Why Consultants Love Jargon

Idea In Short

Use jargon only when it genuinely speeds shared understanding, and drop it everywhere else. If you must explain the term, it is failing. Sort your analytical language by rigor required versus rigor delivered, and never take a swag when the client expects a deep dive. Clients want clarity and authenticity.

A Second Language Nobody Requested

Let us all admit it: consultants use jargon more than we should. The vocabulary is so ubiquitous that it functions as a second language, one you might jokingly list at the bottom of a resume. Jargon does have a function as shorthand for something the listener likely understands.1 The diagnostic is unforgiving, though. If you have to explain the jargon, it is actively making communication harder. Seth Godin draws a useful distinction between jargon and lingo:

> "Jargon is intentionally off-putting, and lingo reminds us how connected we are. They might look similar, but the intent is what matters. Jargon is a place to hide, a chance to show off, a way to disconnect. Lingo, on the other hand, allows us to feel included."2

Too often, jargon is a shorthand way to say boring things in a pseudo-intellectual voice, a chummy signal that says: see, I know what I am talking about. One suspects consultants envy doctors and lawyers their genuine technical vocabularies. The habit deserves examination, and consultants examine things with frameworks. Sorting the analytical jargon by how much rigor a situation demands against how much rigor actually gets delivered produces a classic two-by-two matrix, the consultant's favorite tool for forcing messy reality

into something easy to understand.

Ballpark and Back-of-the-Envelope

Early in a project, ballparking a number or running a back-of-the-envelope calculation is legitimate and often necessary. The estimates may come from research, benchmarking or plain experience. Proposal writing in particular involves a fair amount of scoping and smart guessing about what the answer could be. The implicit contract makes this respectable: everyone understands that more rigor will follow later. Demands for accuracy are low and the analysis delivered is low, a matched pair. Trouble begins only when the low-rigor number escapes its context and starts masquerading as a finding.

Swag

Here the consultant has made a mistake. Somebody ran out of time, got lazy or forgot to do the required analysis, and now he is taking a swag at the answer. This is a lose-lose position with no dignified exit. Either the consultant tells the client he is guessing, which loses credibility, or he hides the weakness in the analysis, which loses integrity and eventually credibility too. The swag differs from the ballpark precisely in expectations. The client believed rigorous work stood behind the number, and it did not.

Deep Dive and Drill Down

These two expressions earn their popularity. After completing a broad analysis, teams often need a deep dive into specific areas, drilling down into data to learn what is really going on. Deep dives are good things, combining rigorous analysis with tight targeting. Consider a spend analysis where eight buckets of spend drive 80 percent of costs. A deep dive then pulls richer datasets from the vendors themselves, covering specifications, service levels and other details, with the goal of isolating the key cost drivers. Rigor delivered where rigor is demanded: the happy quadrant.

Boiling the Ocean

Here the consultant is wasting time. She has spent hours gathering data or producing analysis without a purpose, tediously doing work instead of thinking through the problem in a structured way first. When a partner says you are boiling the ocean, the message is blunt:

you are lost. High effort, low insight, and a strong signal that the problem was never properly framed. The phrase survives because the failure mode it names never goes away.

Meeting Jargon, in Chronological Order

Everyone spends too much time in meetings, so naturally jargon clusters there. A chronology organizes it best: before, during and after. Before the meeting comes the pre-read. Send information ahead so attendees know what to expect, perhaps just the executive summary rather than the full deck. If a session includes a lecture portion where people sit quietly and listen, record it in advance so attendees can watch at 1.5 times speed, replay it or view it on a couch. Corporate language has evolved a whole vocabulary for these rituals.3

During the meeting, the parking lot earns its keep. Good facilitation means articulating the meeting scope so everyone agrees why they are there, staying mindful of constraints such as time and decisions required, and respecting conversational flow while limiting tangents. The key point: do not let the train jump the tracks, because conversations drift for reasons both innocent and ignorant. A whiteboard for items tabled until later redirects discussion back to the agenda in a way that is not subtle and is entirely acceptable.

Two more staples complete the set. A hard stop names the latest moment someone can stay, a polite advance notice that departure is not an insult. Taking a topic offline simply means later, in private, and it prevents a two-person conversation from monopolizing everyone's time. Both phrases work because they compress genuinely shared meaning, which is lingo doing its proper job.

A Translation Discipline for Teams

Managers can institutionalize the clarity the client deserves. Run a jargon audit on every major deliverable before it ships, asking one non-team reader to flag every phrase they would not use with their own grandmother. Assign the newest analyst as the designated translator, since fresh ears catch the vocabulary veterans no longer hear. Reward plain-language titles in reviews the way firms already reward analytical rigor. The exercise costs thirty minutes and routinely uncovers deeper problems, because a sentence that cannot be de-jargoned usually hides a thought that was never finished.

The Reservoir Never Empties

One website catalogs more than 900 cringe-worthy consulting expressions, and attentive listeners will hear business jargon flowing constantly at work. The volume can be overwhelming, which makes the closing rule more important. The client wants you to speak clearly and with authenticity, not with business slang. Use the shorthand inside the team if it helps, and translate ruthlessly at the client's door.

- 1Jargon
- 2Seth Godin
- 3Corporate Jargon

Summary

Jargon serves as shorthand and betrays as showmanship. Know the difference between a ballpark estimate and a swag, between a deep dive and boiling the ocean. Run meetings with pre-reads, parking lots and respect for hard stops. Then speak plainly, because clients hire clarity.