ENTREPRENEURS

The Most Annoying, Pretentious And Useless Business Jargon

My Say Contributor

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The next time you feel the need to reach out, touch base, shift a paradigm, leverage a best practice or join a tiger team, by all means do it. Just don't *say* you're doing it.

If you have to ask why, chances are you've fallen under the poisonous spell of business jargon. No longer solely the province of consultants, investors and business-school types, this annoying gobbledygook has mesmerized the rank and file around the globe.

Gallery: Most Annoying Business Jargon

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"Jargon masks real meaning," says Jennifer Chatman, management professor at the University of California-Berkeley's Haas School of Business. "People use it as a substitute for thinking hard and clearly about their goals and the direction that they want to give others."

To save you from yourself (and to keep your colleagues and customers from strangling you), we have assembled a cache of expressions to assiduously avoid.

Glossary: The Most Annoying Business Jargon

We also assembled a "Jargon Madness" bracket---similar to the NCAA college basketball tournament---featuring 32 abominable expressions. Each day, for 32 days, readers will get to vote, via Twitter, on one matchup. The goal: to identify the single most annoying example of business jargon and thoroughly embarrass all who employ it and all of those other ridiculous terms, too.

In the meantime, here are some of the worst offenders Forbes has identified over the years. For a full list of 45, **click here.**

Core Competency

This awful expression refers to a firm's or a person's fundamental strength---even though that's not what the word "competent" means. "This bothers me because it is just a silly phrase when you think about it," says Bruce Barry, professor of management at Vanderbilt's Owen Graduate School of Business. "Do people talk about peripheral competency? Being competent is not the standard we're seeking. It's like core mediocrity."

Buy-In

This means agreement on a course of action, if the most disingenuous kind. Notes David Logan, professor of management and organization at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business: "Asking for someone's 'buy-in' says, 'I have an idea. I didn't involve you because I didn't value you enough to discuss it with you. I want you to embrace it as if you were in on it from the beginning, because that would make me feel really good.'"

S.W.A.T. Team

In law enforcement, this term refers to teams of fit men and women who put themselves in danger to keep people safe. "In business, it means a group of 'experts' (often fat guys in suits) assembled to solve a problem or tackle an opportunity" says USC's Logan. An apt comparison, if you're a fat guy in a suit.

Check out the results of our Forbes "Jargon Madness" bracket.

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Empower

This is what someone above your pay grade does when, apparently, they would like you to do a job of some importance. It's also called "the most condescending transitive verb *ever*." Says Chatman: "It suggests that 'You can do a little bit of this, but I'm still in charge here. *I* am empowering you.'"

Open the Kimono

"Some people use this instead of 'revealing information,'" says Barry. "It's kind of creepy." Just keep your kimono snugly fastened.

Bleeding Edge

Someone decided that his product or service was so cutting-edge that a new term needed to be created. It did not. Unless you are inventing a revolutionary bladed weapon, leave this one alone.

Lots of Moving Parts

Pinball machines have lots of moving parts. Many of them buzz and clank and induce migraine headaches. Do you want your business to run, or even appear to run, like a pinball machine? Then do not say it involves lots of moving parts.

Corporate Values

This expression is so phony it churns the stomach. Corporations don't have values, the people who run them do.

Make Hay

This is jargon for being productive or successful in a short period of time. The phrase 'to make hay' is short for 'make hay while the sun shines', which can be traced to John Heyward's *The Proverbs, Epigrams and Miscellanies of John Heywood* (circa 1562). A handy nugget for cocktail conversation, but that's it.

Scalable

A scalable business or activity refers to one that requires little additional effort or cost for each additional unit of output. Example: Making software is a scalable business (building it requires lots of effort up front, while distributing a million copies over the Web is relatively painless). Venture capitalists crave scalable businesses. They crave them so much that the term now has become more annoying than the media's obsession with celebrity diets.

Best Practice

This refers to a method or technique that delivers superior results compared with other methods and techniques. It is also perhaps the single most pompous confection the consulting industry has ever dreamed up.

Think Outside the Box

This tired turn of phrase means to approach a business problem in an unconventional fashion. Kudos to a Forbes.com reader who suggested: "Forget the box, just think."

Solution

This word has come to mean everything from the traditional way

to solve a mathematical proof to a suite of efficiency-enhancing software--and it is the epitome of lingual laziness. Says Glen Turpin, a communications consultant: "It usually refers to a collection of technologies too abstract or complex to describe in a way that anyone would care about if they were explained in plain English."

Leverage

Meet the granddaddy of nouns converted to verbs. ‘Leverage’ is mercilessly used to describe how a situation or environment can be manipulated or controlled. Leverage should remain a noun, as in “to apply leverage,” not as a pseudo-verb, as in “we are leveraging our assets.”

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This painful expression refers to a specific area of expertise. For example, if you make project-management software for the manufacturing industry (as opposed to the retail industry), you might say, “We serve the manufacturing vertical.” In so saying, you would make everyone around you flee the conversation.

Over the Wall

If you're not wielding a grappling hook, avoid this meaningless expression. Katie Clark, an account executive at Allison & Partners, a San Francisco public relations firm, got a request from her boss to send a document "over the wall." Did he want her to print out the document, make it into a paper airplane and send it whooshing across the office? Finally she asked for clarification. "It apparently means to send something to the client," she says. "Absurd!"

Robust

This otherwise harmless adjective has come to suggest a product or service with a virtually endless capacity to please. A cup of good coffee is robust. A software program is not.

Learnings

Like most educated people, Michael Travis, an executive search consultant, knows how to conjugate a verb. That's why he cringes when his colleagues use the word "learning" as a noun. As in: "I had a critical learning from that project," or "We documented the team's learnings." Whatever happened to simply saying: "I learned a lesson from that project?" Says Travis: "Aspiring managers would do well to remember that if you can't express your idea without buzzwords, there may not be an idea there at all."

Boil the Ocean

This means to waste time. The thinking here, we suppose, is that boiling the ocean would take a long time. It would also take a long time to fly to Jupiter, but we don't say that. Nor should we boil oceans, even the Arctic, which is the smallest. It would be a waste of time.

Reach Out

Jargon for “let’s set up a meeting” or “let’s contact this person.” Just say that---and unless you want the Human Relations department breathing down your neck, please don’t reach out unless clearly invited.

Punt

In football, to punt means to willingly (if regretfully) kick the ball to the other team to control your team's position on the field. In business it means to give up on an idea, or to make it less of a priority at the moment. In language as in life, punt too often and you'll never score.

Impact

This wannabe verb came to prominence, says Bryan Garner, editor in chief of *Black's Law Dictionary,* because most people don't understand the difference between the words "affect" and "effect." Rather than risk mixing them up, they say, "We will impact our competitor's sales with this new product." A tip: "Affect" is most commonly a verb, "effect" a noun. For instance: When you *affect* my thinking, you may have an *effect* on my actions.

Giving 110%

The nice thing about effort, in terms of measuring it, is that the most you can give is everything---and everything equals 100%. You can't give more than that, unless you can make two or more of yourself on the spot, in which case you have a very interesting talent indeed. To tell someone to give more than 100% is to also tell them that you failed second-grade math.

Take It To The Next Level

In theory this means to make something better. In practice, it means nothing, mainly because nobody knows what the next level actually looks like and thus whether or not they've reached it. (For ways of actually measuring what's going on at your company, check out: "Nine Enlightening Business-Performance Metrics.")

It Is What It Is

Thanks. Idiot.

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My Say

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