

The Ambassador



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“The Ambassador” is a monthly communiqué designed to provide tips on best practices in effective communications. Next month, look for guidelines on speaking about the *Feed the Pig* public service campaign from the AICPA and the Ad Council

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Jogging Around Jargon: Creative Approaches to Presenting Detailed Data

By Jerry Doyle

Experts will teach you that it is critical to steer clear of technical jargon and “inside baseball” whenever you are delivering a public speech or engaged in a media interview – regardless of the level of sophistication of the audience.

Let me start with an example. A few years ago, NASA scientists were asked to explain to a gathering of reporters the plan they had for fixing the broken Hubble telescope. Here’s what the lead scientist planned to say: “Well, at 23:50 hundred hours, in sector 6, we will execute an EVA and calibrate the module.” The reaction was a combination of furrowed brows and wide yawns. The scientist had succeeded in excluding anything that might be compelling about the plan; however, translated into layman’s terms, the statement was actually quite fascinating. “Close to midnight, thousands of miles above the surface of the Earth, an astronaut will perform a space walk and *manually* adjust the focus of the huge telescope lens!” Even rocket scientists who know that an “EVA” means Extra Vehicular Activity would agree that it is much more interesting to hear about a spacewalk, and that it will get more approving and impressed nods than quizzical expressions from audiences.

So, how do you take your complex, technical data and wordsmith it in a way that doesn’t “dumb it down”, but actually enlivens it?

Use Plain English

Often, presenters are under the false impression that using multi-syllabic words and complex technical terms are signs of your expertise and competence. And that, furthermore, using them is necessary to sustain credibility. This is simply not true. A presenter is judged by the accuracy of his statements and the confidence he exudes while delivering them. It is better to be spot-on and simple, versus vague and complex. Using plain English tells your audience participants that not only are *you* clear about the information and that you know your area of expertise well, but that you want *them* to understand it, too. The example of the NASA scientists showcases this point clearly.

Limit the Use of Acronyms and Abbreviated Technical Terms

Presenters from every profession and industry are guilty of filling statements with acronyms instead of words. If there were a contest to evaluate which profession has the most acronyms used in speeches, it would be a very tight race between accountants, physicians, engineers and computer experts. There is PCAOB,

ASB, SEC, AAA, AAWA, and FASB... and the list goes on and on.

Audience members can often find it difficult to follow a presenter who delivers acronyms and abbreviated industry terms over and over in his quest to prove a point. However, it is often difficult to avoid them completely, so remember these important points about acronyms:

- *Introduce the Acronym or Term* - Be very clear and slowly articulate what the acronym stands for the first time you use it. Think of it as an introduction and tell your audience how you plan to refer to it for the remainder of your talk. “The legislative precedent Sarbanes-Oxley – or ‘SOX’ as I will be referring to it many times over the next 20 minutes --...”
- *Remind* – Often, even if you have carefully described a term when you introduced it, an audience may need to be reminded if you haven’t brought it up in a while. Make sure you get in the habit of reminding the audience. Sometimes, these can be used as slide transitions or when you are setting up to deliver a key message. “So, ERISA comes into play on the pension fund issue on the next slide. ERISA, as you may recall, is the federal accounting law...”
- *Offer to be Interrupted to Explain* – Audiences are relieved when a presenter tells them to feel free and stop them for clarification. “Ladies and gentleman, I’m going to be delivering a lot of technical jargon and abbreviated terms, so do not hesitate to raise your hand and ask me to re-explain anything that is not clear.”

Get Creative and Illustrative

So, how can you liven up data that is highly technical and dense with jargon? Here are a few suggestions:

Use Visuals

Use a picture instead of a chart whenever possible. Use a chart instead of words whenever possible. If you’re going to use words, keep them simple and non-technical. This is sage, ageless advice – one picture is worth a thousand words. If you have to use technical terms, but want to increase the likelihood that it will be retained by the audience, create a visual that supports and clarifies. The medical profession has recognized this and often uses visuals well to explain the mechanism of action of drug therapy or the anticipated progression of a disease. Imagine that you are trying to literally explain scientific data that is on a molecular level. Pictures on a slide are certainly helpful, but animation is even better. But, remember that these visuals won’t do the explaining for you. Use them appropriately, as an aid to help you explain the technical terms. Also, keep in mind that the value of the visual does not reside in how fancy it is, but in how well it illustrates your message. So, even simply drawing a picture on a flip chart can be just as clarifying as an animated PowerPoint slide.

Use Case Studies

As mentioned before, too much jargon can be dizzying, so take the time to provide context and perspective by using a client, corporate or customer example. This will give your audience a chance to “see” how the data applies to a

real life situation and, therefore, can bring the message into focus.

Use Analogies

Analogies are often difficult to develop, but you should always consider trying to use them because they are very powerful. Here is an example from the telephone industry: today, everyone understands caller-ID, but when it first came out, it was difficult to explain technically. The communication team from the telephone company had more than enough data to support their message about this new innovation. The data alone often created great confusion amongst audiences. It was only after they came up with an analogy that the details of the new offering came into focus. The communications team analogized caller-ID to a peephole in your door: just as you can see who is knocking before you answer the door, caller-ID enables you to see who is calling before you pick up the phone. This simple analogy worked so well, it was the most quoted segment when a spokesperson used it in an interview. The company ultimately decided to use it in *all* of its advertising collateral.

Often, it is impossible to sweep out all jargon and technical terminology from your talk, so limit it as best as you are able. Then, look over your talk again and see how you can paint a picture in the mind's eye that will support and clarify all of the "inside baseball" that you reference. It will make your presentation not only much more comprehensible, it will also provide an edge that your peers may not possess.

Have a suggestion on a topic? E-mail Carmen Encarnacion at cencarnacion@aicpa.org

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