

10 Tired Business Cliches You Should Never Use Again

Jeff Haden/Inc.com

Check out some web copy. Skim through marketing literature. Listen to salespeople. Often the same old words and phrases get used. Sure, they made a real impact once, but they're almost meaningless now, if only because they've been used so often.

If the following terms are used in your marketing, advertising, or sales processes, put yourself in the customer's position and consider their reaction--because that's the only reaction that matters:

1. "Customer focused."

Gee, I hope so. Should you be anything except customer focused? If the goal is to imply that other providers are not customer focused, tell me how you're better: quicker response times, greater availability, customized processes or systems, etc.

Explain in concrete terms how you will meet my specific needs. (If you don't know my needs and therefore can't explain how you will meet them, shame on you.)

2. "Exceed expectations."

Exceeding expectations is an admirable goal, and one every company should aspire to, but exceeding expectations should be an internal and not an external goal. Tell me you will exceed expectations and "exceeded expectations" is the expectation. (I know, that's a little Zen.)

Just tell me exactly what you will do. If you consistently pull it off, I'll be happy. Let me (the customer) judge whether you truly go above and beyond expectations.

3. "Best in class."

There are two problems with that term: Who defined your "class," and who determined you were the "best" in it? (Most of the time the answer to both questions is "you.")

Maybe you are that wonderful. Great! Prove it. Detail your accomplishments, awards, and results. As a customer, I don't need the best in class, I need the best for me--so tell me objectively how you will provide the best value for my needs.

4. "Low-hanging fruit."

Consultants love this one. The problem is, when you say, "We'll start with the low-hanging fruit," I hear, "We'll start with the really easy stuff you really should have done yourself."

No business wants to hear they have low-hanging fruit. Just describe, in cost-benefit terms, how you prioritized your list of projects or tasks [on my behalf].

5. "Unique."

Sure, everyone is a snowflake, but the ever-increasing pace of commoditization means few products and services have no like or equal for long.

If a customer is considering whether to hire your firm or buy your products, "unique" means nothing to them. Customers want "better." Describe how you're better for their needs.

6. "Value added."

This term is often used to imply a customer will receive something for little to no incremental cost. Of course, that really means that what's received isn't value added because it's a part of the overall deal.

Tell me the deal, explain all the options and add-ons, and help me figure out how I can take full advantage of what you provide.

7. "Turnkey."

I love a turnkey solution as much as the next guy, but few solutions truly are. No matter how comprehensive the offering, I always wind up participating more than I was led to expect, so when I hear "turnkey" I'm naturally skeptical.

Unless, that is, you thoroughly break down what you will provide and what my participation will be, both during implementation and after. Turnkey is in the eye of the beholder; the customer is always the beholder.

8. "Expert."

Margaret Thatcher once said, "Power is like being a lady; if you have to say you are, you aren't." Anyone can claim to be an expert; real experts can prove it.

So show what you can do, and let me decide how expert you are. For example, "Web 2.0 expert" can be read as, "We can plop videos and marginally interactive applications on any website." On the other hand, saying, "Built websites for..." or, "Created applications that..." and showing examples allows potential customers to evaluate your level of expertise and its suitability for their needs.

9. "Outstanding ROI."

Everyone loves a great return on investment. But without access to my numbers, you can't accurately calculate my ROI. Therefore, your estimate is either theoretical or based on another customer's results; either way I know your estimate is absolutely best case.

Show the costs, don't hide anything, and trust me to calculate my own ROI. If I'm not smart enough to do so, I probably don't have purchase authority anyway, so you're wasting your time.

10. "Partner."

Long-term business relationships are great, but we will never truly be partners until the day my hand can reach into your pocket like yours reaches into mine.

Still, maybe one day a customer could come to see your business relationship as a quasi-partnership... but that's something they will decide based on your long-term performance, not your marketing.

Words make things happen.

Until they don't.

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