

## Learning to Speak the Tech Language

*If you think conversations with technology vendors are as comprehensible as that last "art film" your spouse dragged you to, join the crowd. Foggy communication can lead both vendor and association down a cluttered road of misunderstandings and wasted resources. Here are some of the most frequent culprits behind the confusion.*

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The musical *Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* has a funny scene in which Charles Durning, a stereotypical Southern politician, dodges the media by being painfully long on rhetoric and woefully short on substance. This kind of verbal fluff doesn't seem as funny when it comes to our associations and the conversational fog we get into when we talk technology. The information technology (IT) industry is notorious for constantly identifying — or inventing — lofty, ambiguous terms that only propagate misunderstanding. And what might be considered "trendy IT-insider speak" has caused more problems in requirements definition, contract negotiations, and project implementation than either party can afford. Here are some of the words and phrases that get us into trouble.

### 1. Streamline/Seamless

These are two adjectives of the moment, and neither says anything about how a particular piece of software will work. To be "streamlined" is to have the simplest process *without interruption or turbulence*. To be "seamless" is defined as *having no awkward transitions or obvious disparities*. Think of an uninterrupted piece of fabric. Is that kind of analogy even reasonable with IT? Most office infrastructures were built over time, with organizations piecing together hardware, software, and custom programming until the result looks more like a country patchwork quilt than a single bedsheet. Some quilts are amazing works of art that also *function* well — and isn't that really what we want? A vendor who can work with what we have and bring that together with some new pieces to make

something appealing and functional? The goal is to be without interruption or obvious disconnects, not to be without seams.

What you must communicate to your vendor instead of "seamlessness" is how you need the pieces to come together. Use your words to detail what isn't working now. Describe where the current process is fraught with turbulence; a credible vendor will know how to bring it all together so that the seams are as artful as the squares.

### 2. Web-enabled

Generally, what leaders are asking for here is to be able to use a browser to access information or products. Sometimes what we mean — or what vendors hear — is that we want the entire process to be facilitated using Web technology. Here is the difference: If all you can afford to do is post your current PDF registration form on the Web site so users can print and complete it manually, that is not fully "Web-enabling" a process. Some call this "faux e-business." And truly, if that is all your organization can support, there is nothing wrong with making incremental progress and putting only part of the process online now. The mistake would be in suggesting that you want to "Web-enable conference registration." What the vendor hears in this case is "create electronic forms, integrate the membership database, and develop an interactive conference program with wait lists, a shopping cart, online credit card transactions, confirmations, receipts, and more." Lay out your workflow process first on paper and discuss how deeply into the process you can afford the automation to go.

### 3. User-friendly/Intuitive

This is the ultimate crystal-ball descriptor in IT right now: "We want an *intuitive* design or *intuitive* navigation." Given the diversity of the people who might ever visit your site, how is that possible? What we usually mean is, "We want a design that will make the most sense to most people." Well, you have to imagine that at one time someone tried to think through a user-friendly process for a salad bar. You start with lettuce, right? Or do you prefer spinach? No, you start with a bowl ... or a plastic tray? And who is that guy jumping past the line, going for the macaroni salad? We don't have intuitive navigation for a salad bar — what makes us think we can achieve this with Web sites?

Skip the word altogether. Instead, spend some time learning who your key target audiences are, what they prefer, and why they go to your site. Conduct a usability assessment. Do a visitor survey. Build some user profiles and offer those descriptions to your vendors instead of asking them to gaze into that crystal ball and intuitively know what you want.

#### 4. Flexible

Often, when we ask for something to be flexible, we want it to be able to accommodate various conditions. That can be a challenge since, fundamentally, computers are rule-based. There are limits. In a requirements-definition process, you must anticipate the full range of variances to be accommodated and also know your limits. For example, if you want a "flexible" reporting tool, you should be clear about how much the tool can be changed or manipulated to respond to different situations. Do you want to be able to choose from a finite set of fields and generate reports, or do you want to be able to add fields and values, custom-design the output format, or export to other programs? Defining the range of flexibility can be a great role for your staff pessimist. Engage them in thinking about all the things that could go wrong or ways people could mess things up, and that will give you a good sense of where you need to set limits.

#### 5. Leverage

Probably one of the best buzzwords of last year, "leverage" is something everyone seems to want but few can describe. To "leverage" means to *gain some advantage through the use of a tool*. The image is of the caveman bracing a big stick under a rock to propel it forward. This verb then makes sense where technology is concerned, but can you — or the vendor who is promising you — answer this question: "When you're done leveraging, what will that look like?" Where will your rock be? We hear phrases such as "We want to leverage our existing technology investment." Interpreting that, do you want to use some other tool to gain advantage over the money you have already spent on technology? Or are you saying that you want to get more out of what you have already bought but not spend more? The important word in that definition is "advantage." Can you describe what advantage you are trying to gain and against whom? When you are "leveraged," what will that look like? Focus on clearly defining both the problem and desired outcome.

#### 6. Innovative

As applied to association work, this adjective is fascinating. Dictionaries will tell you that to be innovative, you have to introduce something wholly new. The cost of being truly innovative also means assuming a fair share of risk. In our technology work with associations, very few actually want to be the first to introduce something totally new; they want something proven, something stable — just new to them.

