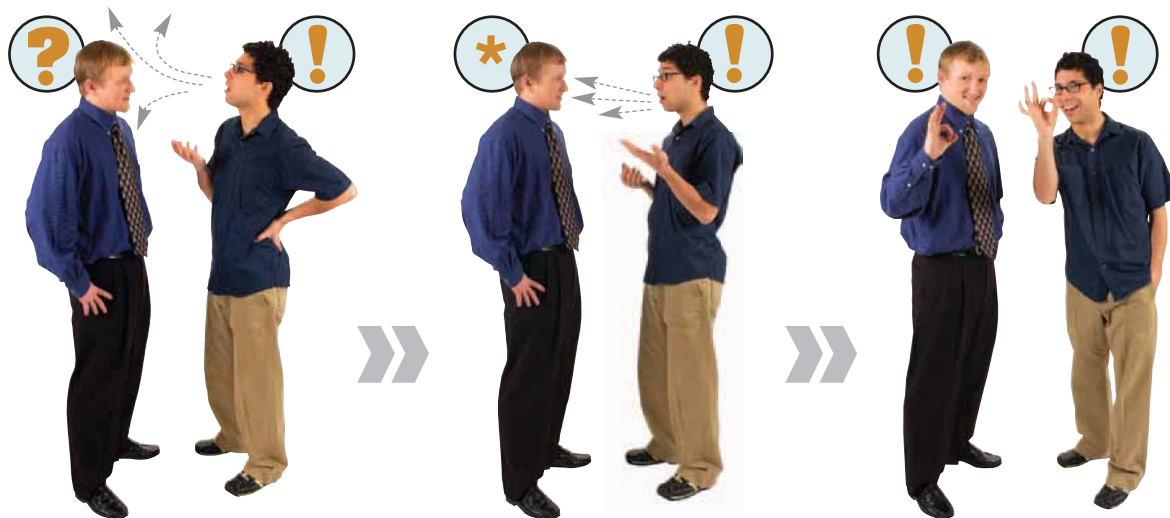




talk



straight

BY
CHRIS
HARGES

Ditch the techy jargon and give customers the real deal with **COMMON SENSE LANGUAGE** they can understand.

20 years ago, buying a computer was a lot like buying a tent. Both required trips to a specialty store. Both products were technical, complicated and poorly marketed. If there was any supporting literature at all, it was so full of jargon and insider language that it read like a foreign language. At retail, store associates had a tendency to speak down to potential customers, stressing their expertise by making it painfully clear how little the average consumer knew. At best, it was an intimidating retail experience for the budding computer user or outdoor enthusiast.

Nowadays, it's gotten a lot easier to buy a computer. But while retailers and manufacturers in the outdoor industry have evolved dramatically since the '80s, it's quite apparent that our little industry still has a long way to go to match the consumer-friendly inclusiveness of the home electronics market. While there's plenty of room for improvement at retail, it must be pointed out that the problem with communicating product messages often starts with the manufacturers.

It isn't that manufacturers are trying to be elitist. It's just that many are so focused on competing with one another, they appear to have forgotten they're competing for new consumers as much as they are for consumer loyalty. While the battle to achieve that mythical grand prize of being able to claim technical superiority and authenticity keeps gearheads and wannabes running from brand-to-brand in a never-ending quest for the latest gear, it doesn't do a lot to encourage the beginner to take up new outdoor sports. Sooner or later, we're all going to need to convert that beginner to a regular participant.

So how do you welcome new customers without watering down your hardcore brand

image? It's pretty easy. Just do a better job of telling your customers about your products. As a graphic design firm that caters to the outdoor industry, we've seen more than our fair share of packaging, product instructions and user manuals. What we see is often either so full of jargon or so poorly designed that it's virtually meaningless to the novice or intermediate outdoor consumer.

