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Clients should be wary of jumping on the latest buzzword bandwagon, because words and phrases intended to convey a sense of gravitas quickly become bland when overused. Instead, try saying what you really mean

The beauty of our copywriting business is we get briefs and requests from 20-30 different companies every week. So it's easy to spot the occasional bandwagon in their communications.

Take, for example, the numerous credit crunch e-mails and letters we all receive. You can't really disagree with what they're saying – it's just that they all say the same thing, in exactly the same way. Hence, they're bland. So after a while they just become a little tiresome and when another arrives, you say, 'Oh, here are more ambulance chasers'.

I don't have anything against bandwagons, as such. Climate change, for instance. Here, we can predict that the few companies who haven't yet jumped on this particular bandwagon will do so during the next year. Of course, there isn't anything wrong with trying to save precious resources or cut down on waste, but if you're going to devote a large communications budget to bleating to all and sundry about how wonderful you are for doing so, you can expect consumers to become a tad cynical. Which is where bland words simply won't do.

WORDS THAT SIGNIFY NOTHING

So, what do I mean by bland words? Well, I mean those that every single one of those 20-30 companies each week wants in the headlines of their brochures, websites and presentations – integrity, quality,

passion, delight, customer focus, innovation – that sort of thing. Words that don't actually tell you anything useful or concrete. In fact, they are a bandwagon, or blandwagon, unto themselves.

Consider these two headlines: 'Driving innovation' and 'Flippin' codswallop'. Which of these is going to make you read on, and which is going to make you turn elsewhere?

I know my answer. So why, oh why, does almost every client want to start a brochure with the first one? Now, I'm not saying I'd suggest a client uses the second one, but it is about as meaningful. In fact, as just about everybody wants to use the 'i' word (innovative) then using it in your brochure pretty much proves that you aren't.

Sorry to pick on this one word, but people have become so used to peppering their communications with the word innovative that they don't even recognise the same sentiment expressed in normal language – new ideas, fresh thinking, abreast of technological advances, creative, inventive, imaginative, original thought, pioneering – and so they re-insert the innovation word in the next draft, sometimes even within the same sentence as the words above.

This summer, in the literature of a large Scottish banking group (yes, one of them...), I replaced innovative with groundbreaking, as it suited the point they were trying to make, only for the client to tell me they didn't

want to sound like they all used picks and shovels. And ten years ago I used the expression 'Here's a great new idea' in a consumer leaflet for a large well-known retailer, only for the client to tell me I hadn't said the product was innovative.

STATING THE OBVIOUS

What about those other words? 'One of our values is integrity.' Well, how much would you trust someone who felt the need to keep telling you they were honest? Customer focus? You mean you're interested in your customers and why they might buy things from you? Is there another way to stay in business? By all means tell your customers what you are offering and why it's so good. But blathering on like everyone else about customer focus isn't the way to do it. Then quality? It hasn't really meant anything for years, has it?

And so on to the others. 'Passionate about what we do.' 'Delight our customers.' 'Exceed our customers' expectations.' OK, maybe they're not that bland, but they are current bandwagons. Do we believe them? Do we hell. They'd have more credibility if they finished their brochure with 'Have a nice day' or even, 'Remember, I really, really love you'.

So, what's our advice for the year ahead? When it comes to company communications, by all means, jump on a passing bandwagon. But please, don't join the blandwagon.