It's Clear: The Business Case for Plain Language in B2B Healthcare Marketing

JANUARY 2024
AHAMEDIAGROUP.COM

Introduction: The Genesis of Our Research

I started Aha Media Group 18 years ago after a life-threatening illness. The articles I found online both scared and comforted me. Eventually one of those articles led me to the doctor who helped me get better.

That experience made me a fierce advocate of plain language. At the same time, across the world, user experience professionals and communicators were proving that consumers needed concise and clear content, especially when reading online. In healthcare, we saw challenges around plain language for consumers abound: Doctors were dictating to writers that healthcare blogs and articles should sound like professional research journals. The focus was on sounding smart, not distilling complex scientific information into content everyone could understand. All while people's attention spans shortened, literacy rates dropped and screens became even smaller.

Knowing a poor healthcare decision can be life-threatening, we conducted our own research and socialized others' findings over the years. We aimed to help our clients convince their internal stakeholders that they should use consumer-centered plain language.

As our content marketing agency began serving healthcare business-to-business (B2B) organizations, we realized that subject matter experts were dictating the same jargon-filled, complex content approach to their marketing and communications professionals. Engineers, scientists and physicians are not content experts. Yet, examples of their challenging content exist everywhere on the web.

It was time for new, original research to answer the question:

Do B2B buyers also need plain language to feel confident in making a purchasing decision?

We ran three studies: two qualitative and one quantitative to examine if our hypothesis was correct.

The findings?

Plain language with actionable, easy-to-read messaging wins every time in healthcare.

Healthcare professionals work in complex environments. However, you don't need to complicate your message to communicate with them. There's a reason your B2B healthcare marketing may not be getting the results you want and need. Overly elaborate, jargon-full content loses your customers, as our research demonstrates.

I am confident these findings will help you in your role as a healthcare communicator and marketer. Businesses run on trust. Trust is built from clear communication. You will only deepen your relationships with your customers when you use clear and concise content to communicate with them.

Ahava

AHAVA LEIBTAG
PRESIDENT, AHA MEDIA GROUP
AHAVA.LEIBTAG@AHAMEDIAGROUP.COM

A note about the term "plain language"

When you advocate for plain language with a subject matter expert, they may become defensive and dismissive. They might say things like: "We don't need to dumb it down," or "Our audience looks to us to be the smartest in the room." Assure them that plain language is simply content that speaks clearly to the reader. For the purposes of this white paper, we will use the terms "plain language" and "clear content" as synonyms. You may also try using the following terms to invite your colleagues to embrace plain language: "customer/consumer-centric content" or "customer/consumer-appropriate language."

Table of Contents

Introduction: The Genesis of Our Research..... 1 – 2

Part I: About Plain Language..... 4

Part II: What's the Payoff of Using Clear Content for B2B Decision-Makers?..... 5 – 6

How Do B2B Decision-Makers Use Content..... 6

Part III: About the Research..... 7

Part IV: Research Examples and Data..... 8 – 13

Example 1: Learn More..... 8

Example 2: Request a Demo..... 10

Example 3: Download a White Paper..... 12

Part V: Real-World Research..... 14 – 16

Part VI: Conclusion..... 17

About: Aha Media Group..... 18

Addendum: Research Participants..... 19

Addendum: FAQs..... 20– 21

PART I

About Plain Language

Our research shows that 80% of healthcare decision-makers prefer marketing content that is written in plain language instead of technical jargon. **The results are undeniable: Healthcare professionals categorically prefer and act upon clear, concise and convincing content.**

So why isn't more B2B content easier to read and understand?

Probably because the term "plain language" trips up most communication professionals. Plain language isn't about dumbing down content or bringing down reading levels. Instead, plain language ensures your content speaks to your reader in a way that they can easily understand. It's concise with no extra words or jargon. Plain language helps people find useful information and make educated decisions.

In short, plain language guides your reader to:

- Find the information they need
- Use that information to move to the next step
- Act upon that information

A note about jargon

Your target audiences are healthcare professionals who are comfortable with the industry vocabulary they use every day. There are words and phrases you don't have to explain to them, as they are part of what we call "shared communities of practice." Therefore, you may not need to explain certain terms the way you would with a business-to-consumer (B2C) audience. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't implement the basic principles of plain language in your communications. **Clear content will always help you keep your reader's attention and get your message across.**

When you use plain language, your potential customers can understand your offer. Your content will have an immediate impact. Our research gives you the tools you need to convince your executives to change the way they communicate to achieve better results.

