Why Nobody's Parents Understand Consulting

Idea In Short

A well-produced advertisement for management consulting recently made the rounds, visually appealing, well-paced and genuinely inspiring in tone. Every claim in it was arguably true: consultants do harness complexity, do design creative approaches, do turn strategy into action. The irony is that anyone outside the industry would struggle to explain what any of that actually means in practice. That gap between polished language and plain understanding says something worth noticing about how entire industries, not just consulting, talk about themselves.

A polished, inspiring advertisement

A well-produced video advertisement for management consulting recently circulated online, visually striking, well-paced and genuinely inspiring in tone, running just a couple of minutes with a strong soundtrack. Every claim inside it held up as defensible: consultants do harness complexity, do bring fresh perspective, do design creative strategic approaches. None of it was false advertising in any meaningful sense.

Jargon that only insiders can translate

The irony surfaces the moment someone tries to explain what any of those phrases actually mean in concrete terms. Harnessing complexity with ingenuity, vision and focus. Turning theory into action, and action into value. Making change happen with pace, certainty and strategic agility.1 Each phrase sounds impressive and says almost nothing a general audience could act on or even picture clearly.

Understanding requires prior context

Someone already familiar with the industry and the type of work being described can fill in the gaps easily enough, mentally translating abstract language into specific, real deliverables. Someone without that prior context, a parent, a friend outside the field, a new graduate considering the industry, is left with polished language and no concrete picture of what actually happens day to day.

The running joke about parents

It has become something of a running joke within professional services that even close family members struggle to explain what a consultant actually does for a living.2 That joke is funny precisely because it points at something real: an entire industry's public-facing language has drifted toward abstraction, leaving even the people closest to a practitioner without a clear, plain-language answer.

A pattern that extends well beyond consulting

This gap between polished messaging and plain understanding is not unique to consulting. Any industry built around specialized expertise, finance, technology, law, tends to develop its own internal shorthand, and that shorthand has a habit of leaking into external marketing meant for a broader audience.3 The result is advertising that sounds impressive to insiders and says very little to everyone else.

Why plain language is a genuine skill

Translating real, valuable work into language a stranger could understand within seconds is a harder and more valuable skill than it looks. It requires giving up some of the impressive-sounding abstraction in favor of concrete, specific examples, a shift many organizations resist because plain language can feel less sophisticated than jargon, even when it communicates far more effectively.

Clarity as the actual measure of good communication

The real test of any piece of communication, an advertisement, a project pitch, a simple explanation to a family member, is not how polished or inspiring it sounds. It is whether someone with no prior context walks away actually understanding what was just described. By that standard, a great deal of otherwise well-produced communication still has real room

to improve.

- 1Jargon
- 2Management Consulting
- 3Business Communication

Summary

A polished advertisement full of true, well-intentioned claims can still fail entirely at the one job advertising is supposed to do: making a stranger understand what a business actually delivers. The running joke about consultants' parents not knowing what they do points at something bigger than consulting, a persistent industry habit of describing work in language built for insiders rather than for the people who might actually need to understand it.