



Words to describe the glory of Apple

By Lucy Kellaway

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Like most Brits, I find success in others pretty hard to cope with. When that success is combined with good looks, I can't tolerate it at all.

Apple's continued glory eats away at me like a maggot at my core. I long for it to pick up some bruises. When the iPad came out, I prayed that it would be awful. My prayers were not heard: like all Apple products, it is sleek and gorgeous, and in due course I shall go to one of its wondrous temples of consumption and grumpily buy one.

Now I find that Apple has succeeded in an area even more revolutionary than designing beautiful products that are easy to use. This time, though, I feel no discomfort. Apple has discovered something that other companies have long forgotten, if they ever knew: language can also be beautiful and easy to use. Words can be fun to read. They can look elegant. They can make you laugh.

Earlier this month it published a set of guidelines for apps sold at its App Store. According to the laws that govern this sort of thing, this document should have been doubly unreadable. It was a list of legal requirements and was aimed at techies. Instead, it was funny and clear, and I found myself reading it effortlessly, even though I barely know what an "app" is.

"We have over 250,000 apps in the App Store. We don't need any more Fart apps. If your app doesn't do something useful or provide some form of lasting entertainment, it may not be accepted."

The tone is direct, comic and elegantly threatening.

"We will reject apps for any content or behaviour that we believe is over the line. What line, you ask? Well, as a Supreme Court Justice once said, I'll know it when I see it. And we think that you will also know it when you cross it."

Now compare this to the standard stuff on the Microsoft website. The brand new browser, it says, “delivers a richer, faster, and more business-ready Web experience. Architected to run HTML 5, the beta enables developers to utilise standardised mark-up language across multiple browsers”. Well I never. Reading this, I’m bored and restless, irritated and alienated.

Given the towering superiority of the first linguistic style over the second, will it catch on? Will other companies copy Apple’s language just as they have copied its design?

You might think so. You might think there was a clear commercial advantage to be had in writing clearly and stylishly. But you would be wrong. There is no sign that Microsoft has been suffering from its stolid, dodgy way with words. Indeed it is one of the great mysteries of capitalism that there is no invisible hand that joins good language and good profits. If anything, the hand pushes the two apart.

Even in industries that make their money by selling messages there is no appetite for clarity. Just last week a reader sent me the following sentence from the blog of Bob Jeffrey, the head of JWT, in which he describes what his vast and successful advertising agency does: “Global consumers are rapidly re-evaluating and readjusting their value paradigms and purchasing decisions. Our job is to keep our ear to the ground with these consumers, providing relevant real-time insight to our clients that inspires cutting-edge, cost-efficient solutions.”

The Apple version of this would be something like: “Consumers can change so we try to keep up.” This version reads better, but it is not hard to see why Mr Jeffrey didn’t put it that way. “A relevant real-time insight” sounds like something that a befuddled client might pay more money for.

An even better example of the link between high profits and low language was on the appointments pages in the Financial Times 10 days ago. It was an advertisement from “one of the largest and most trusted banking and financial services organisations in the world” which was hoping to hire a “customer journey re-engineering manager”.

This title contains three layers of obfuscation: the ludicrous yet ubiquitous idea that a banking customer is on a journey; the idea that this journey needs re-engineering; the notion that this needs managing. There is only one conclusion to be drawn: surplus profits generate bonuses and bullshit in equal measure.

The only customers who are really on a journey are those of the transport sector. And as I looked at a collection of them chugging along into Moorgate station last week I thought of another reason why Apple’s brave effort to rehabilitate language won’t catch on. Words are finished. Customers on journeys don’t read. They watch videos on their iPads, iPhones and iPods.