PART II

What's the Payoff of Using Clear Content for B2B Decision-Makers?

Think about the last time you were searching for information on a new vendor, product or service.

- What made you act on certain content?
- Why did you close some websites and bookmark others?
- What was the key to keeping you engaged?

Chances are, even if you didn't do so consciously, you responded more positively to content written in plain language. Why? You didn't need to read it over again to understand it. Your eye probably didn't dwell on certain words. You were able to comprehend it at the same time you were reading it. We've known for years that consumers prefer plain language; why wouldn't B2B professionals?

The ~~long and~~ short of clear content

There is a clear preference for content that uses bullet points, eliminates jargon, keeps sentences short and speaks directly to the reader. The reader experience should also be mobile-friendly, benefit-directed and scannable for key points.

To ensure your message is heard, use:

- Shorter sentences
- Bullets
- Easily scannable text
- Chunking
- Words your audience understands

Our goal was to study how marketers can ensure they meet their audience's content preferences, successfully communicate their message and inspire action. The research that follows validates our suppositions about plain language: **Well-written healthcare marketing communications will always get a better response.**

The real value of easy-to-understand content is that people are more likely to read it and act. Our research shows that:

- **Preference:** 80% of decision-makers prefer marketing content that is written in plain language instead of technical jargon.
- **Action:** 73% of decision-makers would schedule a demo after reading plain language marketing materials — versus 44% for non-plain language materials.
- **Decision:** 68% of decision-makers would download a white paper after reading a plain language teaser — versus 22% for a non-plain language teaser.
- **Socialization:** 89% of purchasing teams share marketing and sales materials with a larger group to make decisions. These groups include a wide range of roles and a varied understanding of technical jargon.

How do B2B decision-makers use content?

We asked B2B buyers some additional questions about who makes buying decisions, what kind of content they prefer and how that content is shared.

Their responses provided a deeper look at B2B marketing communication preferences during the sales process. We learned that:

- 90% review sales and marketing materials for products and services of interest.
- 89% share these materials with other team members during the decision-making process.
- Technical demos (60%), case studies/testimonials (49%) and web content (44%) are the top types of materials used in purchasing decisions.

These numbers are invaluable for demonstrating that great healthcare B2B content needs to be layered by personas and co-personas. Often the person making the final buying decision (think CFO or CEO) does not have the technical expertise needed to wade through complex engineering or medical terminology. By providing clear content during the buying process, you ensure all the people involved understand your value proposition. And who doesn't like to communicate with someone who makes them feel smarter?

PART III

About the Research

We began our research with a **qualitative study** by Aha Media Group and Mantis Research. The goal was to understand how healthcare B2B buyers use content to create business cases and build consensus with their colleagues about purchasing products and services. First, we showed study members original anonymized content. Then we asked them to compare it to content that was rewritten in plain language.

The findings were definitive:
Clarity is not only preferred, it's a competitive advantage.

After such strong qualitative findings, we performed a quantitative study of 150+ clinical and non-clinical healthcare professionals. We tested real-world examples of healthcare marketing content presented first in traditional phrasing and then in plain language. And we came to the same results as the qualitative study: You will have better results if you use clear content.

Consider that 7 out of 10 decision-makers would schedule a demo after reading plain language marketing materials, versus 4 out of 10 for non-plain language materials. And since almost 90% of purchasing teams share marketing and sales materials they trust with a larger group to make decisions, you want to ensure your content is clear and concise.

Our research partner, Feedback, conducted a third study using ethnographic datasets from online peer discussions of healthcare professionals. "Ethnographic" simply means the study of people in their own environments, or in the real world.

Feedback has a team of experts in sociology, psychology and anthropology who watch and learn from online discussions. These experts examined healthcare professionals' online behaviors — actions like asking a question, giving a recommendation or responding to another person. They were able to assess, based on the observed interactions, what healthcare professionals prefer and don't prefer when it comes to plain language.

Their findings reinforced that **healthcare professionals, like most people, like to explain complicated ideas and situations with conversational, easy-to-understand language.**

PART IV

Research Examples and Data

WHY CHOOSE OUR COMPANY: EXAMPLE ONE

Our first example presented marketing content from a healthcare company. Long sentences and heavy language in the original content bog down the reader. We offered a plain language alternative, using bullet points for easier reading. Action verbs also make it simple to understand the benefits of the offer. Survey participants had a distinct preference for plain language.

