The Dumbest Clichés in Business Writing

Scott Adams' hero of the cubicle, Dilbert, has helped us realize how ridiculous we sound when we use business and technical clichés. Some clichés were originally clever or original phrases that have become meaningless through overuse. Other clichés never made sense in the first place; they were based on the misuse or abuse of language.

My personal favorite among dumb clichés is the all-purpose closing to sales letters and proposal cover letters: "If you have any questions, please feel free to call."

Why does it bother me? First, it turns over control of the sales process to the customer. Second, it presupposes a failure to communicate. ("Look, I know I can't write. I confuse people all the time. Just call me and we'll figure this out together.") And, third, it contains no call to action at all.

At the front end of proposal cover letters, you often read this cliché: "We would like to express our appreciation for the opportunity to submit our response to your request for proposal..." Blah, blah, blah. So what's wrong with it? Because it's in subjunctive mood, I'm always tempted to mutter, "Well, if you would like to, go ahead. Express yourself already." Plus, it sounds formulaic and phony.

Another cliché that people use to damage themselves is the phrase, "to be perfectly honest with you..." What does that mean? Previously you were lying to me? Being less than "perfectly" honest? Hmm. When people use that expression frequently, I really become suspicious.

A couple of clichés that have become popular recently, particularly in high-priced consulting circles, are the use of "traction" applied to something intangible, such as an idea, and the phrase "at the end of the day," meaning something like "finally" or "later."

So a truly gifted communicator might say: "To be perfectly honest with you, at the end of the day the advertising campaign failed to gain traction with consumers, so we didn't achieve market penetration."

Whoa! There's another beauty: "penetrating the market." How Freudian is that?

Other dumb clichés fall into a couple of categories. There is the set of grandiose clichés: "best of breed," "world class," and "cutting edge"
are among the most popular. (To me, "best of breed" brings to mind thoughts of a dog show. The other just seem pompous.)

Another category of clichés includes such "touchy/feely" expressions as "partnering," "win/win," "rightsizing" (instead of layoffs), "holistic," "user friendly," "value added," and so on. Interestingly, the same people who talk about "win/win" and "partnering" are often the same ones who use militaristic language to describe business: "campaigns," "capturing markets," "take no prisoners," and similar nonsense.

If you love the language, or if you just want to make your point clearly and forcefully, challenge yourself before using clichés in your business writing. At best, they have no impact and suggest that you lack originality. At worst, they distract the audience from your message, spawning irrelevant associations and undercutting your credibility.

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