

“Say What?” Best Practices in Complex Issue Messaging

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What We Did

- Review news releases from 2015 from ~30 WEI member companies
 - Topics: Price Changes, Net Metering, Environmental Upgrades, Customer Service Charge
- Diagnostic, not comprehensive
- Tip of the communications iceberg



Why We Did It

- Utility business becoming more complex.
- Consumers are over-messaged.
- If we want customers to support us, we have to speak their language.
 - “An educated consumer is our best customer.”
- As an industry, we are too fond of jargon and acronyms.
- We are engaged in a craft that blends art and science. We should strive for excellence.





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Our Guide: George Orwell

- Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- Never use the passive where you can use the active.



Source: "Politics and the English Language"

Orwell (cont.)

- Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.



Price Changes

- Most utilities refer to “rates,” even when they’re discussing price changes related to **fuel costs.**
 - Very few used “prices”
 - “Rates” vs. “Prices”: A distinction with a difference.
 - “The price of electricity/gas delivered by COMPANY will rise/fall next month based on WHAT.”
- Most releases also referenced impact on bills.
- Strive for consistency with news media.



Net Metering

- Contentious issue, some utilities involved in litigation, few news releases.
- Emphasize fairness
 - “Fair, stable and predictable.”
 - “Rooftop solar users effectively pay nothing for their use of the grid.”
 - “Solar subsidy”



Customer Service Charges

- Very few news releases on this topic
- “Monthly service fee increase”
- Consider vehicle analogies
 - Congestion
 - Fuel
 - Periodic maintenance



Environmental Cleanup

- Very few new releases posted.
- In prior research, many utilities used technical terms to describe technologies.
 - Flue Gas Desulfurization
 - Activated Carbon Injection



Takeaways

- Put yourself in the customer's shoes.
- Test your concepts and messages
 - Focus groups, online customer panel
- Aim for 8th grade readability
- Create a company style book if you don't have one.
- How do non-utilities message?



Thank You!

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