



Marketing  
101

by Linda Formichelli

# Empowering Your Savvy Synergistic Marketing Paradigm

*Think this title sucks? Good, there's hope for you yet. Read on and learn other words and phrases that are so meaningless, repetitive, and worn-out that they should never again appear in your marketing materials. Ever.*

**I** was browsing through a particularly nice business Web site, when there it was. Like dog poop on fresh snow, the clunky Mission Statement stood out for its sheer ugliness:

“To empower our customers to realize maximum business value by leveraging both existing investments and the possibilities offered by technological innovation.”

Our language contains a limited number of truly bad words — and I’m always amazed at how many people try to transcend that limit. Independent professionals get even less slack than the nine-to-five world when it comes to making a first impression; it would be a shame for IPs to waste what little latitude we have on words that detract from our message.

I’ve been known to foam at the mouth at the mere mention of certain words, so in a nod to objectivity, I asked other marketing professionals for their thoughts on words to avoid. Together, we bring you this list of linguistic losers. Take your last piece of marketing writing — say, a sales letter, proposal, or brochure — and do a search and destroy on the following.

## Words You Don’t Know the Meaning Of

Can you really tell me what *synergy* means? How about *paradigm*? Didn’t think so. Sometimes I think those words were introduced into the marketing vernacular by a gaggle of mochaccino-high ad execs trapped in their office at 1:00 AM.

If you pepper your prose with empty words, your marketing message will be unclear. And if someone calls you on one of your high-falutin’ words, the consequences won’t be pleasant. Case in point: if the Reebok team had stuck with words they understood, they wouldn’t have named their women’s running shoe “Incubus” — which, they found out only after the shoes hit the shelves, is the name of a mythical demon who preys on sleeping women.



## Words That Don’t Exist

I know an IP who uses the word *agreeance*, as in, “I’m glad we’re in agreeance on the contract, Mr. Client.” Apparently, the humble *agreement* isn’t impressive enough. And

Words and phrases that should never appear in your marketing materials. Ever.

of course, there's always the ubiquitous *irregardless*. Sorry, folks ... regardless of how much you hear it, *irregardless* just doesn't exist.

## Repetitive Redundancies

Of course you give something away for free. How else would you do it? And we know you think to yourself. Who else would you be thinking to? Go through your writing and exterminate such redundancies as:

- “point in time”
- “large in size”
- “general consensus”
- “new innovation”
- “end result”
- “final outcome”

## E-Words

Did you ever say a word so many times that the sound loses all meaning? Try it now with the word of your choice. Then

say *e-commerce*, *e-media*, or *e-dentity*.

Doesn't it give you an e-erie feeling? “I heard an ad on the radio last week and I can't even tell you what it was — just that I heard ‘e-something’ and at least five ‘dot-com’ references in the course of thirty seconds,” says Mary Spaeth, executive VP of Angle Technology in Evanston, Illinois.

“Marketers and public relations professionals need to be aware that in attempting to project a high-tech image, they could actually be losing the very audiences they want to capture.” The consensus (not the *general* consensus) among marketing professionals is that IPs should avoid all forms of

high-tech pretentiousness.

As for *virtual*, *state-of-the-art*, and *world-class*: can you say overused and grandiose?

## Aggressive Passives

If you want to deflect responsibility for a screwup onto some unidentifiable third party, passive verbs are the way to go — as in, “Your account was inadvertently deleted from our system.” Avoid this. Be responsible. Try instead: “We inadvertently deleted your account from our system.” A passive verb makes for a weak, round-about way of saying something, which

