

Online language pathways

Understanding how people use language when they search online
and how this should influence the way brands communicate



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Online language pathways: an approach to understanding how brands need to communicate with their customers online

Introduction

Understanding consumer behaviour is the foundation of brand strategy. Understanding how consumers use and respond to language online is vital to informing and shaping digital communications, brand messaging *and* service delivery strategies.

Jupiter and Forrester have studied online consumer behaviour in terms of activities, interests, actions (and inactions) – as well as demographics. Digital linguistic behaviour – or online language – is a consumer attribute which, to date, has been barely explored.

And yet marketers have access to a wealth of linguistic data via the ‘mouthpiece’ of the internet experience: search engines.

CDA’s belief that language is the currency connecting consumers and brands online isn’t uncommon – plenty talk about ‘online conversations’. However, until now, very few practitioners have developed and tested theories to help brands understand how to use and *evolve* online language strategies to target and engage customers.

This study sets out to answer some of our own questions, capture a strong sense of the role language needs to play within online brand strategies and provide the basis for further research. These early findings provide fresh insights for brands looking to optimise their online presence.

CDA

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Key questions – what we wanted to know

- Is there an **online language** adopted by consumers when they do things online?
- How does this consumer language compare with language used by brands on their websites?
- How do consumers articulate their intentions – before and when they go online?
- How does *actual* linguistic behaviour online compare to the **language of intent** ie what people say they are going to do online?
- To what extent does search language reflect consumer intent and online **brand language**?
- Are brands sufficiently adapting their online propositions and content to answer consumers' questions and engage them during their entire online journey?
- Do brands make their online content useful / easy to find and quick to understand for busy consumers?

Key findings

- Language that people appear to **respond to most favourably** when they finally engage with a website is language that more closely resembles their **natural language of intent** – less mechanical and more human.
- Language that **engages** people on web pages is not the same as the language that forms the pathways to a site.
- People **adapt their natural language** when searching for information online, often employing more mechanical terminology (machine language).
- The **language of intent** is often 'lost in application': ie there is a **disconnect** between the language people use to describe **intended** behaviour and their **actual** language behaviour when they engage with the internet.
- People apply associative thought processes* when using the web. They're looking for relevant and useful information, so brands need **to associate** their content proposition with answering consumers' questions.
- Brand messaging and information gathered from the search results **influences consumers'** decision making and filtering (choice reduction) processes, as well as the information provided on the destination website.
- There seems to be a direct correlation between **what language** a website uses and **how a visitor feels**. In many cases participants are put off by what they find because it is **not in line with their** previously articulated **expectations** and / or requirements.
- The language that brands employ on websites can often be too formal (technical, *un-human, productised*) – and this can **alienate** people.

* *associative thought: the way the human brain links and freely associates what are often disparate thoughts and experiences to learn and act*

(More detailed findings – including examples – are included on page 6 of this paper)

Methodology

CDA is a digital communications consultancy. We carried out this study to better understand the linguistic processes and pathways used by consumers online, to help brands and businesses adapt their online strategies to engage with and acquire customers more effectively.

We invited a sample of 14 individual internet users, of varying levels of internet proficiency and with different demographics (age, gender and profession) to take part in a two-stage study:

Stage one: understanding the language of intent (pre-online)

In stage one, participants were asked to consider a typical scenario which most adults would experience at least once in their everyday lives: **to research a financial product – specifically an instant access savings account**

Participants were emailed a set of instructions (each one received the same set of instructions). They were asked to imagine they were opening a new online savings account with £3,000. They were asked to look for an account which was simple and straightforward to apply for, and one which was instantly accessible, so that money could be withdrawn quickly.

Specifically they were asked to consider how they would go about searching for - or researching – this savings account using the internet including:

- what search language, or keywords, they would use, and
- whether they might refine their search – change their search terms or language – after an initial search.

They were then asked to imagine visiting three websites as part of their online research but not to physically act on this – and to provide a written description of no more than 400 words to explain how this imaginary online task and journey went.

