

The top five 'Adjectives to Avoid' in your corporate profile (Part I)

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In a recent column on how (and why) a company has to have a corporate profile, I emphasised the value of providing a compelling reason for the reader to choose you - specifically, outlining what it is about your business that elevates it above your competitors. To do this, you need to use good adjectives. *Un-boring ones*.

You'll agree, I imagine, that 'great service' is all very well, but it's not enough. Everyone promises great service, even those who offer awful service. You've got to take it one step further. And I don't mean the word 'unique'. Let's get started.

In this article, which is Part 1 of a two-part series on adjectives, I list five adjectives you should think twice before using to describe your organisation - and why:

1. Unique

I hate this one, because it's used incorrectly. 'Unique' means 'Being the only one of its kind', so it's semantically unlikely for you to have a unique company, approach, product or even idea. Even if you are the only organisation in the known universe to do or offer a particular thing, I'm hoping you have more to say about that than to focus on its/your uniqueness for effect. Be specific. Give examples. Say WHY.

So, instead of saying 'I have a unique training offering...', how about, 'I offer a tech support service where I'll come to your office - whether you're local, national or international - and run an in-house workshop for you. And I'll use your existing issues, systems, challenges and/or circumstances as training examples...'?

2. Leading

As in, 'We are the leading [insert relevant noun here] in [our industry, the country, the world...]. Beware of this one, because you can only use it a) if it's patently true and completely feasible and b) if you could prove it if called on to do so. Otherwise, you're just being braggy, which readers don't like and consumers don't trust.

I prefer to be subtle about this one, by hinting at a good reputation: 'Over the last 10 years, my business has handled SEO writing, editing and proofing projects for 200 happy clients in South Africa, Africa and overseas.' Let the facts speak for you.

3. Certified

To claim that you're a certified something - exempt micro-enterprise, VAT vendor, member of an association, etc - you must actually hold (and in many cases, have paid for) a current certificate for that something. The same applies with 'accredited', 'recognised' and 'authorised'. Tread carefully here, because you can get into trouble.

My way? 'As of October 2008, I have a Level Four EME certification from EMPOWERDEX (Reg. No. E09J00806), with 100% BEE procurement recognition.' Yep, it's a mouthful, but there's credibility in clearly being what you say you are.

4. Innovative

I have no doubt that there are innovative ideas, brands, services, people and companies out there, especially in the digital space, but this adjective has become so trite as to have no meaning at all. It's far more effective to write up a sentence on *why* the organisation, product or solution is groundbreaking, pioneering or first-to-market - with a good, solid reason or example of real-world application. Ditto, the awful 'cutting-edge', the clichéd 'out of the box' and the ambiguous 'different'.

5. Boutique

'Boutique' means small. But it can also imply expensive. On top of which, it's over-used. So, if your company is small but perfectly formed, say that. If it's agile, responsive, sincere and staffed by real people who do really good work, say that.

My way of phrasing it is, 'Outsourcing your [insert service here] is cheaper than most professional services, especially when a small company is involved. And we have no interest in bleeding you dry or forcing you to commit to huge monthly retainers. You pay for what you need. You call us when you need us.' It's clear and honest.

I'm known for an irrational hatred of conclusions, so I'm relying on you to provide the end of this debate. What've I left out? Do you disagree with me?

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I spend 10 hours a day writing - and teaching others to write. I was South Africa's Freelance Copywriter of the Year in 2020 and one of the world's 'Top 50 Female Content Marketers' in 2021.

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