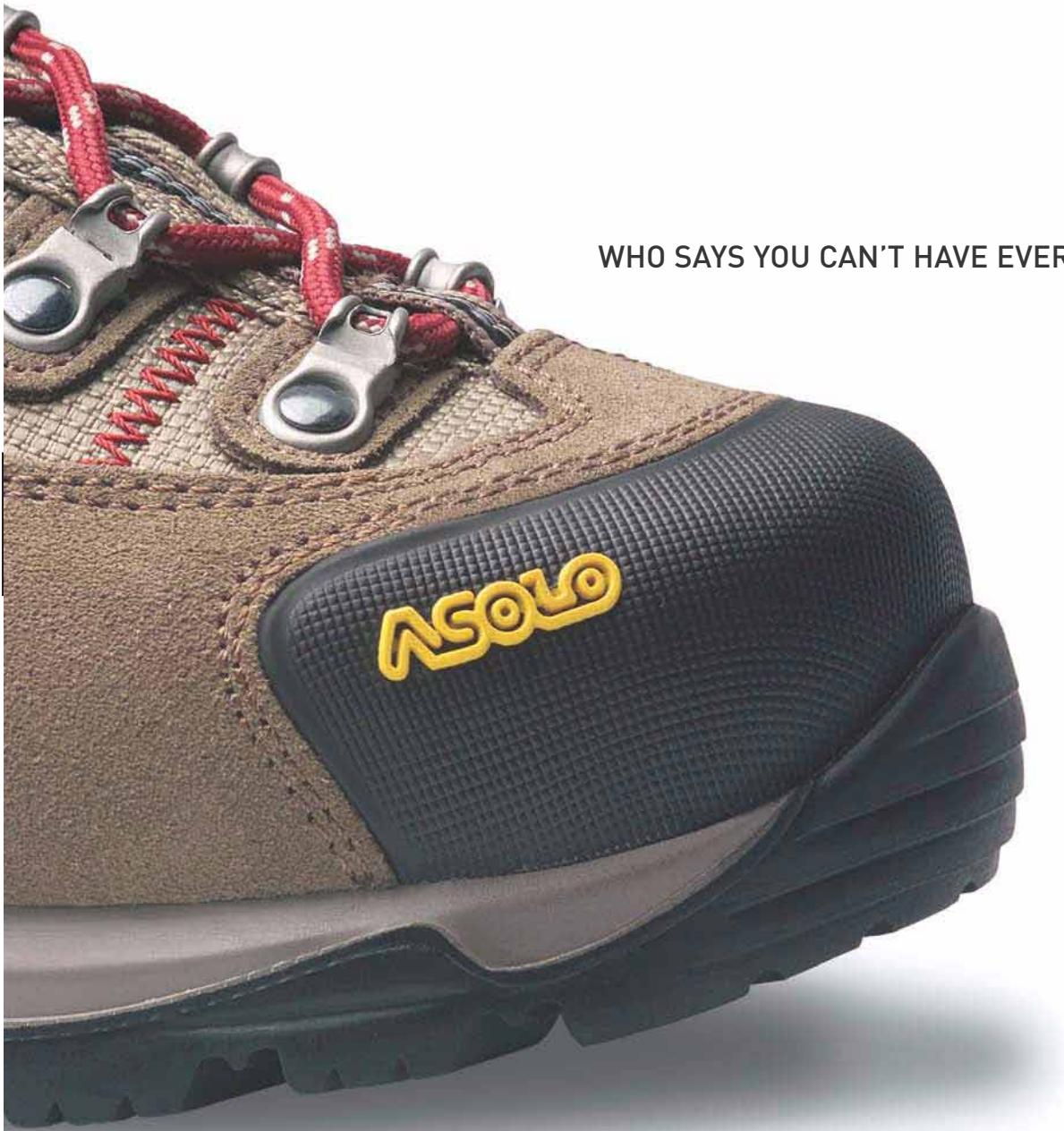
A company that thinks nothing of allocating thousands of hours to designing a tent that's easy to set up will turn around and sell that tent with a Xeroxed page of instructions that makes a VCR manual look like an easy read. Brands that spend hundreds of thousands in advertising to reach mainstream consumers clog up their packaging with phrases like "40D stress reinforcement panels" and "Rated at 6 CFM."