OPTION A (NOT PLAIN LANGUAGE)

Why choose our company?

Our Company identifies pain points in your current workflows and strives to create an impactful way to overcome even the toughest operational challenges of healthcare organizations with purposeful innovations.

We leverage technology such as mobile devices, applications, and AI to capture data analytics to enhance outcomes, improve patient and provider engagement with the help of RPM, provide virtual visits and health navigation, advance the quality of our services by measuring patient health improvements, foster community engagement with electronic SDOH data collection and eliminate manual, paper based processes with automated workflows.

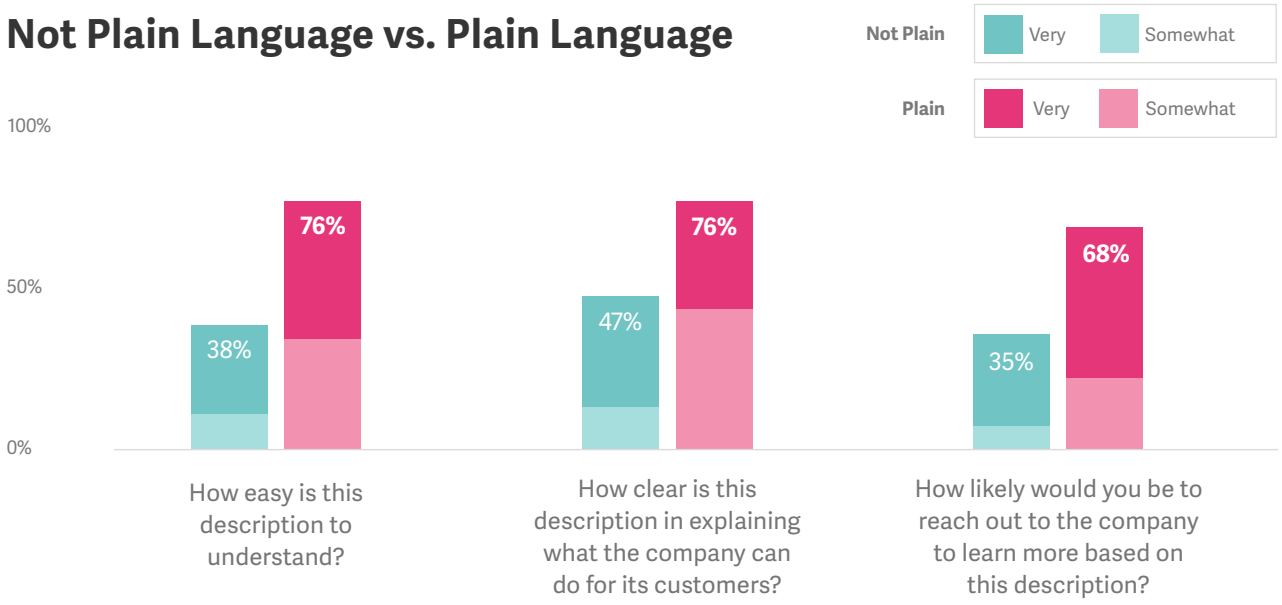
OPTION B (PLAIN LANGUAGE)

Why choose our company?

Our Company helps hospital systems, private practices, home care providers, payers, and local agencies enhance outcomes, reduce costs, and elevate the patient experience. Our Company uses technology such as mobile devices and easy-to-use apps to:

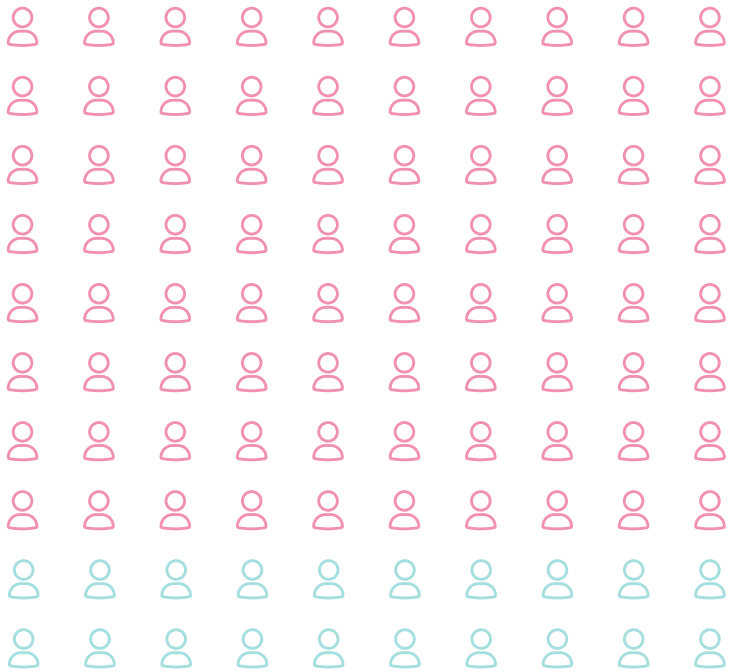
- *Capture data analytics with real-time reporting*
- *Improve service quality by measuring patient health outcomes*
- *Expand patient-provider engagement with remote patient monitoring*
- *Reduce manual processes and in-person visits with automated workflows and real-time visibility into patient vitals*
- *Provide virtual visits and health content navigation with guided tools and language translation*
- *Foster community wellness through the collection of Social Determinants of Health data*

