adviser charge for the bundled funds we advise you on, by completing the enclosed Affirmation Form. The form can be found in this pack and we have prepopulated it where we can for ease. We have also enclosed a pre-paid envelope for you to pop it back in the post to us. Your platform will then write to you later this year to confirm your funds have been converted to their ‘unbundled’ equivalent.” (FK 69)

5. Don't waffle to mask a lack of substance

Rather than just using words as a space-filler, some businesses use overly verbose language to mask a lack of substance. Businesses like [Index Ventures](#):

"We back the best and most ambitious entrepreneurs and help them make their ideas real and lasting. The entrepreneurs we team up with were born to build their businesses – it is their life's mission. Working side-by-side with these visionaries makes us incredibly optimistic about the future." (FK 58.4)

This is an unusual lapse from Index, as venture capital firms often use snappy, straightforward language with purpose. But in this instance, it's difficult to find any real substance beneath the swanky language, despite the high readability score.

This from [Neos Home Insurance](#) scores even higher on Flesch Kincaid. Seemingly it reads well, and yet means even less. To be candid it says nothing of value:

"People first, and everything else (technology, insurance, data...) second. This is a people business. Designed to help care for the things that are important to you. We define help as being real, making things easy and working at speed when it matters. We try (we are human too) to make things human proof, but we always keep you in charge. You are not replaceable." (FK 74.6)

6. Observe the Cocktail Party Rule – and avoid boasting

Corporations that grow and endure over time can be justifiably proud of building a sustainable business. But boasting about how brilliant they are to demonstrate their superiority over their competitors breaks the Cocktail Party Rule. This states: "If you want to be boring, talk about yourself; if you want to be interesting, talk about the issues that matter to those who are listening." That's one reason why content marketing has grown to be so popular and successful: businesses talking about what they know and so why they're in business, rather than what they do.

Boasting can be perfectly comprehensible – like this passage from [Norton Rose Fullbright](#) (another law firm) – though the rambling sentence scores poorly on Flesch Kincaid.

"We are highly regarded for our work across all aspects of contentious and non-contentious employment and labour law around the world. With dedicated teams in Europe, the United States, Canada, Latin America, Asia, Australia, Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia, we offer a full-service, cross-border employment and labour practice. We have substantial transactional experience, and regularly advise on the employment and labour law aspects of multi-jurisdictional corporate reorganisations and mergers and acquisitions." (FK 14.9)

One of the reasons it scores so poorly on FK is that the writer felt compelled to mention every single region in which the company operates ... which is almost every major region in the world. Similarly, saying 'highly regarded' and 'substantial' when providing a brief overview of the company's expertise feels like overkill. This particularly true when those familiar with the industry are likely to be the main readers.

A good definition of both brand and reputation is "what other people say about you – particularly when you're out of the room". Lawyers [Bird & Bird](#) don't make any grammatical or comprehensibility blunders with their text from their homepage. It's more that the self-congratulatory tone makes this a good example of corporate brand language gone sour. *"Bird & Bird is an international leading law firm in business sectors where technology plays a key role. So, it's no wonder we support innovation, regularly organising events and sharing our insight about groundbreaking ideas and developments." (FK 40.5)*

A little more modesty, a little more letting others say why they're so brilliant (case studies, anyone?) wouldn't go amiss. A little more understanding and application of the Cocktail Party Rule. It's not as if lawyers as a profession are unfamiliar with the cocktail party ...

7. Talk human

It's a strange truism of corporate communications that as soon as they're required to write "for" or "as" the business, perfectly eloquent individuals adopt a register that's never come out of any human mouth. It's as if the spotlight paralyses people to start talking gobbledygook and poppycock, balderdash and baloney. Find out more terms for nonsense language at the [marvellous Phronistry](#).

Many politicians and policy wonks are guilty of many or all the missteps we've identified so far. Fortunately, not all Government departments lapse in this way. Here's a great example of human chatter from the [Home Office's Fire Kills](#) campaign:

"Test your smoke alarms monthly. Last year over 200 people died in fires in the home. You're at least 4 times more likely to die in a fire in the home if there's no working smoke alarm. When you test your smoke alarms, you could test the smoke alarms of an older family member, neighbour or friend who needs help. It only takes a moment to test and gives your family and people you care about a better chance of surviving a fire." (FK 83.9)

Invoking discussion with neighbours and family members adds a human touch, allowing a serious – and highly important – message to be conveyed simply and effectively.