Two weeks later a second set of instructions were sent out to participants.

Stage two: understanding online language

In stage two, instead of simply using their imagination as in the first stage, participants were asked to take a real online journey and to search for a savings account, using the same parameters as above.

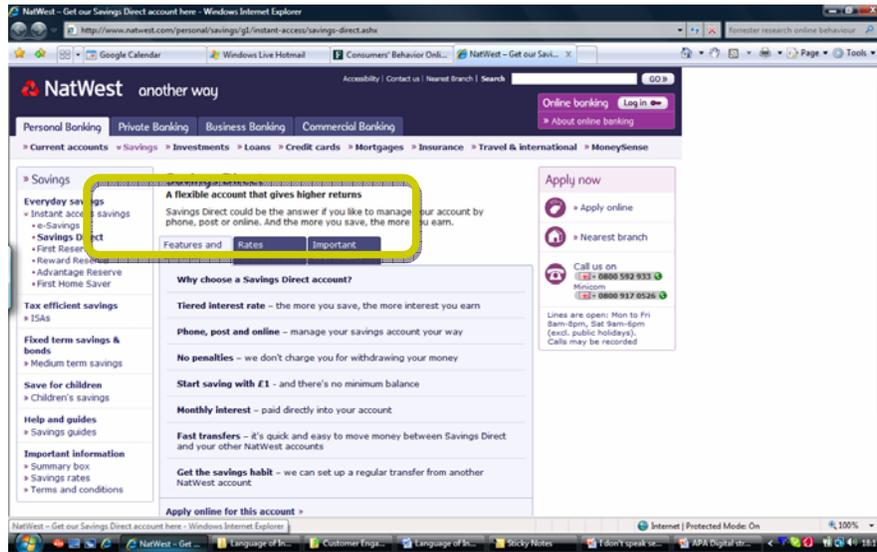
Importantly they were asked not to refer back to their previous written account at any stage.

As part of this task, participants were asked to choose and visit two websites based on their search results, focusing on the web page or pages related to the product that most interested them. Again, they were prompted to refine their search terms *once*, as with their imaginary journey.

In addition they were asked to visit the NatWest website, and specifically, the NatWest instant access savings page of the site ie

<http://www.natwest.com/personal/save-and-invest/savings/g1/instant-access/savings-direct.ashx>

The information available on this page is accessible via three tabs: Features and benefits, Rates, Important information:



(NatWest was chosen for its familiarity and as a control website. NatWest is not currently a CDA client).

Again participants were asked to write a contemporaneous report of their journey and experience (max 400 words) including recalling the search terms they used.

To prevent the sample being influenced by subjective language, the task instructions were emailed and carefully worded so as not to influence or direct the language OR behaviour of participants, who were also asked not to *talk* directly to CDA about their task. In the event they needed further help, they were asked to only submit queries by *email*.

Once the written accounts were collated, the results were analysed to:

- compare the two 'before' and 'after' written narratives of the participants using internet search
- compare the 'before' and 'after' **vocabulary and language**, looking for changes in descriptions, word selection and word ordering or usage
- compare and contrast the language within participants' two narratives with the language returned by their searches during stage 2
- compare and contrast language within the two narratives with the language subsequently experienced by participants on the website/s they visited

Findings in detail

The findings indicate that people often **adopt** the language and phraseology of another group / subset in order to complete a task.

Specifically, the language used by participants to describe their behaviour before they carried out the task – classified here as the **language of intent** - differed to the language they used online when actually carrying out the task. We found they used a more ‘mechanical dialect’ (machine language) when searching, using technical words and succinct, staccato phraseology, whereas their imagined journey used more ‘human’ vocabulary and structures.