Not Plain Language vs. Plain Language



When asked, "Which option do you prefer?"

80% Preferred Plain Language



What we heard from respondents:

"The run-on sentences in the original content make it hard to read and believe."

"It takes less work to unpack the [plain language] message."

"The [plain language] option was more concise and spoke more directly to me as a potential customer."

REQUEST A DEMO: EXAMPLE TWO

The second example offered marketing language examples for a software product. We rewrote the original content, offering an alternative way to share the same information. The simpler words make the product appear more useful and potentially more valuable. The data is clear.

OPTION A (NOT PLAIN LANGUAGE)

Virtual Care Management

Our technology is a white-label, HIPAA-compliant software platform integrated with all the features and functions needed to practice any form of physical or behavioral medicine suitable for virtual or hybrid care. The platform's single, intuitive interface enables an efficient, effective, easy-to-use virtual visit for your patients and your providers.

Request a demo >

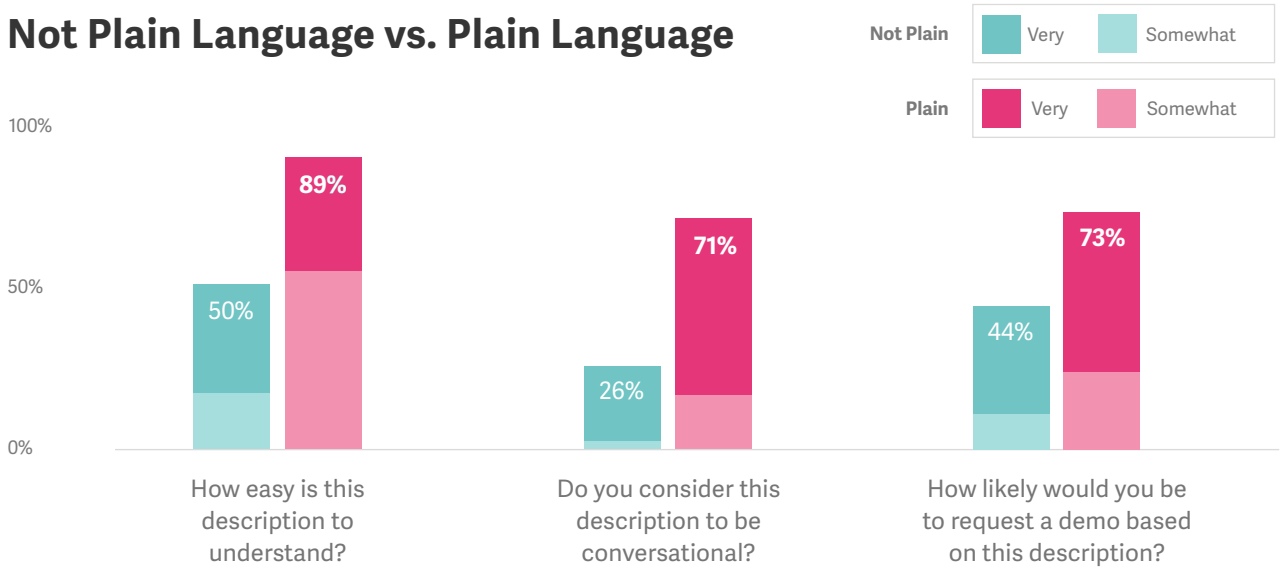
OPTION B (PLAIN LANGUAGE)

Telehealth Made Easy

Our telehealth software offers all the features you need to provide patient care. Designed for physical or behavioral health, the platform offers flexibility for care in-person, virtual, or hybrid. The interface is easy for both patients and providers to use and is HIPAA compliant.

