the CROW Chronicle

Why Corporate Claptrap is really bad for brands

We've been *'peeling back the onion'*, we've had a bit of an *'idea shower'* and we've got something we want to '*run up the flagpole'* - something that we're '*110% frustrated'* by. This Crow Chronicle* is about the terrible curse of *Corporate Claptrap.*

The truth is that using corporate language is almost inescapable and virtually unavoidable given how much time we spend at work. It's engrained in organisations' cultures. The first time we hear it we're confused - it makes no sense - but before we know it we find ourselves '*road mapping'*, '*shifting paradigms'* and '*burning the boats'.*

However, finally, thankfully, a few organisations are beginning to call it out for what it is: an issue that negatively impacts business and the engagement of those working within it… but we'd go further. We've '*touched base offline'* with brand owners taken a '*helicopter view'* of the research and concluded that it's also **damaging for brands and brand building**. Why? Well as management Professor Jennifer Chatman of Haas School of Business recently wrote, "*jargon masks real meaning*". And when it comes to brand building, establishing real meaning is what it's all about…

The heart of the issue lies in the complexity of the human language. Unlike other animals, our language is more than systematic noise grunted to one another (teenagers excepted). It contains cultural meaning and, critically, spoken words also communicate unspoken meaning. Our language therefore becomes a filter that processes our understanding and influences how we behave beyond our conscious awareness. OK. That sounds high-fallutin'. But consider these three brand-damaging implications.

1 **Claptrap stops us from being close enough to our consumers**. As corporate language becomes engrained in a business, the culture of that business shifts with it. With every reference to '*building a strawman'*, every generous delivery of a '*heads up'* or '*reach out'*, with every meeting that starts with '*getting people aligned'* and finishes with a '*hard close'* at '*the end of play'*; for every '*mission critical'* task, for every concept that gets '*dropped in the pan to see if it floats'*; for every '*deck of slides'*, '*turd polisher'*, '*clocksucker'* or '*boiling of the ocean'* and every '*re-stage'*, '*re-purpose'* or *re*sodding anything… we move further and further away from the people that really matter: consumers.

The key to brand building lies in truly understanding your consumer, their needs, their frustrations, their problems, their hopes and their motivations. When you're engrained in a business this is tough at the best of times. Why then would we accept the use of a language that further divorces us from the world our consumers live in and cements an ivory-tower world-view?

2 **Claptrap delays action and excuses procrastination.** We would never undervalue the need for stakeholder alignment. However, the business language often becomes the hiding place for inaction as the need to '*onboard decision makers'* is used to excuse the adding of weeks or months of unnecessary delay into business. And as inaction becomes the norm, the business language explains it away: we need to '*put our foot on the ball'* in order to deliver a plan that will '*move the needle'* or, we need to '*deep dive'* further to ensure that the sales team's concerns are '*on the radar'*. Yes, debate is needed; of course we shouldn't rush into action without consideration; but great brands never forget that impacting their end consumer is the only thing that counts. Anything that stops that is a waste.

3 **Claptrap creates unwritten rules about behaviour that hinder progress**. Next time you hear a presentation from the company owner or CEO, listen out for how many of the phrases that they use quickly enter common parlance. People adopt the same language to show support, to tow the line and to fit in. People naturally shy away from standing out (unwittingly or not). This can be a great and powerful thing. However, if the language used is convoluted and idiosyncratic (Corporate Claptrap) then nobody asks the simple, basic brand building questions for fear of looking stupid.

This is so dangerous for brands because the questions that make the biggest difference in marketing are the childish ones, the ones that are brutally simple and disarming. The language that drives the greatest change is often the Bluntest, yet in Corporate Claptrap Land, people are inadvertently dissuaded from using it.

So try binning the business language, pick up your brand plan and embrace your inner-child. Ask the simplest questions:
*Will this make a difference?
Do we really have to do that?
What would happen if we didn't do it? Why can't we do it now? Why can't we do it bigger?* You'll be amazed how quickly you release the '*sleeping giant'* in your brand…

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*To the editor of *The Crewe Chronicle*. Sorry fella.