Here are some examples of participants translating their language of intent into search language:

Stage 1

(Language of intent - thought)

High interest instant access savings account

Best rate bank account with instant access

Easy access and best interest rate savings

Stage 2

(Search language - typed)

best instant access savings

banking account online

instant access savings

This translation from human language into machine language seems to be a sub-conscious and iterative or fluid process: people refine or filter their language as their online journey progresses, and that this is particularly evident during the search journey (when using a search engine).

Language of intent	Search language	Re-search language	Sites visited	Experience reported
Best bank account rate	Banking account online	Best online banking rates	HSBC (via MoneyExtra) NatWest	I was put off by lack of clarity around monthly fee The AER rates looked more inviting than some and I liked the fact that the more money you save, the more interest goes up Didn't spend time on Important information as it looked a bit text heavy and legalese

The example above demonstrates a participant's entire journey, from the language of intent to the destination site.

Notice how the human ‘best bank account rate’ language of intent translates to machine-like search language ‘banking account online’ before the term is refined to include the human ‘best’ reference again to filter out unwanted search returns. He finally engages with the less formal language of the Natwest website (choosing to spend less time in the “text-heavy” Important Information section).

By the time they reach their destination – the site or page that meets their need – people appear more pre-disposed to respond to sites that use language reflecting their original language of intent, rather than the more mechanical, colder search language.

For example, in stage one, someone predicted that their reasons for choosing a provider were: “I will probably plump for the one that makes it easiest for me a) to understand what they are offering and b) to apply for it”. And sure enough, in stage two the same participant selected the West Bromwich Building Society Status account because it easily explained that it pays 6.56% AER on balances over £1,000, and allows 6 withdrawals a year without penalty. However, the participant subsequently discovered that he had to apply via the post or go into a branch, and so abandoned his enquiry.

This language filtering process can be articulated in the following diagram:



Overall our findings can be divided into three areas:

- General observations
- Language or linguistic findings
- The use and behaviour of search patterns:

General observations

- An inherent online behaviour is comparing – all participants felt they were using the web to **compare** information, pricing and deals. However, few included the word “compare” (or derivatives) in their search language. It’s almost as if this *goes without saying*.
- Consumers expect their web experience to be **useful** but they want to remain in control of the process. As this participant observed: “I just want information and explanation – I’ll do the rest”.
- Participants are influenced by language which they can easily associate with *theirs* and that they feel describes their intent.
- People want very clear language as site navigation and this is critical to engagement. If people can’t see, at first glance, where to find the information they want, they’ll leave the site and try another route
- Comparison sites are a core component of the personal finance information retrieval process and are arguably the most influential, satisfying the need for 3rd party or impartial advice and guidance through the decision making process. Very few participants skipped straight to a financial institution websites without a prior 3rd party comparison.
- Interest rates, a subjective trust of a brand / institution, ease of navigation and speed (findability) are the key reasons cited when choosing a provider, as one participant explained: “ING was easy to navigate and appeared to tick the right boxes. Rate was good as well at 6.0%”. These primary motivators are not influenced by marketing content.
- Some participants have pre-conceived expectations of where and how they’ll find the information they need. E.g. some hoped to find comparison tables, calculators or other tools – **interactive content is important to them**.
- Some consumers seem to ‘go through the motions’ of researching online, but their decision making process and site selection conforms to a pre-existing opinion. Others combine their online research with offline influences such as peer recommendations, expert advice, direct phone conversations and offline marketing.

Linguistic findings

- The **language of intent** changes when consumers type in their search terms, going from a narrative style to a staccato style of language.
- The actual language used (or typed in) is often less specific or prescriptive than the language of intent. For example, one participant said that they would go and search for “instant access account” or “best current account”, but actually searched on “bank account online”, a more generic, less specific query.
- Participants begin their search journey (in their minds) using **structured language**. During their task the language they *use* becomes more *unstructured*, as they refine their objective and employ search terms. But they still appear to respond to language that is **closer to their original language of intent** once they engage with specific websites.