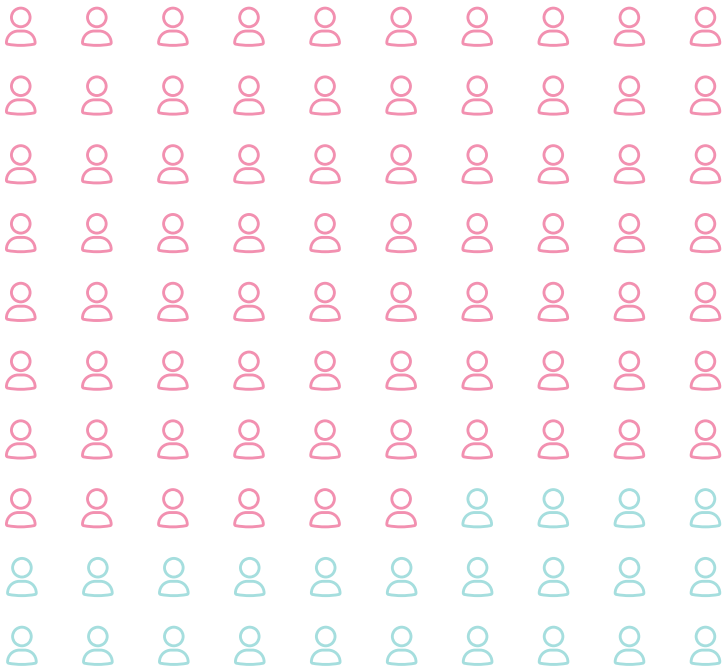
Request a demo >

Not Plain Language vs. Plain Language



When asked, "Which option do you prefer?"

76% Preferred Plain Language



What we heard from respondents:

"The [plain language] example goes straight to the point."

"The headline on the [plain language] option is catchier, and the description is short but accurate."

"[Plain language] is easier to understand, making me think that the product itself will be easy to use."

DOWNLOAD A WHITE PAPER: EXAMPLE THREE

Our final example was a teaser introducing a white paper. We provided a plain language alternative to heavy, technical content. Each option presented a clear link to the download, and we were curious which teaser would be the most convincing. According to our survey participants, only one content option is truly actionable.

OPTION A (NOT PLAIN LANGUAGE)

#ECR2020: Digital Tomosynthesis on DR 800 and DR 600

Despite a large array of publications and clinically-oriented investigations and studies indicating potential applications in various fields, digital tomosynthesis (DTS) has not yet realized its potential as a widely used clinical application. Apart from mammography, where digital breast tomosynthesis (DBT) is becoming increasingly well-established, DTS is acknowledged in the academic field, but seemingly less in clinical practice — particularly not in productivity-oriented clinical environments. Agfa's tomosynthesis solution — facilitating novel reconstruction in combination with state-of-the-art MUSICA post-processing on both the DR 800 and DR 600 X-ray systems — allows Agfa to close this gap. By means of well-documentd and practical clinical cases, this white paper demonstrates the potential of digital tomosynthesis in the radiological field. It shows that DTS can be a useful compliment to 2D and CT imaging in improving department productivity and patient care.

