

East or west, plain is best

Say what you mean, says **DOUG SACKS**, who is flying the flag for a return to the use of clear language and less direct marketing-ese.

For decades, most trends have originated on our west coast and quickly migrated eastward. This began with popular culture, music and fashion trends thanks to Hollywood and the ubiquitous sunshine and trim and fit bodies that populate California.

But this eventually evolved into more substantive political trends and populist voter uprisings with the 'Popular Resolution' based form of government in California. But now, California is facing bankruptcy – the financial kind. And some of our trends may be coming from a new direction.

This one is decidedly from the east. Far to our east. From across the Atlantic . . . from the UK.

I don't know if this is the start of another British invasion like we had in the 1960s. Let's hope so!

The issue is not new. In fact it is decades old.

Maybe it makes sense to me because I am also decades old.

Take a look at a dozen or so direct mail offers and see if they are written in plain English.

But I hope it catches on here in a marketing sense: A story out of New Mills, England, emphasises the latest efforts of the Plain English Campaign, which began 30 years ago. I don't know what the beef was 30 years ago, but I see the problem now every time I open and read a direct mail solicitation or customer letter from a bank or insurance company.

I just don't quite understand all that is being offered or said. Maybe that's the point and the intention!

Certainly, the art of obfuscation has long been practiced in the legal, medical and political arenas. The financial sector embraced it as well, as has business in general – with its fondness for acronyms and buzz-phrases that sound important but only state the obvious. Mostly, they function to create a sense of insider-ness, as you have to be on the inside of the industry to understand them!

How many acronyms can you name that only direct marketers use and make no sense to anyone else?

If you travelled to San Diego for the DMA annual conference last month, and stuck your head into one of the lecture rooms and listened for five minutes you'd know what I mean.

Now, imagine you are not familiar with direct marketing and are trying to decipher all the three-letter acronyms and buzzwords we use.

In fairness, it's the same in every industry sector. But there may be more at stake here than just a laughable adoption of keywords designed to make the obvious seem more important or more attractive, or to make

an anti-social act or one which is in bad taste seem less so.

For example, before the Superbowl a few years back, I thought a 'wardrobe malfunction' was something men did when they didn't match sock colour to pants colour, wore a tie that didn't go well with their suit or combined stripes with plaids like a wild and crazy guy. Now, of course, I know better.

And now that all men are metrosexuals, we no longer have wardrobe malfunctions!

Credibility problem

If the intention is to confuse, then we have another credibility problem in the industry.

Take a look at a dozen or so direct mail offers and see if they are written in plain English or in 'direct marketing-ese'.

And I don't just mean the credit card, bank and insurance offers which are so full of small print and legalese that the reader needs a degree from the Wharton School to decipher them.

I mean, take a look at the basic direct mail offers. The ones that should be, well . . . direct.

Recently, my daughters matriculated to college having spent the last three years socialising, taking long vacations, organising benefits for every conceivable cause and generally having loads of fun mixed with teenage angst at what we call High School here. I understand and witnessed the 'high' part but I didn't see a lot of 'schooling', what with extended vacations, professional days and disgruntled or burnt-out teachers.

But at least my girls were anonymous there. Once they

started applying to colleges, they were inundated with direct mail offers. And now that they have opened bank accounts with national banks, the offers seem to have increased. They come to the home address for Dad to see.

I won't select any in particular as that would be unfair. But they all seem to lack what was once the art of what we called Plain Speaking.

Once we praised our politicians, like Harry Truman, for plain speaking. That was, of course, long after he was pilloried for being too plain.

But all things come around eventually. Now, with the lengthy recession, wars, endless political and celebrity scandals

and just plain bad behaviour we witness every day, I predict that, at least subliminally we are longing for more Harry Trumans . . . or Teddy Roosevelts who said 'speak softly and carry a big stick'!

Direct marketers may be wise to tap into this undercurrent and use it to their advantage.

Speak plainly.
Speak softly.

The big stick they carry can simply be a fair offer, explained in plain English, allowing the consumer to decide if it has value. Plain and simple.

Perhaps this is a trend we can finally start on our own east coast.

I just don't quite understand all that is being offered. Maybe that's the point.

Douglas Sacks is VP – strategic planning and partner at Focus Worldwide LLC, specialising in global data, analytical and marketing solutions. Email: doug@focus-worldwide.com