- Some participants used **mirror language** ie repeating the language they read within search results or on websites, when often this wouldn't be their own natural language of choice.
- **Adjectives** such as 'best', 'easy', 'instant', 'quick' and 'high' are often used by participants and **overused** when searching for the right proposition.
- Participants seem to use their initial search terms / keywords as a **benchmark for subsequent searches** carried out. Subsequent search terms will be influenced by language found within the search results.
- The words 'best' and 'good' are regularly used in both the language of intent and the **actual search language**. However, financial compliance and regulatory policies demand that financial services brands restrict the use of superlatives in their promotional messaging. Therefore, what searchers may perceive as 'best' has to be guided by **a) product / site ranking in the search results b) what 3rd parties recommend, and c) whether information provided by the financial provider satisfies their needs.**
- **Website language** (as demonstrated by financial services providers) can often be too formal – and this deters consumers. E.g. the 'Important Information' section on one site was identified but dismissed by one participant who said they wanted 'more information'.
- Iconography e.g. a 'thumbs up', in support of text, proved to be a useful aid in the decision making process and indicates the visual nature of online language. However, icons can often be misinterpreted across different cultural boundaries, so comprehensive research is recommended before the application.
- Participants reported that website language seemed to be construed towards **existing customers**, and this is a deterrent to prospective customers. For example, one in particular commented "The first tab talked about how it is easy to transfer money to other Natwest accounts, which made me think that this is really an account aimed at existing customers (and a pretty poor one at that)!"

Search behavioural findings

- With one exception, all searches were carried out on Google.
- Whether a participant chooses to click on a paid or a natural search result, the messaging language in both informs their decision making process.
- Some users treat their first website selection as a comparison benchmark for future site selections.
- One participant gave a lot of thought to **how they were going to search** – recognising that the **more specific language** typed in, the better and more relevant the search results will be. However for most, the 'translation' of intent into keywords flows naturally (is not pre-meditated).
- Despite using 'machine language' few participants demonstrated an understanding of how to get the most out of their search process – for example, very **few tailored their language** or refined their searches sufficiently to find exactly what they were looking for. Instead, they try to filter their search results, suggesting a fairly low tolerance for excess information when operating within the short timeframe most people give to online tasks.
- **More confident** participants displayed 'super-searcher' or 'native searcher' language or behaviour – this included the more natural use of 'machine language' to better communicate with – and get the most out of – their search.

Conclusions & recommendations

Our **language of intent** (how we consider and think about our intentions) changes when we go online where we use a different dialect or linguistic subset. We adapt our language to the language we think search engines will understand.

In this respect, this language can be described as the **search language**.

Once engaged with the search process, we begin to be influenced by the language and messaging within search results, which play directly into our decision making process helping us refine research. This **re-search language** is language that marketers can control to **target users via the search returns** (whether sponsored or organic results) and is therefore extremely powerful.

Brand language must be aligned with **consumer search language** for two reasons:

1. Search engines will reward brands with a higher relevancy score and therefore increase their ranking.
2. Users will have a far higher propensity to purchase or complete their task if a brand and its website successfully communicates that it can provide the information / product(s) / service that they are looking for.

This study also demonstrates that brands don't always understand online user language resulting in two typical problems:

1. Poor language targeting within search results.
2. Disappointment felt by users when they don't find what they want or expect on websites.

Analysing search language (keywords) can give brands a good insight into consumer intent. However the semantics can sometimes differ in terms of online vs 'offline' linguistics.

There is a significant time constraint placed upon the online research process by individuals. Therefore, it is the responsibility of brands to be aware of the language needed to:

- Ensure their websites can be **easily – and quickly – found within search engine listings** (this means high ranking)
- Serve up exactly what consumers are looking for, and **how they articulate** it at each stage of their **search process**
- Deliver information (answer a consumer's question) in a relevant and succinct way. Website accessibility and navigation is important, but providing **useful content** – content which satisfies the needs of the consumer – is critical to engagement

5 principle takeaways

1. Integrate brand and search marketing strategies

Many organisations now employ search marketing strategies to attract new customers via their websites. However, the majority are still not recognising the need to understand **consumer language**, tailor their search marketing accordingly AND synchronise this with their content strategies.