Be careful about tossing around terms such as "innovative" or "cutting edge" if your organization's risk threshold is more modest. Are you game for something truly new and possibly untested? Do you have an appetite for experimentation, or are you really looking for something that has been vetted, proven, and stable? "Innovative" is a very appealing word for IT professionals; don't bait that hook if you aren't prepared for what you might catch.

#### 7. Interactive

Maybe it's just a personal pet peeve, but the word "interactive" strikes me like nails on a chalkboard. Not only have we beaten this word to death, but we still have yet to achieve any kind of common definition for it. The textbook definition is *mutually or reciprocally active*. That means — on the Web — that the site and user should both be active.

Now, what is "active," and does that mean "simultaneously?" Is it interactive if I, the site owner, have expended effort to post content, and you, the visitor, come to the site at some later time to click your mouse around and read it? That certainly is activity on both parts, just not very engaging. When we say we want our sites to be "interactive," do we mean that each time you do something on the site, either I respond immediately to you or something on the site whirls, spins, displays, speaks, or sings? That's activity, too.

Perhaps the best working definition was written specifically for electronic communications and defines that, for interactivity to be present, there must be an exchange of the user's command with some response. That is, if your Web site user does something — enters information or makes a selection — the site (or you) responds in some way.

The burden of using this word is that you must define what you mean by interactive. You must decide what you want users to be able to do, and think through what the responses would be. One effective technique is to write portions of your requirements in the form of a story or vignette. Describe what users would do and what would happen as result; this begins to build out a picture of the level of interactivity that is right for your site.

#### 8. **Integrated**

To "integrate" is *to form, coordinate, or blend into a functioning or unified whole; to unite with something else; to incorporate into a larger unit; to end the segregation of and bring into equal membership in society or an organization*. In a technology context, we are usually referring to making separate systems or databases work with each other and provide a more unified context for our information. Integration is generally a good thing, but it usually forces us to change how we have been in the past.

When communicating with your vendors, ensure they understand which database takes priority when a discrepancy exists, where you are willing to change business processes, and where you must allow for exceptions. Be clear about the scope of the integration that is necessary.

For example, if you want to control access to your members-only Web site content and have the login process integrated with your membership database, specify the extent of the user verification you require. Do you need a real-time look-up of member identification and verification of member status? Do you want all the member data to "carry over" so if the user accesses an online form, it prepopulates with all his information? How much integration do you want?

Be careful, too, about mixing these troublesome terms. Asking for "seamless integration" in the previous scenario might be interpreted by your vendor as allowing the user to change his information and have it immediately overwrite the membership database without any validation/approval from you. In some cases that might be what you want, but you have to think it all the way through.

#### 9. **Scalable**

*The application should be completely scalable.* Aside from fish frying, what folks really are saying about scaling is that they want a tool to grow as they grow, to take on greater capacity or volume as needed and, in some cases, to contract or "scale back" when they don't need that much. We might be better off saying we want the application to be an accordion!

But still we have to specify the range of scalability we require. A programmer is hard-pressed to code for infinite options, so spend a little time discussing the absolute most and least that you need. If you need a scalable content management system (CMS) because right now you have only two Web staff, project forward to imagine the greatest number of people you would give content rights to before you could no longer control quality. It makes a difference whether that number is 12 staff or 1,200.

#### 10. **Design/Redesign**

These wayward words may be too far gone to save, but if we are going to avoid some of the black holes of misunderstanding and lost money, we have to try. Let's revamp our use of the words "Web site redesign" to be what we mean: "We want a change."

Think of the popular home improvement and design television shows. When you say you want a redesign, do you mean you want to improve one or two areas of what you have ("Trading Spaces"), do you just want to improve the face of your site ("Curb Appeal"), or are you looking for a radical overhaul by knocking down the framework ("Extreme Makeover: Home Edition")? Many associations have floundered into project overruns because the notion of "design" to them was aesthetic (color, font, images), while to the vendor, design was both aesthetic and architectural (navigation, usability, page layout). Avoid surprises by clarifying the scope of the design work you need done.

Realize, too, that you often can't have architectural change without affecting aesthetics. The Web team that wants to implement a CMS (which may force templates and rules for posting) must satisfy the marketing or communications departments (which want free reign of "creative expression").

Another problem with aesthetic design is that it is a lot like defining art — it can be just about any practice, using any materials, with just about any outcome, and you could still defend it as art. It also seems to be the one aspect of Web sites on which everyone has immediate, firm opinions. Avoid the debate: Do your homework about your Web audience, their preferences, and their culture. Know how they use the Web and your site. This information goes a long way toward dictating the design principles that are right for your site and that can substantiate decisions you make.

Keep asking questions: Are we talking about aesthetic design or architecture? How much flexibility do we really need? To whom is this intuitive?

Often, association executives are hesitant to challenge a vendor's spew of terminology or fear looking like they are techno-neophytes by asking too many questions. They might even use these troublesome terms themselves to mask their lack of understanding. Get over it!

Miscommunication has a real bottom-line impact. Your best defense is to ask questions, and the best way to be smart is to spend time ensuring you get what you need. If what you hear in conversations with your vendor is "You'll be getting an interactive, Web-enabled design that offers flexibility and seamless integration so that you can leverage your investment," refine your ability to cock your head to one side and make that perplexed beagle face that says, "Huh?"