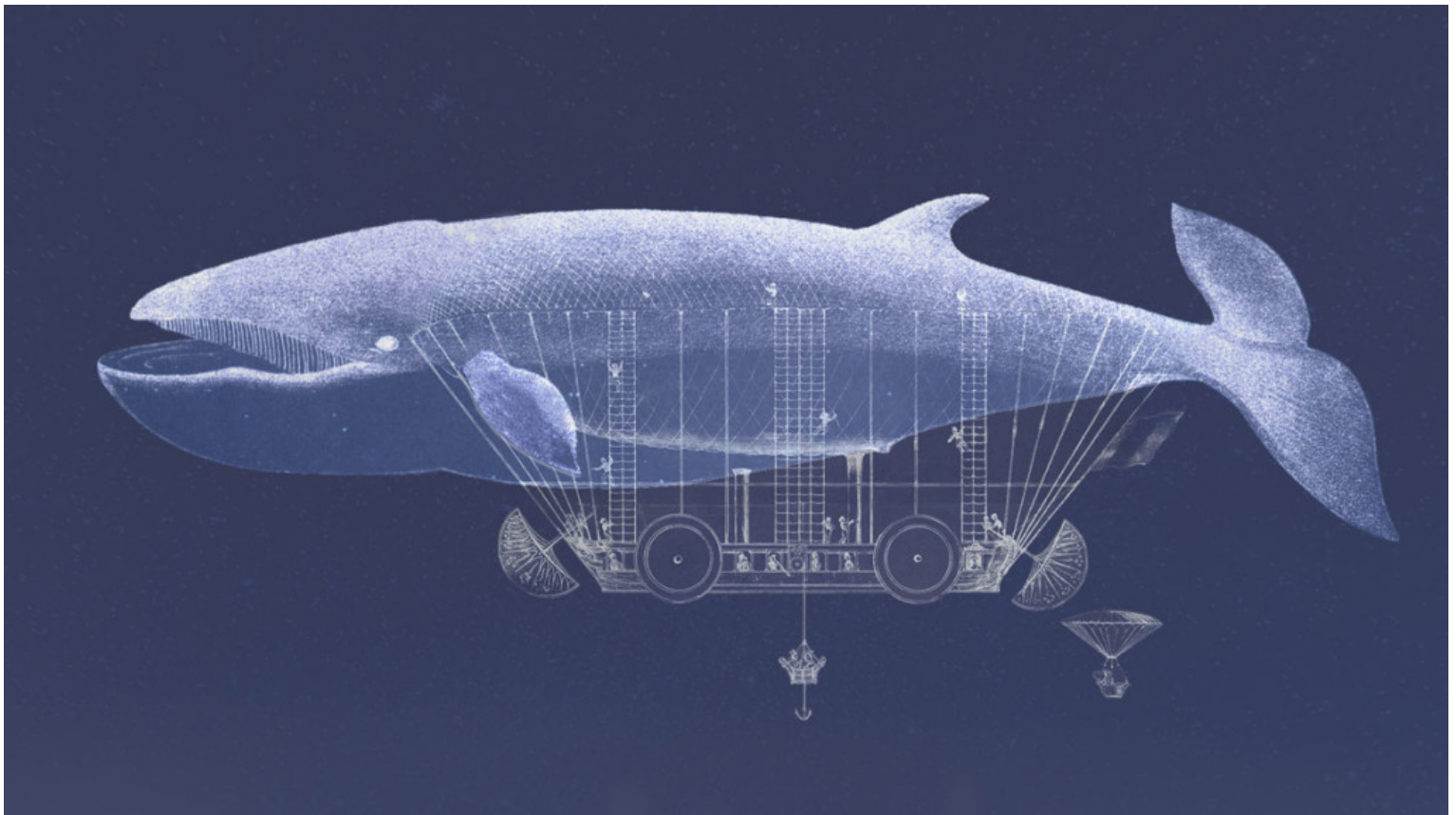


CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

Technical Experts Need to Get Better at Telling Stories

by [Karen Mazurkewich](#)

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“If only we could tell our stories better,” is a refrain I hear often from people I work with in the science and technology community. And I understand why. In my experience, startup and technical business leaders don’t tell their innovation stories well. This is a huge missed opportunity. When you’re doing good work, you want people to know about it. So whether you’re drafting website copy, a marketing brochure, an online article, or a press release, consider hiring professional storytellers to make the world-changing things you do mean something to regular people.

