

“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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Sierra Club: “How the Coal Industry Poisoned Your Tuna Sandwich”

This much mercury can contaminate a 20-acre lake

U.S. coal-fired power plants produce 48 tons of it each year



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EET'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,

EET executive director of communications.



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EEI's Lexicon Project

Words to Lose

- ▀ Ratepayer
- ▀ Electricity
- ▀ Utility
- ▀ Rooftop Solar
- ▀ Utility-scale Solar
- ▀ Distribution Charge

Words to Use

- ▀ Customer
- ▀ Energy
- ▀ Energy Company
- ▀ Private Solar
- ▀ Universal Solar
- ▀ Energy Delivery Charge



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Source: m+p Lexicon Project

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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Price Changes #2

- “(Utility) summer electric rates will be in effect for all energy used between June 1 and Sept. 30.”
 - Passive Sentences: 0%
 - Flesch Reading Ease: 46.9 (seek highest #)
 - Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 11.6 (seek lowest #)



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My Rewrite

- ▀ “Summer is here and your electric prices will be increasing.”

Passive Sentences: 0%
Flesch Reading Ease: 69.7
49% easier to read (69.7 - 46.9/46.9)
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level 6
48% more accessible (6 - 11.6/11.6)



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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



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