

For love of Jargon

Straight talking from Adrian Stokes who wants to protect the integrity of the industry from designer battle

Jargon symbolises much of modern life and the world of design has a hatful of leading lights. I often wonder if designers are related to Magpies in any way. Certainly our visual vocabulary is made up of things found, squirreled away and then re-assembled with a dose of inspiration (desperation?) into a solution. But like Magpies, we can be seduced by outward appearance and the promise of easy pickings.

Examples? Three forms of particular note; acronym, or spoken mobile first. Who can forget the arrival on the business horizon of SWOT often used to examine SME's and eventually improve their KPI's!!? I was one of those people who could never remember the steps at parties and when everyone hopped, skipped and clapped in a line, I usually found myself at the opposite end of the room to the action. In meetings with a bunch of skilled acronymists, I'm dancing in the dark; a two hour meeting spent in the twilight zone, the minutes of which record, and I quote, "Location based on pre-loaded look-up table using standard WEPPS BM LMP address allocation rules." Anyone got a light?

In fact I once turned up for a DFC meeting with Steelcase Strafor to find that a DMC was in progress (the next one up) and I wasn't invited. So why demean colleagues and our language when speaking in words, would save us/me time and embarrassment?

But which words? Acronym's close cousin is business-speak. Many designers love business speak. It's easier than design-speak or plain English and can sound impressive and tuned in, even if you are neither of those things. It's most visible form is of course the "Mission Statement" or translation of the blindingly obvious into a near foreign language. Very quickly it mutates and before you know it you've caught brand-speak.

Product branding; the art of the Global con, where once great companies become mere names (brands) which are ascribed characteristics (brand values) which translate into product strategy (brand programme) and ideas (brand solutions) and a sales and marketing campaign (brand strategy) the whole being the result of a process of analysis (a bit more taxing this; understanding the drivers and constructs...brand positioning which determine whether the whole exercise is going to be worth a jot in the first place. The importance subscribed to the brand idea and the

subculture that has been spawned to promote its promotion, is just another form of the (pseudo) intellectual bullying adopted in so many areas of working life to categorise, coral and control.

The design business is on the receiving end. Jargon is a weapon; a communications equivalent of the cluster bomb; crude and cruel especially if you find yourself underneath it. The jargonist does not respect tradition; the means justify the ends and the end is a pedestal of unearned influence and in some circumstances, a fortune of someone else's money spent.

The "benchmark" or is that the "bottom line" of any design activity is the product. In my world this is usually a three dimensional object. Disappointingly despite more column inches and hot air being devoted to the promotion of design by jargon the "outcomes" fall woefully short and misunderstand the very nature of original thinking that for the most part requires knowledge gained in practice and talent gained in the womb. Perhaps then the greatest disappointment of all, which began the minor crusade I fight in my office, is the tendency of designers to try and obscure poor thinking with a third culprit "design speak".

A good practitioner of this form is often clever and quite formidable. Design speak can turn a question mark into a tick. I've always believed the most uneducated consumer will intuitively appreciate a well designed product, but I have also sat across the table from individuals and been very nearly convinced that what I knew to be poor was in fact a near classic; the power of words. Words in this form can be very hard to contradict and unless you are fully armed; perilous to challenge.

There are many glorious examples of design related jargonese but my favourite is the "paradigm shift". Now I know a paradigm is an idea; but a shifted one? Perhaps a new concept, or new theory, or just a new idea; and here is the nub, jargon is the pointless obscuring of the truth and over the years I have learnt one thing and that is that "truth is beauty and beauty truth" ... jargon is ugly and ugly is jargon "that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know" ... oh dear the next one will be on pretentiousness. **I**

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