This tech talk is meaningless to anyone outside of the industry. Hell, a good deal of it is meaningless to anyone who works outside product development departments. The most you can say for it is that it bamboozles the consumer into thinking: "Gee, this must be pretty high-tech stuff. I don't understand a word of it."

QUIT TALKING TECH

With the most modest investment of resources and a little attention to detail, any brand can gut through technical mumbo jumbo and connect with customers. Giving consumers product information they can understand has a number of tangible benefits:

» Clear explanations of features and benefits can justify the high price points associated with many outdoor products. Many brands in the outdoor specialty channel are attempting to stake out a premium position. If you need to convince a potential buyer that



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your product is worth more than a chain-store knock-off, you had better be able to explain why—simply.

» Good messages well-delivered can give you a leg up on your competitors. Consumers judge a product's quality and worth using every bit of data they can get their hands on. Your product may look cool, but if the hangtag dangling off it looks like it was written by an engineer and laid out by his kid brother, you're giving mixed messages.

What's more, outdoor consumers live in a wider world. They're bombarded day in and day out by carefully crafted, professionally designed messages from brands like Volkswagen and Apple. Like it or not, the big guys with the deep pockets set the standards for what sort of messages accompany premium products. If you want consumers to believe your products are worth higher prices, you need to make sure your communications appear premium as well.

» Every new consumer that doesn't get turned off by tech-talk is a potential outdoor enthusiast. It's touch-and-go with beginners. Outdoor sports are both gear and knowledge intensive. Many consumers have to be coaxed into participation. To take up a new outdoor sport, a novice has to spend money, spend time, and commit himself to a period of awkwardness and uncertainty. The more comfortable you can make that transition, the more likely the user will become committed to the sport and committed to your brand.

THE REAL DEAL

Good messaging comes with experience. But there are a few pointers to help outdoor marketers avoid talking to themselves.

1. Don't count on developers and salespeople to be marketing professionals. Developers tend to be product-focused, while salespeople tend to be dealer-focused. You need to make sure the people behind your marketing communications are consumer-focused. Knowing how to create a message that connects with consumers is a different skill from knowing how to create a product consumers will buy.

2. Don't count on marketing professionals to be copywriters and designers. Good marketers are always good strategists, but that doesn't mean they can turn that strategy into an effective brochure, package or hangtag. Make sure your communication materials are created by professionals. This doesn't mean you have to outsource. But it does mean you have to make sure

DID YOU KNOW? «««



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your designers and copywriters have both talent and experience.

3. Try to think like your target audience, not like an industry insider. Base your messages on what consumers know, not on what you know. Always remember that, as a communicator, you know too much for your own good.

4. Research your messages. In a development-driven industry like the outdoor market, there's a tendency to focus on features and technologies that excite product developers and gearheads. Find out why customers buy your products. Those needs are what you should focus on.


5. Speak to everyone without offending anyone. To be an inclusive marketer, you've got to satisfy the needs of the least technical potential consumer without offending the gearheads. It's a fine line to walk and a neat trick but it can be pulled off. It takes planning. And a good copywriter.

6. Test your messages. Run them by friends outside the industry. Hold a focus group if you can afford to. Ask your mother. Even professionals get second opinions. Go with your gut, but keep your eye out for messaging problems that keep cropping up.

7. Look at other industries. In the last decade, the computer industry has learned how to present itself to a non-technical audience. It's come a long way. Watch what Apple and Dell do to make the complicated comfortable for soccer moms and grandparents.