From my vantage point at MaRS, the Toronto-based start-up innovation hub, I have the opportunity to meet, interview, and write about some of the remarkable people and discoveries emerging from Canadian institutes and startups. And while I'm continually impressed with our network of technical experts, I'm less impressed with how they share their work. The reasons are clear: technical breakthroughs are burdened by the weight of jargon, dragged down by clunky clauses and weighty words. The ledes are buried and the color bleached, leaving journalists and readers disinterested. It's easy to write about wearable technology; it'd be far less fun to plough through language related to gene therapy. What are technical innovators doing wrong - and how can they fix it?

Don't hire PhDs to write your stories.

I've been approached many times by recruiters asking me to refer them to communications talent, but frequently the folks I offer up are rejected because they don't have a master's degree or PhD in a scientific or technical field. The problem is that many institutes are hiring "experts" in the science, not practitioners in the craft of storytelling. My suggestion: A good communications expert can help you translate your work so it relates to the world outside your lab, office, or facility.

If you are looking for a PhD in brain science to communicate brain science, then you're not looking in the right place. Instead, seek out writers who have crafted op-eds or articles for a variety of publications and show dexterity in messaging. If a writer can write effectively for different publications, then chances are they can write for you.

Don't believe that plain, clear writing is dumbing your ideas down.

Jargon clutters your message and confuses the reader. That's why tech leaders need to understand their target audience. The language you use in white papers and research papers, which are crafted for peers or senior stakeholders, cannot be easily transferred to other marketing documents.

At *The Wall Street Journal*, where I used to work, a front-page story went through five editors whose chief task was to eliminate jargon. The reasoning was that if they couldn't understand the paragraph, our readers wouldn't either. The final result didn't always convey every nuance I was aiming for, but the end result was immensely digestible. The same logic should be applied to communications from deeply technical companies.

Design a new communications playbook.

It's not easy to tell straightforward stories about complicated topics. But the solution isn't to cram all the ideas into one story or release. In fact, given that readers' attention spans are getting shorter, it's essential to follow this rule: Keep it simple. Build your narrative from the foundation up - one idea at a time.

There are many ways to approach this, but let me tell you part of what we've done at MaRS. Rather than start with pitches and press releases, we've reverse engineered the process: we've hired magazine writers to write multiple stories on a particular theme or sector. We give them freedom to interview different startups, tenants, and corporate partners across these sectors, and encourage the journalists to do what they do best - find the angles that will appeal to readers. We provide general topics, access to experts, and let them write either for our internal magazine or contributed content that we place in outside publications. Once published, we distribute different versions of the stories across our social media channels.

The purpose of starting with long-form articles is not just about creating branded content: it's about crafting our organization's unified approach to messaging. The freelance journalists and editors we hire serve as sherpas, helping us find interesting narratives in the labyrinth of angles and ideas across our ecosystem. We can then crowdsource other ideas by teasing out the themes surfaced in our magazines. These new ideas can be turned into fresh pitches or op-eds for other journalists or publications. So the articles serve both as branded content and primers for savvy journalists seeking background information and insights for their own articles. In short, we feed the top of the marketing funnel in multiple ways by giving reporters the transparency and traction they need to develop stories for their own publications.

I recently reached out to a colleague who is also a former journalist to ask him why his company's messaging wasn't as plain as I knew his writing to be. His response was that the technical experts who reported to the C-suite insisted on rewriting his copy. The company's leaders were unintentionally doing themselves a disservice by complicating - and watering down - their messages highlighting the organization's competitive advantages and technical expertise. No surprise, the organization remains frustrated that it's not getting recognized for its amazing work. The main reason: complex stories require different marketing approaches. If your traditional communications strategy isn't working, try hiring professional storytellers.

Karen Mazurkewich is the head of Communications and Marketing at MaRS Discovery District. In addition to co-founding her own startup, she spent a decade as a senior journalist for The Wall Street Journal in Asia and the Financial Post in Toronto where she covered financial services, business innovation, and technology.

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Torsten Langner a year ago

two thumbs up!

but at the end the technical expert needs to figure out how to talk about

WHO needs to change (people)

WHY he/she needs to change (business)

WHAT needs to be changed (processes)




... and at the very end...

HOW it needs to be changed (technology)

last year I created a model called the Persuasion Canvas which aims to be a simple and holistic approach:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBpLA6V58Ys>

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