

Where the *baloney* meets the road



SCHOLARSHIP AND THE MARKETPLACE

In 1952, in a pique over bureaucratic language, then-assistant general counsel for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Milton Smith coined the word “bafflegab.” He was at a loss to otherwise characterize the incomprehensibility, ambiguity, verbosity and complexity of the language being used by those bombastic folks over at the Office of Price Stabilization.

I first ran across the word almost 30 years later, when, early in my career as a doctoral student, I was assigned a *Psychology Today* reading with the curious title, “Bafflegab Pays.” In the article, author J. Scott Armstrong, a marketing professor at Wharton, offered this direct advice: “If you can’t convince them, confuse them.”

In the years since, the street translation of this advice has become part of the lexicon of most American workers: “If you can’t dazzle them with brilliance, baffle them with ____.” You know the rest.

But Armstrong’s bafflegab suggestion didn’t seem to be offered as irreverent, tongue-in-cheek advice. Instead, his article provided compelling data to support the wisdom and efficacy of employing bafflegab in academic settings, and seemed to warrant serious attention, particularly from doctoral students whose academic careers would depend on convincing journal editors of their research competence.

In his research, Armstrong found a direct correlation between how difficult articles were to read and comprehend, and how the journals they appeared in were respected among academics. In other words, when professors ranked the prestige of management journals, the top-rated journal was the hardest to read, the lowest-rated journal, the easiest. And when Armstrong rewrote some passages from the hard-to-read, highly ranked journals to make them easier to read, those same professors now rated the easier-to-understand ver-

sions less competent than the difficult versions, even though their conceptual content had been carefully preserved.

Excited by the thought that I had just been handed the key to success in academe, I embarked on my own bafflegab journey. I quickly found, however, that there were strong forces aligned against me.

Almost immediately it became clear that when it came to writing unintelligibly, doctoral students did not enjoy the same perception of competency that Armstrong had reported among professors. His observations notwithstanding, my adviser spared no opportunity to tell me that I made no sense.

Later, and much to my dismay, I realized, too, that my PhD committee actually expected me to be able to explain how my esoterically titled dissertation, “The Effects of Reference Dependence on Decision Difficulty,” could inform the practices of real-life managers.

Later still, as a new, tenure-track faculty member, I again realized that when my students asked me what exactly I did for a living, I would need to have an adequate and understandable response at the ready. Bafflegab wasn’t going to suffice.

As management education enters the 21st century, at least three forces further challenge how we conduct and, more important, communicate our research to our stakeholders.

First, media rankings of business schools, such as those by *Business Week* and *U.S. News & World Report*, affect administrators, alumni, donors and especially prospective students who see a devaluation of their degrees with lower rankings. The influential *Business Week* rankings, for example, give 90 percent weight to their survey of graduating students and recruiters, and 10 percent weight to faculty publications. Although a BW ranking may not be the true measure of a school's quality, and could be tempting schools to "look good rather than be good," there is, nevertheless, an urgent need to find a way to express our research that is intelligible and responsive to the market.

Second, executive education is a strong component in the strategy of business schools and requires, if not an outright, fundamental shift from research to teaching, at least a need to develop materials that are relevant to the practice. When experienced managers sit in the classroom, their question is how can they use what we teach to improve their business. Such questions, once again, challenge us to look at our research in practical ways.

Third, as business schools embrace more and more international students, the resulting diversity challenges us to examine the cross-cultural implications of our research. Now the task encompasses extending the research into newer cultures where consumers hold different values and mindsets.

Here then, is where the baloney meets the road, and bafflegab, no matter how brilliant it might sound, just won't cut it. As I strive for simpler language and more relevance for my research, I have learned at least three valuable lessons.

First, I think about how my research can have an impact on others. For example, its esoteric title notwithstanding, my dissertation simply said that consumers had a more difficult time choosing between disliked alternatives than choosing

between liked alternatives. The challenging task was to think of situations when consumers are forced to choose between bad options (when for example, they cannot afford the more expensive, latest technology gadget and are forced to choose between the old-generation alternatives) and figuring out how one could reduce the difficulty of such decisions.

Second, I try not to think of research and teaching as a zero-sum game, i.e., the more time I spend on research the less time I spend on teaching and vice versa. I always make it a point to include my research in my teaching. Not only has this made me strip the research of all its bafflegab components, my students have often provided insightful comments that have added to the richness of my research and follow-up papers. For example, the pain felt by one of my students when the University Bookstore took back a discount that had mistakenly been credited to her purchase prompted me to think about the implications and roots of this marketplace reality: Even unexpected (and undeserved?) gains are mentally coded as losses if they are not realized.

Third, I try to think from the simple to the complex, and not the other way around. My research on the role of film critics on box office performance stemmed from a simple observation of my own behavior. I blindly follow the recommendation of Joe Morgenstern, the film critic of *The Wall Street Journal*. Although this is not a bad strategy — after all, Morgenstern won a Pulitzer Prize in 2005 for his reviews of the new films of 2004 — it intrigued me about the role of critics in general, i.e., if they merely predict your taste, or actually influence it, and has spawned substantial research on my part.

The results of that research? In plain language, critics — like professors who can clearly communicate the focus and results of their research — appear to have influence in the marketplace. ■



Subimal Chatterjee is professor of marketing, School of Management, Binghamton University. He teaches courses at the undergraduate, graduate and executive levels in consumer be-

havior, customer satisfaction, marketing management, product management and e-commerce. Chatterjee's research investigates consumer decision making and how consumer judgment and choice can be altered

in predictable ways by manipulating the decision task and context. In recent articles, he has studied how the persuasive power of different market signals can vary depending on the nature of market competition and the type of consumer. Chatterjee's work has appeared in *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Marketing*, *Production and Operations Management*, *Organization Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, and *Journal of Consumer Psychology*. His research has been funded by the National Science Foundation and Marketing Science Institute.