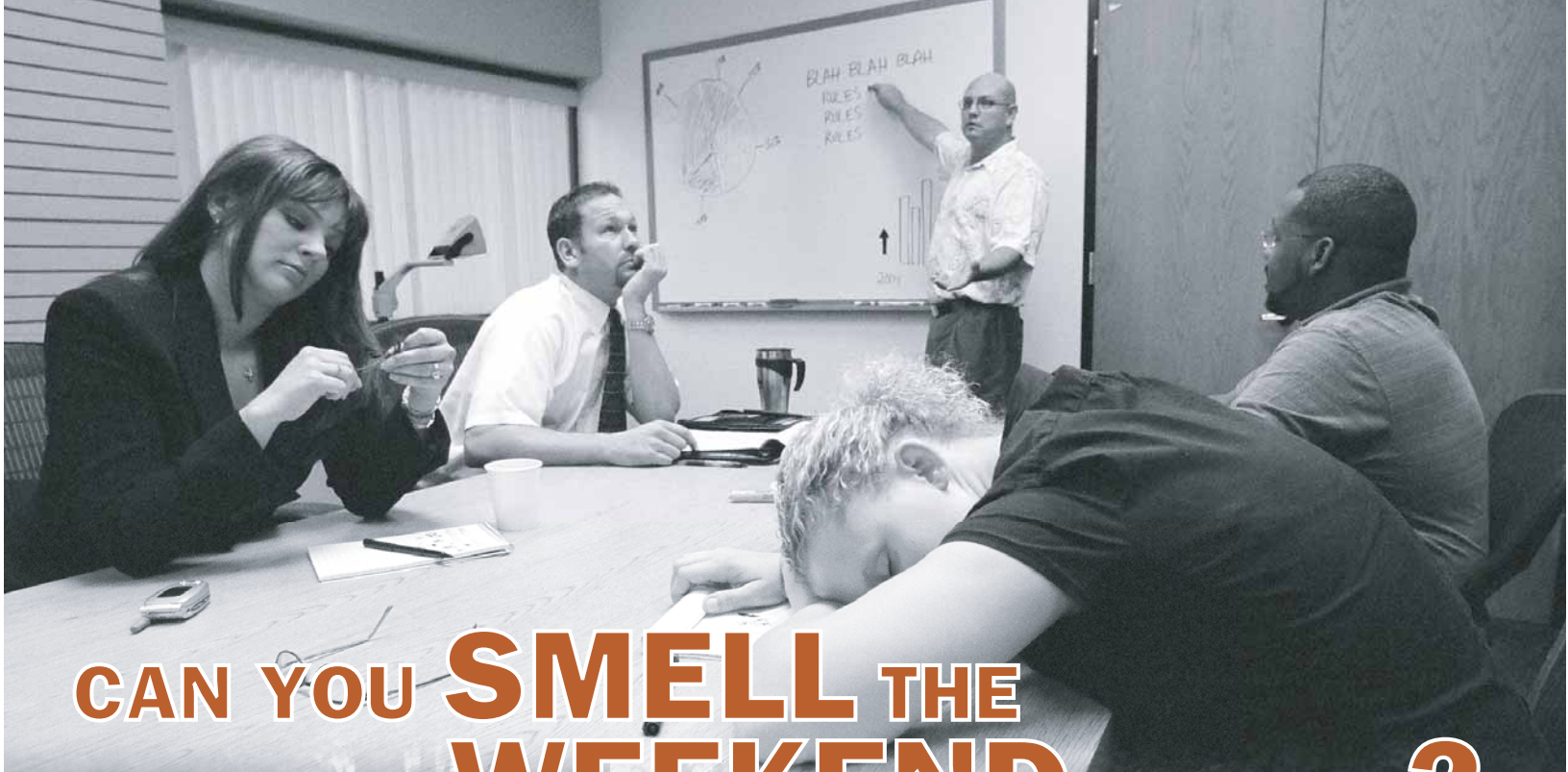
8. Beware of the proud parent syndrome. People are seldom the best judges of their own work. If you're getting negative feedback on your messages, there might be a problem and it might be you.

9. Be careful with your brand. You only get a few moments in this world to connect with consumers. Keep your messages simple and repeat them as often as possible.

10. Be wary of mucking up your message with a patchwork of icons, proprietary fabric names, collection names and logos. In the precious moment of consumer attention, multiple messages can be confusing. With brand messages, less is more. 

Chris Harges is a partner at Satellite Design, a graphic design firm specializing in corporate identity, packaging and POP. For more information on brand strategies, contact Harges at chris@satellite-design.com.

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