Download the white paper here >

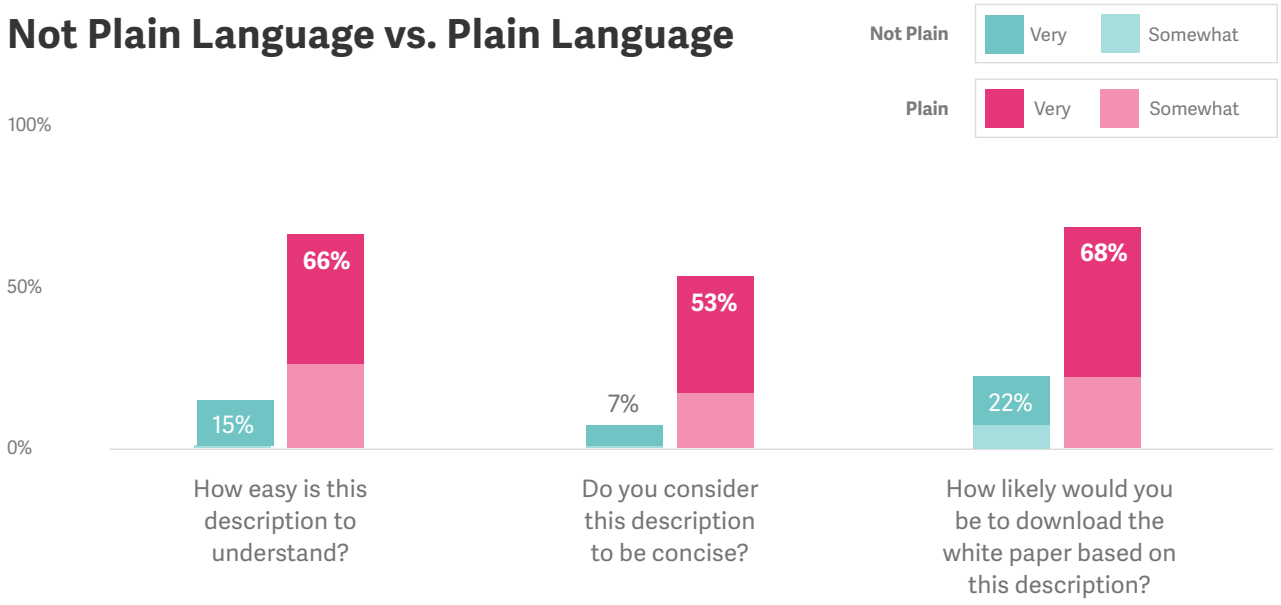
OPTION B (PLAIN LANGUAGE)

Medical Imaging in the Real World: Examples of the DTS Advantage

Digital tomosynthesis (DTS) is a medical imaging technique where a single reading provides multiple tomographic slices that are quickly reconstructed into images. Despite its usefulness, DTS is not being used in many clinical settings, except for in mammography where it is becoming more common. Agfa's tomosynthesis solution, which combines new reconstruction techniques with advanced post-processing technology, aims to change that. Through real-life examples, this white paper shows that DTS can be a helpful addition to other imaging techniques in improving patient care and productivity in medical departments.

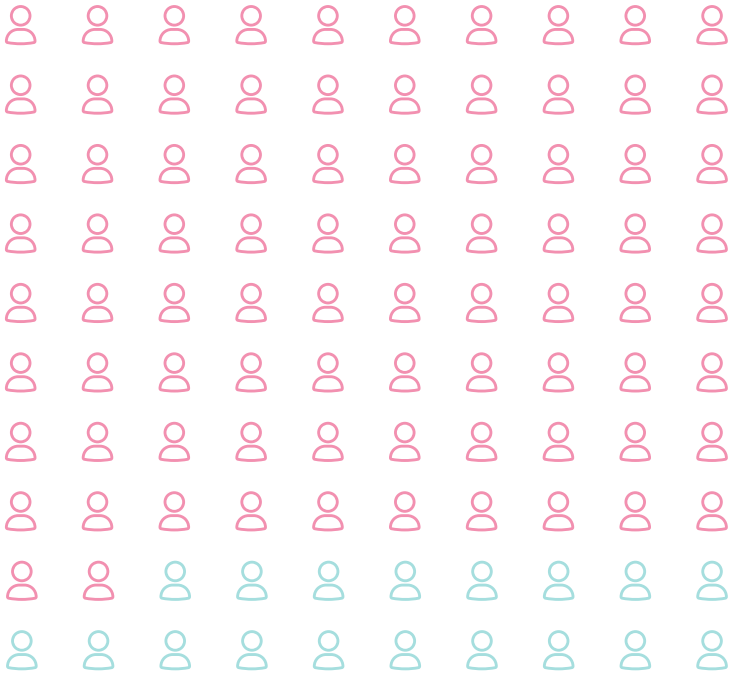
Download the white paper here >

Not Plain Language vs. Plain Language



When asked, "Which option do you prefer?"

82% Preferred Plain Language



What we heard from respondents:

"The medical terminology makes me check out and stop reading."

"I would not read the [technical language] summary because it is so long."

"The [plain language] was easier to read and told me exactly what to expect in the white paper."

PART V

Real-World Research

First, we asked B2B healthcare professionals about their language. Then, we surveyed them. As a final step, in this newest research, we observed them online to see if they behaved in the real world the way they say they do.

What kind of language do they use in expert-level peer discussions? In a depressurized environment where the goal is to get the point across as efficiently as possible, is plain language still preferred? Peeking at how healthcare professionals talk to each other online helped us confirm our initial findings and produced a new insight.

