



inside the buyer's brain

avoid the parity trap

- differentiating your solutions in highly competitive categories



costly *signals*

Consider the peacock.

You might think a peacock would struggle to elude predators due to its huge, cumbersome tail and brightly colored plumage. Yet peacocks do indeed thrive in the wild—befuddling Charles Darwin enough for him to declare,

“The sight of a feather in a peacock’s tail, whenever I gaze at it, makes me sick!”

It wasn’t until 100 years later (too late for Darwin) that Amotz Zahavi, a biologist at Tel Aviv University, coined the term “costly signaling” to explain the conundrum.

Costly signaling is a theory that posits that expensive-seeming signals or actions are harder to fake, and thus perceived as more believable. The peacock’s tail serves as a “costly signal” to potential mates that it’s strong enough to survive, despite its big and bright tail. Less fit specimens wouldn’t have the agility to avoid predators if a long tail handicapped them.

In a business context, you can use costly signals in your messaging to assign more value and credibility to your solution. When you’re competing in a crowded category with many other solutions that look and sound like yours, you need to “signal” through your messages and conversations why your solution is better and different from your competitors’.

But how? How can you position your solution in a way that signals to buyers that your claims are honest and persuades them to choose you?

To find out, B2B DecisionLabs partnered with Dr. Nick Lee, behavioral scientist and Professor of Marketing at Warwick Business School, to study the best way to make your solution stand out in highly competitive categories.

The premise was simple: What if you took the same feature set from the same company and told the story in a different way? Can one version of the story consistently and materially defeat a different version of the story—even when both stories are based on the exact same capabilities?

Yes, it can. And in this report, you’ll see how.



Doug Hutton

SVP Products,
B2B DecisionLabs



a competitive *state of play*

In a recent B2B industry survey, **88 percent of companies said that their competitors offer similar capabilities as they do.**

It's no secret that in well-defined categories, many companies can solve the same problems with similar capabilities and pricing. The problem is, **most marketers and sellers (88 percent) aren't confident that buyers understand what makes their solution unique and different.**

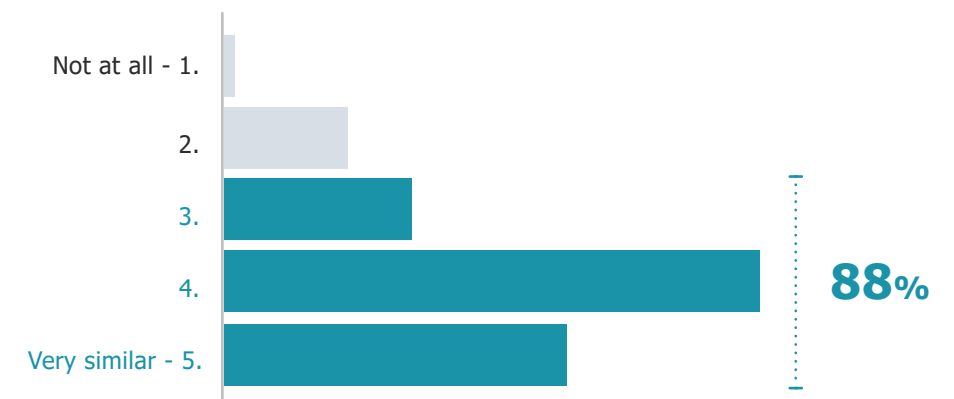
If buyers can't distinguish you from your competition, you look like just one more choice among many viable options. You need to articulate your value clearly and effectively. If you don't, your prospects won't see the difference, they won't value your capabilities, and you'll end up in side-by-side "bake-offs," competing on price.

But what does "articulating value" really look like?

To most organizations, "articulating value" means focusing on benefits rather than features, keeping descriptions short and crisp. Others describe capabilities by dressing them up in superlatives to make their solutions appear better and brighter than others.

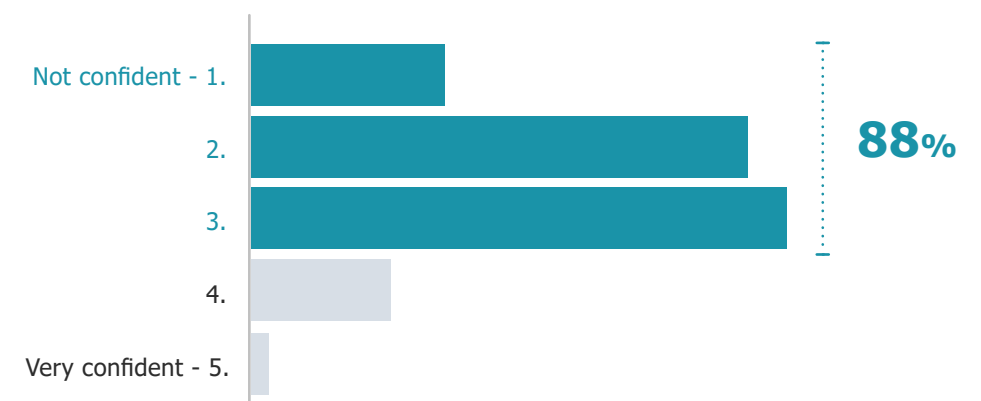
Despite the prevalence of all these tactics, research shows how these common practices are missing the mark.

