"Say What?" Best Practices in Complex Issue Messaging

APPA Customer Connections Conference
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Opening Thoughts

- "Any fool can make something complicated. It takes a genius to make it simple."

  — Woody Guthrie

- "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler."

  — Albert Einstein

- "Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection we can catch excellence."

  — Vince Lombardi

What We Did

- Reviewed news releases from ~40 public power utilities over last 12 months
- Topics: Price Changes, Net Metering, Environmental Upgrades, Customer Service Charge
- Diagnostic, not comprehensive
- Tip of the communications iceberg

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Why We Did It

- Utility business becoming more complex.
- Consumers are over-messaged.
- Most consumers are scientifically illiterate
- Speaking the customer's language is necessary to build confidence and trust
- Utility communicators sometimes rely too much on technical terms.

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EEI's Lexicon Project

- "Look at the way we talk as an industry. We use of all of these acronyms, all of this jargon. Some of us use the same words but define them differently or we use different words to mean the same thing."

— Stephanie Voyda,
EEI executive director of communications.

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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.
  - Sample: "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.

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Price Change Readability

- "(Utility) Board of Directors today approved a new approach to how the utility better links the actual cost of generating power with the amount customers pay."
  - Passive Sentences: 0%
  - Flesch Reading Ease: 40.5 (seek highest #)
  - Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level 14 (seek lowest #)

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My rewrite

- "(Utility) is changing the way we charge customers for power."

Passive Sentences: 0%
Flesch Reading Ease: 69.7
72% easier to read (69.7 - 40.5/40.5)
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 6
57% more accessible (6 – 14/14)

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Translating "Utility" into Everyday Language

Utility Terms	**Everyday Terms**
◣ Appropriate	◣ Fair
◣ Restructure	◣ Change
◣ Rate	◣ Price
◣ Infrastructure	◣ Network

Takeaways

◣ Always try to bite-size your copy

◣ Test your concepts and messages

- ◣ Focus groups, online customer panel, literacy group, Word readability tool or your children
- ◣ Aim for 8th grade readability

◣ Create a company style book if you don't have one.

◣ Pay attention to how non-utilities message