THE RESULTS

INSIGHT #1

No matter who the audience is, it's important to use the same words, abbreviations and acronyms that they use.

In one study, Feedback looked at the key audiences of the Pulmonary Hypertension Association (PHA). This included people with pulmonary hypertension (PH), their healthcare providers and the support and resources available to them.

Online discussions showed that when talking about PH, most clinicians used the abbreviation "pulm" instead of PH. This was a new discovery for the PHA — even though doctors of all ages had used the abbreviation for many years, the PHA hadn't.

With this insight, the PHA is empowered to use the same plain language in its marketing materials that its audience uses.

NEW TAKEAWAY

Identifying and using shared vocabulary is critical for your message to be findable, understandable and actionable.

INSIGHT #2

Even though healthcare professionals might tolerate longer explanations, they prefer and encourage short, clear and to-the-point communication.

Healthcare providers and professionals in pharmacy, pharmaceuticals, medical devices, supply chain, insurance and finance sometimes use technical words when talking about job complexities with an audience of peers. But in most cases, these experts tend to avoid using formal, drawn-out language in online discussions with each other. They prefer using everyday words to keep communication efficient, easy-to-understand and straightforward.

The consensus is that simple language helps everyone get to the point and understand things faster.

We observed that when chatting online with each other, healthcare professionals use human language, abbreviations and shared vocabulary in a conversational way:

> *[I] wonder if these patients will develop antibodies against these protein replacements, as some people who get enzyme replacement therapies and other protein infusions do — and some trigger not only reactions to those foreign (to them) proteins, but some even go into anaphylactic shock. No joke, [it] could be a serious issue, especially in older patients — their bodies could recognize these new proteins as foreign rather than endogenous."*
>
> — PHARMACEUTICAL PROFESSIONAL

"What I'm saying is that our agents are 100% compliant. We have been vetted by CMS. I typically don't use random videos to make decisions, instead CMS guidelines. Yes, changes will come to this platform, but our system is proven compliant. We hear the talk and we see the nonsense posted online. Then we go to CMS and get the facts."

— INSURANCE PROFESSIONAL

"I love it cuz, like everything else, it'll be the pharmacy's problem. Patients will scream and yell and say the pharmacy is refusing to fill their meds, when that's not true if they want to pay out of pocket.

Doctors will tell patients it's our fault somehow. All while both parties knew all along they were committing insurance fraud, and will choose to not accept any responsibility for this.

Oh, and like others alluded to, I'm sure the pharmacies will get the chargebacks for it all instead of doctor reimbursements going down, but you know, oh well."

— PHARMACIST

CONFIRMED TAKEAWAY

When the pressure to sound smart — even in professional environments — is washed away, healthcare experts prefer conversational language, clarity and efficiency.

PART VI

Conclusion

80% of healthcare professionals surveyed prefer plain language communications. Even more importantly, when content is clear, it's convincing. So convincing it gets your potential customer to act: 68% of decision-makers would download a white paper after reading a plain language teaser, versus 22% for a non-plain language teaser. And, when observed in the real world, healthcare professionals themselves use conversational phrasing to communicate.

That's the bottom line: **Plain language gets the message across.** Every marketing effort must be clear, with actionable content that makes your offer easy to understand.

Healthcare professionals want — and need — marketing materials that are straightforward, streamlined and organized. The more relatable you can make your content, the more you have a chance of forging a connection. That connection can spark what you truly want: a trusted relationship with a potential customer.

When you sell to a B2B audience, their decision is no less important than an individual making a healthcare decision. Healthcare professionals make critical choices that affect patients' lives daily. Use clear and concise content to capture their attention and convince them that you're a trustworthy business worth their time.

Want to know more?

Visit our **plain language content hub** for more information about how to implement these findings. It's your own personal toolkit for convincing stakeholders, creating customer-centric B2B content and keeping up with the latest research.

ABOUT

Aha Media Group

Aha Media Group has helped the world's biggest healthcare brands increase their reach and reputation through copy, content marketing and content strategies. Our mission is to help people make important decisions in their personal and professional lives through clear healthcare content.

We understand the value of plain language that tells a relevant, impactful story and inspires action. Our award-winning work has changed the way healthcare communicators write and distribute content.

Contact us

Reach out today if you want clear and convincing B2B (and B2C) healthcare content that gives you the competitive advantage.

