

Time to invent a new marketing vocabulary

The sales prospect you're targeting will likely filter out your message unless you use language as fresh and compelling as your product or service must be

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We all do it. We have to, because we're far too busy not to. Our global economy has created a hyperchoice of goods, services and associated options in every category. With hyperchoice comes hyper-messaging, as marketers from thousands of companies try to turn us into customers. But we can't possibly take in all the messages directed at us, so in self-defence we filter out most of them: "I've already seen that. I tried it and didn't like it. I've got it and don't need it. I don't like that company. It doesn't suit my taste. I heard it doesn't work."

Filtering is a necessity for consumers, but it's a challenge for anyone marketing a new product or service. So how do you get past them? When you approach someone with a sales pitch, it has to be all-at-once different, relevant and intriguing. Then, and only then, can it break through the target customer's filter and seduce them, for just a second, to want to know more.

One of the best ways to do that is to create new vocabulary. If what you're selling is genuinely new and different, the way you describe it must also be new. Often marketers find it comfortable to describe an offering in terms that come close to something the target is already familiar with. While this might make it easier for you to tell the overall story, it will also make it easier for the listener to process, categorize and reject it — remember, they're crazy-busy and bombarded by messages.

It would have been easy for Apple to describe the iPod as a portable CD-type MP3 player, but the hip, potential target would not have been as quickly intrigued. They might have filtered out that message and moved on, figuring they already knew about the Walkman. Instead, the iPod name captured imaginations by the million. And Apple followed up by introducing podcasts and iTunes, adding to an exclusive language that keeps the company first-of-mind in an explosion of copycats.

At an SME level, our local Italian restaurant, Romagna Mia, which has just been named Toronto's best for pasta, has a feature item on its menu with the irreverent name "Strangle the Priest." For me to remember that item while sitting here writing this article proves the point: of all the restaurants in the city, let alone all the individual items they offer, this one cuts through. And before I invented the term, there hadn't been anyone called a "brand coach." "Executive coaches," sure; "brand guys," yup; but never a "brand coach." Putting two well-known words together for the first time created new meaning, making potential clients curious about what my firm could do for them.

Inside an organization, unique vocabulary has an additional crucial role: to help internal stakeholders understand, articulate and remember your brand's unique position, and then to live up to it. To sell coffee at-never-before-heard-of prices, Starbucks described the experience in never-before-heard-of terms: "grande" and "vente" options served by coffee experts called "baristas." In the land of Starbucks, baristas don't pour a cup of coffee; they prepare your custom drink. The experience is achieved through a belief that the service level of the baristas is as significant as the product they serve.

WestJet, Canada's friendly (soon to be) replacement for Air Canada, calls its passengers "guests." That sounds good to those of us on the plane. More importantly, it serves to keep WestJetters focused on exactly how to treat their passengers within their differentiated brand of authentic Western hospitality. Air Canada still calls its customers "travelers." Have you ever felt like a guest traveling with them?

At Oxford Properties, the country's largest office property company, then-CEO Jon Love wanted to reach beyond all the flashy glass-and-steel competition and differentiate through excellence in service. I worked with Oxford's senior team to move the company away from one of the most dreaded phrases in the English language: "landlord and

tenant." We started calling the 150,000 people living their workdays in Oxford's office buildings what they really were: "customers." We then put a human face on the company with an approachable, responsive service character called 310-maxx, whom customers could call to do things such as change a light bulb or adjust the heat. That worked big time. Within three months, 99% of all customer-service issues were being reported, so they could be dealt with, far surpassing the industry norm of 62%. The resulting rise in customer satisfaction drove Oxford's lease-renewal rates to record highs, directly boosting profitability.

Sometimes new vocabulary is needed just to give a product a second chance to make it through the filters. Cheap polyester became today's successful Dream Weave. Chinese gooseberries do much better now that they're called kiwis. Nissan replaced the nameplate on the notoriously rusty Datsun once it had finally licked that issue.

To ensure that you choose vocabulary that will help you communicate your point of differentiation, you must choose language your internal team can relate to and can share with your external audiences. It must resonate with your organization's values, so your employees can truly deliver on the promise that comes with it. Look to words or names that have naturally developed inside your firm, and consider bringing them out. If they've earned and own a piece of your heads, the freshness and authenticity of these words or names will likely resonate with your customers and prospects.

To sell your product or service in this crazy world, you need to create a message designed not for your boardroom but for the hyper-clutter of the world outside. Unique vocabulary is a great place to start.

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