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The Power of Ordinary Words

By Ingrid Sapona

Why is it that when people earn degrees and professional designations they often adopt an alter ego when they write? They use complex sentence structures and words they rarely use when they speak.

If you're wondering if I'm talking about you, here are some examples of what I mean: You wouldn't leave this on a friend's voice mail: "I am phoning to advise you the show commences at ten." But if you've written a client something like this: "I am writing to advise you the hearing commences at ten" — then I may be talking about you.

Or, if you might ask your daughter, "How much do you spend a year downloading songs?", but, when asking a client essentially the same question you'd write it like this: "quantify the amount you spend per annum on entertainment, e.g., music downloads" — then I'm definitely talking about you. (If you've ever said or written a sentence like this: "When queried, I indicated we would return home by 11 because the show terminates at 10:15" instead of: "When the sitter asked, I said we'd be home by 11, since the show's done at 10:15" — then you're probably a lawyer and you need more help than I can offer in this column!)

I've asked many professionals why they speak and write differently and most say they were taught that writing is supposed to be more formal than speaking. While you may have been taught this "rule" in grade school, what you don't realize is that the reason for it is self-serving: teachers want students to be careful with language and grammar and the best way of teaching these skills is through writing — it's not because there's something special about writing.

Personally, I think many professionals use non-ordinary words out of insecurity and a misplaced belief that they sound more professional. I'm sure they come by this belief honestly — after all — their professors and colleagues have been using such language for years and they feel that to fit in, they must follow suit.

I also think professionals sometimes hide behind uncommon words and complicated sentence structures. Using words people are less familiar with distracts the reader or listener who must try to process what the professional is really saying. Think of such language as the professional's version of smoke and mirrors.

Laziness is also involved. If you've picked up a work-related vocabulary or way of speaking and you're surrounded by others using that vocabulary, it's easier just to do the same. As well, translating concepts and ideas into ordinary language can be time consuming and difficult.

Despite the challenge of using ordinary language, putting the effort in pays off in many ways. For one thing, doing so will make you a better professional because you'll be forced to test your understanding of concepts as you "translate" them into ordinary words. But, more importantly, if you use ordinary words more people will understand you and your reputation as a knowledgeable, approachable expert will increase!

Try these...

Listed in columns 1 and 3 are words and phrases I've read in CBV reports, opinions, and letters. Columns 2 and 4 show some plain language substitutes. Try using words from columns 2 and 4

instead of those in Columns 1 and 3 — I guarantee your readers will appreciate it!

| (1) Instead of: | (2) Try using this: | (3) Instead of: | (4) Try using this: |
|--------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| furnish → | give | in receipt of → | got |
| elect → | choose | aggregate → | total |
| ameliorate → | improve (or: make better) | implement → | carry out (or: do) |
| in the event → | if | necessitate → | require |
| per annum → | a year | possess → | own (or: have) |
| relate → | tell | sufficient → | enough |
| perpetrated → | carried out | exhaustive → | complete |
| assist → | help | consensus → | agreement |
| commences → | starts (or: begins) | secure → | get |
| prior → | before | pursuant to → | because of (or: under) |

Special to the CBV

The Value Proposition of the MBA: Human Capital, Social Capital or Signalling, and the CBV designation

By Louis Florence, PhD, MBA

Earlier this year, a research study on the value of the MBA degree was undertaken, based on an extensive online survey of MBA alumni living and working in Ontario, and more than 600 surveys received. Approximately 75% of the respondents were employed in the corporate sector, with the remainder roughly split between government, academia, and the non profit sector. Approximately 30% of the respondents had an undergraduate major in business, 25% in the humanities, and 25% in engineering. Roughly two thirds of the respondents were male. Approximately 50% had graduated since year 2000, and 50% prior to year 2000.

The research was intended to uncover the sources of the value of the MBA program, and the contribution of the MBA education to managerial skills, good business judgment, analytical skills, and social capital. Statistics Canada data suggest that there are approximately 96,000 people living and working in Ontario who hold an MBA. A central aim was to determine whether alumni who reported ‘added-value’ as a result of their MBA education also reported enhanced ability to contribute to various measures of organizational success, and hence contribute to the productivity and success of the Ontario economy.

Approximately 80% of the MBA alumni reported they ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ with a variety of value metrics that the knowledge and skills gained — soft skills and hard skills — the credential itself, boosts in self-confidence, and increases in the network of valuable friends obtained (mainly for recent graduates) as a result of their MBA studies. Typically, only 5%-10% of alumni disagreed or strongly disagreed (the rest were neutral). The results obtained were robust and remarkably