

Rolling out the gibberish going forward

Joanna Mather

Every year brings a wave of new business jargon. But 2010 was special. A phrase so lacking in meaning that the business community dumped it years ago became a political debating point: "moving forward".

"Thought showers", "repurposing" and "cascade" were the emerging jargon of 2010, according to the Plain English Foundation, which uses internet searches to identify new jargon and old jargon which is being revived.

The economic recovery influenced jargon too. Companies coming out of the downturn "got their ducks in a row", "picked low-hanging fruit" and encouraged staff who hadn't lost their jobs to "put in 110 per cent".

"Unpack" gained currency in business speech. A manager might say he is "unpacking a new strategy", which means he's explaining it.

"There's more unpacking going on than at a scouts' jamboree," crossword whiz and newspaper columnist David Astle said. "Key take-outs" or "take-aways" are not particularly new but remain popular. They usually refer to the most important points in a presentation or discussion.

Word play

The year's worst jargon

- **KPIs** Short for key performance indicators. As abrasive as 'key result areas', or KRAs.
- **Granularity** Replaces 'drill down'. We're now required to examine things with a high level of 'granularity'.
- **Disintermediate** An economic term that's moved into the mainstream which means cut out the middle man.
- **Moving forward** Julia Gillard's election campaign catchphrase.
- **Cascade** To communicate. As in, that information needs to 'cascade' through the organisation.
- **Thought showers** Replaces brainstorm.
- **Repurpose** To recycle. Rather than something being recycled, it is 'repurposed'.
- **Strategic staircase** Replaces the tautology 'forward plan' with something even worse.

SOURCE: PLAIN ENGLISH FOUNDATION, AFR INTERVIEWS

In a speech to the Stockbrokers Association of Australia in June, superannuation review chairman Jeremy Cooper identified some for the audience. "A couple of 'key take-outs' are the number of funds: 74 and the biggest fund approaching \$200 billion in today's dollars," he said.

Some people are paid to work out what the "key take-outs" are. When SingTel Optus advertised for a senior online channel executive this year, the Sydney-based phone company said it wanted somebody with the ability to "decipher key take-outs".

Plain English Foundation executive

director Neil James said jargon falls into three rough categories: new jargon that replaces old; new words; and clichés or phrases making a comeback. One example of new jargon is "level of granularity", which is starting to replace "drilling down", he said.

"And we all got very sick of capital works projects being 'shovel-ready', but this year they all went into the delivery pipeline or, in government-speak particularly favoured by Wayne Swan, into 'roll-out'," he said.

One to watch for, according to Mr Astle, is "artefact". This "impossible and grotesque verbal creation" is

likely to become prominent in 2011, he said. "One large Australian telco is already fond of 'artefacting'," Mr Astle said. "You can't just talk to people any more. You need to create a trail of evidence to show you are 'actioning' something. You need to create 'artefacts' — tangible evidence — that you are on the case."

"Moving forward" topped the foundation's 2010 jargon hit list. "If 'moving forward' truly captures the spirit of the nation, we should all be very worried," Mr James said. "It hints vaguely at progress without committing to anything, so politicians can sound positive without being held to account for breaking a promise."

Mr James said he was horrified when Prime Minister Julia Gillard trotted out "moving forward" more than 20 times in a speech kicking off the Labor campaign. When the Coalition accused her of mindless platitudes, she said the phrase captured the spirit of the nation.

Closely related is "going forward", which Mr Astle described as similarly useless. "What going forward has done has erased any line in the sand at all," he said. "It has removed the horizon; it will never be reached."

Buzzword bingo

Job hunters have been advised to think again before trotting out overused buzzwords that do little to grab the attention of prospective employers. Social networking site LinkedIn, which has more than 85 million members, has highlighted "extensive experience", "innovative" and "motivated" as the words most overused by its Australian members.

Brian Corrigan