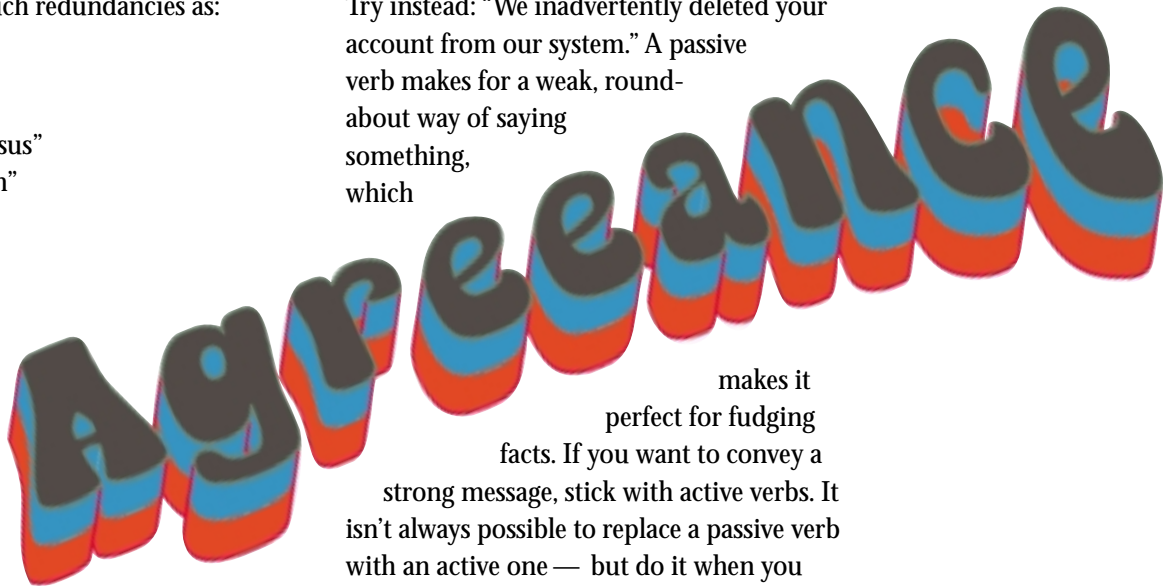
makes it perfect for fudging facts. If you want to convey a strong message, stick with active verbs. It isn't always possible to replace a passive verb with an active one — but do it when you can, and see how much stronger your sentences become.

Not: Because your business is important to us, your account will be handled only by well-trained monkeys.

But: Because your business is important to us, only well-trained monkeys will handle your account.

## Clichés (but Don't Take My Word for It)

Admittedly, you can use the power of a cliché for good instead of evil. Altering a comfortably worn saying or dropping it into a startling new context can give written materials a boost of humor. But in the



# SYNERGY

wrong hands, clichés turn clarity into cloudiness, eloquence into emptiness.

Dan Casseday, director of marketing at the University of South Florida, asked his colleagues for phrases they wished never to see again in marketing materials. The top two? *New and improved* and *But don't take my word for it*. Take *their* word for it: both are bad for business.

## Ten-Dollar Words

These used to be called five-dollar words, but they're so irritating I decided to upgrade them. That and inflation.

Many of us try to dress up mundane tasks with fancy words. To *interface* instead of to *meet*. To *dialogue* instead of to *speak*. Such corporatese obscures the real meaning of your message.

One marketing professional who recognizes the fog-machine-like effect of ten-dollar words is Chris Coleman, owner of the technology marketing company Folio Z in Atlanta. Coleman created a game called Weasel Word Bingo for her two-day Messaging Workshop (designed to help companies describe their services in the most clear, concise way possible). Each participant receives a checkers-like board with a Weasel

Word printed on each light square. The object of the game is to catch the most Weasel Words during the conference while using the fewest. Some of the haughty words that adorn the

board are *proactive*, *utilize*, *facilitate*, and *partnering*.

The list of word warnings could go on and on, but fortunately for you, this column has a limited word count. So instead, I'll end by saying this: If you can't decide whether a word or expression is pulling its weight, apply the litmus test developed by Jennifer J. Johnson, owner of the marketing firm Johnson and Company. "Read, really *read*, what you've written," she says... and ask yourself three questions:

1. Is the word or phrase unique to your company, or could it apply to any number of companies?
2. Does your language really say anything?
3. Would someone totally unfamiliar with you, the writer, the company, or the product or service you represent understand what the words in question mean?

Applying this test may mean salvation for your marketing materials. While your competitors are busy adding value through strategic partnering and proactively utilizing best practices, you'll be communicating with your prospects in plain English — and, with luck, they'll thank you with their business. **1099**