Our competitors' solutions offer similar capabilities as our solutions



88 percent of companies said that their competitors offer similar capabilities.

I am confident that our prospects and customers understand our solution's unique value relative to our competitors



88 percent of sellers and marketers aren't confident that buyers understand what makes their solution unique and different.

avoid the *parity trap*

Positioning the exact same features in a different way completely changes your buyer's perception of value and preference for you.

► SHARE TELLING DETAILS

► THROW AWAY SUPERLATIVES

► FALL BACK ON FEATURES



Providers often fear that modernization might introduce financial risks, even if an upgrade is needed. You might have trouble convincing business case for modernization. Providers often fear that modernization might introduce financial risks, even if an upgrade is needed. You might have trouble convincing business case for modernization.

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the study

B2B DecisionLabs and Dr. Nick Lee, Professor of Marketing at Warwick Business School, conducted this research study with 400 B2B professionals.

The message test conditions were all based on an anonymized go-to-market pitch for a truck driver recruiting company. The pitch included a set of specific business challenges and corresponding capabilities to resolve those challenges.

Starting from the same set of capabilities, the researchers created four different messages that reflect popular approaches to capability descriptions and value statements.

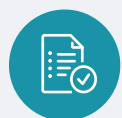
Each message was then positioned as a unique competitor in a head-to-head presentation.

- The Telling Details test condition was called OnRoad Logistics.
- The other three test conditions were all called Highway Fleet Services.

In every test scenario, participants saw, in random order, the Telling Details presentation from OnRoad Logistics and one of the other three presentations from Highway Fleet Services.

You'll see specific examples of each message on the next page.

the test conditions



Features

This message describes a list of capabilities that help resolve the identified customer challenge. There are no benefit statements to show what value the buyer will receive. It represents a messaging approach that seems to imply value through the capability itself.



Benefits

This message describes the benefits of each capability. These benefit statements are meant to help the buyer understand what the feature will do for them and what that means in terms of business impact. This approach follows the "sell benefits, not features" advice that many companies follow today.



Superlatives

This message adds common cliché adjectives to describe features, including typical superlatives such as: "all-in-one," "one-stop-shop," "streamlined," "comprehensive," etc. This is a common approach that companies use when trying to express the difference between otherwise similar capabilities.



Telling Details

This message adds specific information and more detailed, emotional language to describe the business problem, the capabilities to solve that problem, and the value of those capabilities. This approach enhances the story with descriptive words, phrases, or images that help the buyer better "experience" what you're describing.

one solution, *four stories*

Here are some excerpts from each message.
The highlighted elements show key differences.



FEATURES

When you work with Highway Fleet Services and source your drivers from us, you'll access our **searchable and re-marketable database of 80,000 drivers** known to Highway Fleet Services. We also provide a **fast and efficient onboarding process** designed specifically for truck drivers, powered by our **full-time recruiters who understand driver regulations**. Not only that, Highway Fleet Services has long-tenured regional managers overseeing driver services in **300+ locations across the country**. We have all the services that any fleet owner would want or need from a driver recruiting company.



BENEFITS

When you source drivers from Highway Fleet Services, you can **fill empty seats while improving quality**. Thanks to our **large driver database**, your fleet will **get ahead on recruiting qualified drivers**. Once they're hired, you'll be able to **onboard new drivers in just days instead of weeks**. And Highway Fleet Services' **large geographic footprint** means you can scale your business as demand fluctuates.



SUPERLATIVES

When you work with Highway Fleet Services, you get a **one-stop-shop for all your driver recruiting and onboarding needs**. We have an **all-in-one platform and driver database** to hire the highest quality drivers. With Highway Fleet Services' **streamlined onboarding program**, you'll be able to **bring drivers up to speed instantaneously**. And with a **comprehensive network of local offices**, you can scale your business as demand fluctuates.



TELLING DETAILS

When you source drivers from OnRoad Logistics, you can **fill empty seats while improving quality**. With our **80,000+ known driver database**, you can **recruit non-stop to shorten or eliminate empty seat time**. OnRoad Logistics' **full-time recruiters are in constant contact with these database drivers**, establishing qualifications and preferences even when no jobs are open. That means you can **quickly apply your job criteria to qualified and interested drivers** who are known entities.

Once hired, you'll **onboard drivers in days instead of weeks** because our **recruiters will lead the heavily regulated onboarding process**. This **reduces your risk**, as every OnRoad Logistics driver has **a five-year criminal background check and ten-year employment verification**. And our **unmatched geographic footprint—with 300+ locations** led by **tenured regional managers with deep ties to local driver pools**—means you can match your hiring to demand.