Search marketing is a highly effective hook, but unless marketers follow through with content which is in line with their search marketing messaging and – critically – aligned with searchers' language of intent, businesses will fail to convert site visitors into customers.

2. Understand how your customers communicate through the Web, what their information needs are, and how they want to engage with you

Many organisations whose websites were reviewed by participants didn't adequately evidence offering an instant, online account access and an online application process. How companies organise their products and retail proposition needs to respond to the way consumers want to buy or expect to interact. Not meeting these types of expectations sets up the strong possibility of disengagement and disappointment.

3. Use the right language – human language, not sales and marketing speak

An old lesson, but brands must understand when it is appropriate to use more relaxed and informal language that mirrors how people talk. Language such as 'the more you save, the more interest goes up', 'put my money in' and 'lock my money down' were used by participants to describe their intentions, but this language was rarely echoed on websites.

Reducing the formal style of language could be one way banks, for example, could begin to overcome the regulatory constraints that prevent the misuse of superlatives, although some of those words – best, lowest etc – are often top of consumers' minds when looking for certain account types. Greater debate about what is and is not acceptable for legal and compliance purposes is required rather than simply *erring on the safe side*.

4. Make your content useful: answer questions / provide access

People want website content to be useful – either in terms of information provision, how that is made accessible, or being able to find something they can use immediately (transaction, service, function etc). Content that is overly promotional and laden with brand messaging interferes with this utility. Not only is conventional marketing-led language often not what people were expecting, it can also lead to a disappointing experience, giving brands a tougher challenge in the future.

*This doesn't mean that website content can't be fun and exciting for consumers, just that it also needs to **answer their questions, deliver value and be relevant**.*

5. Learn how to harness the adaptive power of language

Studies such as this help us to understand how people learn to '**speak internet**' or to '**speak online search**' in order to facilitate everyday tasks. In turn, these insights enable brands to predict language progressions in order to create the most compelling and useful online content and stay one step ahead. It doesn't matter how cool a website looks, or how much content is packed in it, if people don't understand and engage with its proposition, they will simply move away and be disappointed by their experience.

What CDA would like to understand more about

There are two related areas of study we would now like to pursue:

1. This topic was restricted to the use of the Internet via PCs. We're now interested to compare these results with the linguistic behaviour of other communication technologies such as SMS / mobile telephony / predictive text, to see if consumers tailor their language and behaviour to the device.
2. The relationship between what people think (imagine) and what they 'write' needs more understanding, so CDA will be carrying out a related project analysing 'spoken' language as it relates to search and response to see if there are significant learnings.

Sources, related information and useful links

Jupiter – research into online behaviour and demographics:

<http://www.jupiterresearch.com/bin/item.pl/research:service/75/>

Forrester – research into consumer behaviour online:

<http://www.forrester.com/Research/Document/Excerpt/0,7211,40834,00.html>

About the authors

CDA is a digital communications consultancy devoted to finding and visualising ways to make digital communications work better, be more satisfyingly for users and work more effectively for brands by marrying the right content to every personal encounter.

Services include content strategies, audits / *appraisals* and planning systems across web, email and mobile. Digital communications planning is a core strength and CDA also runs workshops to train and inspire in house content teams and owners,

CDA was founded by Anne Caborn and Clare O'Brien who are regularly invited to contribute to industry events and publications. Amanda Davie recently joined from i-level, where she was Head of Search. Amanda will direct CDA's research and development activities and provide additional senior consultancy.

CDA works with clients across B2C and B2B sectors and includes among its clients past and present organisations as diverse as BP, the BBC, Terrapinn, Goldshield plc, Pampers, the CIPD, the Post Office, RBS and the AIB.

Want to find out more?

If you would like to discuss this study in more detail, or talk about how these findings can benefit your digital communications or digital planning processes, please contact us:

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