Cancer Research UK talks human in [the next extract](#). While maintaining a serious tone (as befits a cancer charity), this section has a conversational edge which feels friendly. It's easy to read and explains facts clearly.

"We want survival in the UK to be among the best in the world. We're focusing our efforts in four key areas – working to help prevent cancer, diagnose it earlier, develop new treatments and optimise current treatments by personalising them and making them even more effective. We'll continue to support research into all types of cancer and across all age groups. And we're keeping our focus on understanding the biology of cancer so we can use this vital knowledge to save more lives." (FK 54.3)

8. Above all, tell great stories

Bearing these principles in mind, we'll round out this report with three great examples of brand narrative that flow well, are easy to follow, and, most importantly, sound human. The first one comes from those pioneers of brand storytelling, [Innocent Drinks](#):

"We started innocent in 1999 after selling our smoothies at a music festival. We put up a big sign asking people if they thought we should give up our jobs to make smoothies, and put a bin saying 'Yes' and a bin saying 'No' in front of the stall. Then we got people to vote with their empties. At the end of the weekend, the 'Yes' bin was full, so we resigned from our jobs the next day and got cracking. Since then we've started making coconut water, juice and kids' stuff, in our quest to make natural, delicious, healthy drinks that help people live well and die old." (FK 77.6)

Second, from new kids on the home security block, [Cocoon](#):

"Traditional home security doesn't work for most people. It's too expensive, too complicated, and false alarms happen so often that we've learnt simply to ignore them. In 2014, our founding team decided that the future of home security is to make using it as simple and intelligent as possible. We set about creating a technology that would protect the whole home from a single device, and this is how Cocoon came into the world. We believe in making homes safer and simpler. Often the people that need home security the most are the people that don't have access to it. Whether you're renting, own your home or travel between homes, everyone should feel safe at home with the minimum of fuss." (FK 62.5)

And finally, not sounding like a business at all, we have new wave cosmetics business, [Lush](#). The language combines a positive tone of voice with a straightforward line in storytelling. Focusing on the idea behind the brand makes it easy for the reader to forget they're being sold a product at all.

"Here at Lush we have never liked to call ourselves an Ethical Company. We find the term rather a difficult concept, because it seems to us that it is used to describe companies who try not to damage people or planet with their trade practices – when surely this should not be regarded as 'ethical' but as normal business-as-usual. All business should be ethical and all trade should be fair.

"Individual companies should not stand out simply by not being damaging or unfair. No company should be trading from an unethical position and society has a right to expect as the norm fairness and resource stewardship from the companies that supply them. We always wish to conduct our business so that all people who have contact with us, from our ingredients suppliers through to our staff and customers, benefit from their contact with Lush and have their lives enriched by it. No company is perfect and we strive daily to get closer to the ideal vision that all Lush people share. We will always want and demand more from Lush, so that our business practices match our own expectations, our staff and customer expectations and the needs of the planet." (FK 55.5)

Appendix

About this research

The research for this report was conducted by Owen Bray. Owen works as a consultant to Insight Agents via the University of Sussex Catalyst scheme, run out of the Sussex Innovation Centre. He joined with Insight Agents after completing an MA in Gender, Violence and Conflict at Sussex. His research looked at how language can shape how we understand our social worlds. Owen was drawn to Insight Agents because of the emphasis we place on the role of words in communication.

The examples of good and bad brand language were informed by our day-to-day practice, more than 25 years immersed in the world of corporate communication, and our curiosity (Google). We were also directed to some lowlights (in particular) by the [Plain English Campaign](#) and its annual Golden Bull Awards, as well as columnists in the media and marketing trade press, from [Dave Trott](#) to [Dominic Mills](#), and Faris and Rosie Yakob's biweekly newsletter, [Genius Steals](#).

About Insight Agents

Insight Agents is a corporate and brand storytelling consultancy. Founded in 2013 by MD Sam Knowles, Insight Agents' purpose is to help businesses communicate more effectively. We empower businesses to thrive by crafting and telling better, more authentic brand stories. Find out more at our [website](#), on our [Twitter feed](#), and in our regular [blog](#).

Because we exist to help companies communicate better, in 2015 we created Bird's Eye View, a diagnostic service of how readable and engaging readers find a company's owned media content, across websites, blogs, and social media. We compare the readability of these channels with each other and also with the same content from three competitors. We then make recommendations detailing how companies can talk more simply, with greater clarity, and increased impact. [Find out more.](#)

