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Bafflegab Pays

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Abstract

"If you can't convince them, confuse them." Simply put, this is the advice that J. Scott Armstrong, a marketing professor at the Wharton School, coolly gives his fellow academics these days. It is based on his studies confirming what he calls the Dr. Fox hypothesis: "An unintelligible communication from a legitimate source in the recipient's area of expertise will increase the recipient's rating of the author's competence."

Comments

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Eight years ago, Dr. Myron L. Fox gave a celebrated one-hour talk, followed by a half-hour discussion period, on "Mathematical Game Theory as Applied to Physician Education." His audiences were professional groups, including psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and educators; afterward, on anonymous questionnaires, they said they found the lecture clear and stimulating.

Fox, in short, was a smashing success. He was also a complete phony—a professional actor whom three researchers had told to make up a lecture of double-talk, patching raw material from a *Scientific American* article into nonsequiturs and contradictory statements interspersed with jokes and meaningless references to unrelated topics. (See "Newline," October 1973.)

To test whether such bafflegab also pays in print, Armstrong asked 20 management professors to rank the academic prestige of 10 management journals that had varying degrees of readability according to the well-known Flesch Reading Ease Test. Sure enough, the top-rated journal was the hardest to read; the lowest-rated one, the easiest.

But might not the more prestigious journals have addressed more complex subjects and required more difficult language? Armstrong tested that possibility by rewriting sections from management journals to make them more readable without changing the content—eliminating unnecessary words, substituting easy words for difficult ones, breaking long sentences into shorter ones.

One, for example, originally read: "This paper concludes that to increase the probability of keeping a [bank] customer in queue, the server should attempt to influence the customer's initial subjective estimate of the mean service time to give him the impression that it is small, or attempt to convince the customer that his time value of service is large."

The rewrite went: "You are more likely to insure that a [bank] customer waits in a queue if you can get the person to think that he will not have long to wait. Another way to do it is to get the customer to think he will obtain much benefit by waiting."

Armstrong gave easy or difficult versions of four such passages to another group of 32 management professors and asked them to rate, on a scale from 1 to 7, "the competence of the research that is being reported." The professors were not told the name of the journal or the author.

Once again, the professors rated the easy version lower than the more difficult one. Dr. Fox lives.