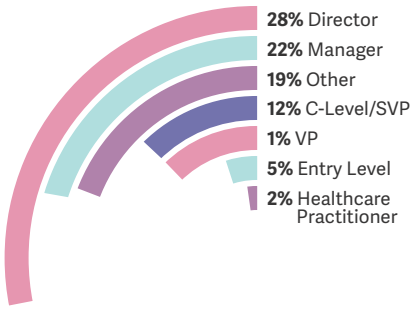
ONLINE: ahamediagroup.com/contact/
EMAIL: hello@ahamediagroup.com
PHONE: 240.705.9802

ADDENDUM

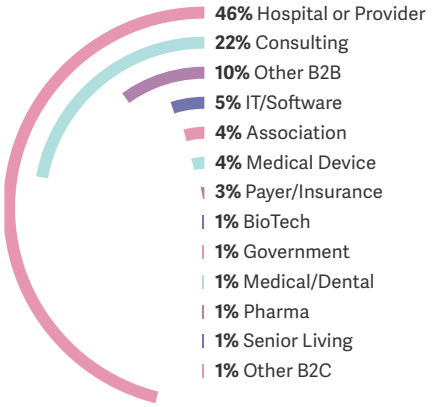
Research Participants

Survey participants represented a range of roles across diverse healthcare organizations of varying sizes.

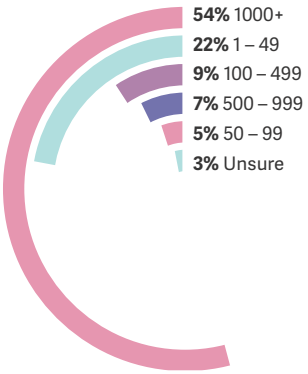
What is the best description of your role in your company?



What type of healthcare organization do you work for?



Counting all locations where your employer operates, what is the total number of people who work at your organization?



ADDENDUM

FAQs

In the spirit of plain language, we're answering some frequently asked questions about our research methodology. Have a question you don't see?

EMAIL: hello@ahamediagroup.com

Quick Facts

- The study has three parts: a qualitative round of interviews (6 participants), a quantitative survey (151 participants), and an ethnographic study of online behavior.
- We never use the words plain language in the survey or research.
- A third-party research firm, Mantis Research, conducted two parts of the study on behalf of Aha Media Group. Another research firm, Feedback, conducted the ethnographic research portion.

Q. **Can you briefly describe the three parts of the research?**

A. We began with a qualitative audit of 6 healthcare professionals.

Their titles and degrees were:

- Chief clinical officer (MD)
- Director of pharmacy (MD)
- Vice president of operations (PhD)
- Director of communications (BS)
- Chief operating officer (MD)
- Director of digital marketing and engagement (MS)

Our second phase included a quantitative survey of 200 people. We chose those respondents by asking questions based on their involvement in healthcare and B2B, title, organization type and other factors. In the end, we qualified 151 respondents.

Our third phase involved ethnographic research of healthcare professionals in online discussions. We used a behavioral focus for social listening that examined interest, demographic and geographic forums and conversations.

Q. What information did you provide to participants before they took the survey?

A. The study began by explaining the goal: "to understand your feelings about B2B healthcare sales and marketing materials."

We asked survey participants to review "4 different sets of content and to answer the following questions about them."

We didn't tell them we were studying how things are written and never used the term plain language.

Q. How did you choose writing samples?

A. We collected examples of copy we'd love to rewrite from around the internet. The examples were a mix of client website copy (before we updated it) and copy from other companies we follow.

Q. Were the samples labeled as "option A"/"option B" or were they labeled as "plain language" and "technical/original"?

A. We labeled them option A and option B. They also were randomized, so not every participant saw them in the same order.

Q. Might participants prefer the plain language versions because the original samples targeted a specific technical audience — one they aren't part of?

A. We provided an introduction for context before participants read the two samples.

For instance, one of our samples used this introduction:

"Imagine you're looking for a consulting company to fill a current need within your organization. These two examples are excerpts of web copy from a company you're considering."

Our plain language rewrite targets the same audience — technical or not — as the original copy. In short, it is the same information — but worded differently — so we can see which people prefer.

This is important because we found that "89% of purchasing teams share marketing and sales materials with a larger group to make decisions. These groups include a wide range of roles and a varied understanding of technical jargon."

So even if the person reading the example is not a technical expert on the subject, they need to understand it enough to socialize it with the ultimate decision-maker.