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Provision often fear that modernization might introduce financial risks, even if an upgrade is needed. You might have trouble with:



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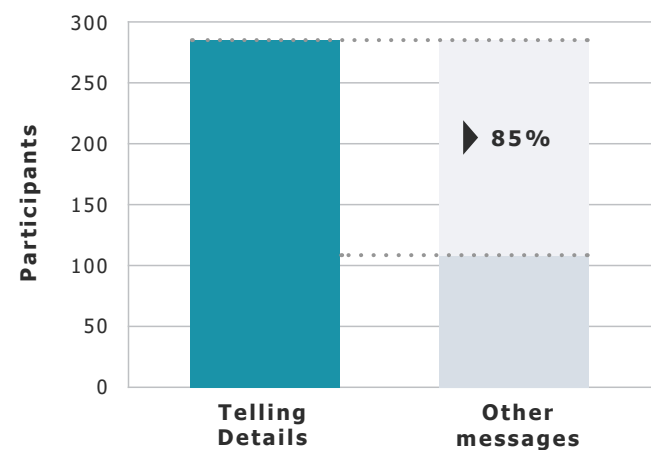
avoid the parity trap

share telling
details

a clear and obvious *winner*

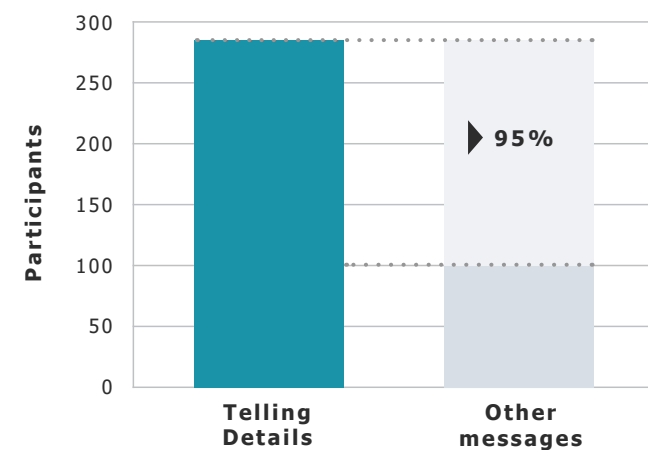
The study results reveal a clear and obvious winner: Telling Details beat every other message, individually and in the aggregate, across every variable we tested.

Which pitch did you prefer?



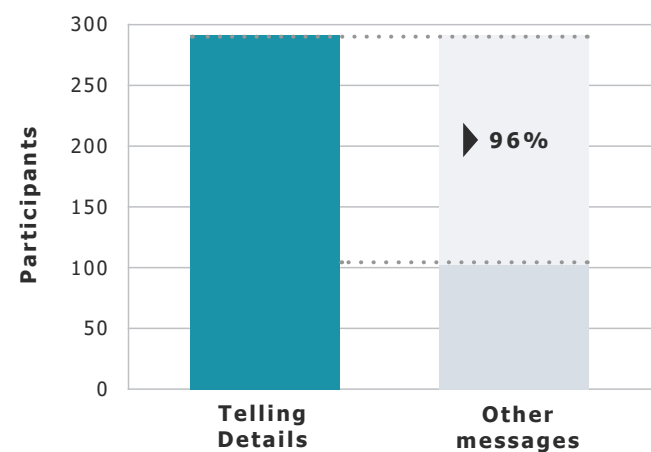
85 percent difference in buyers who preferred the Telling Details pitch vs. other messages in the study.

Who are you most likely to purchase from?



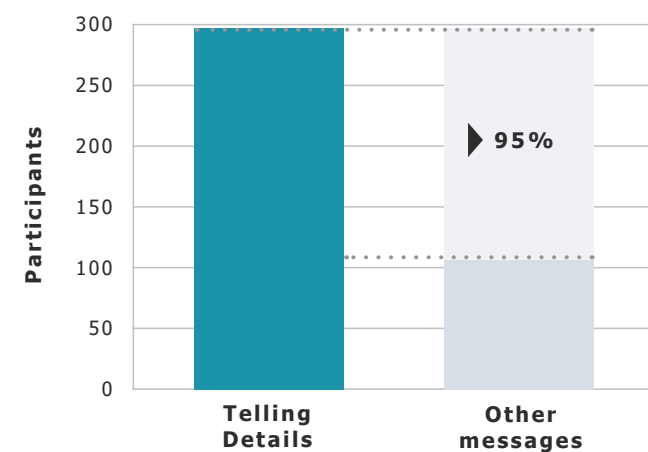
95 percent difference in buyers who said they would purchase from OnRoad Logistics (Telling Details) vs. Highway Fleet Services (other messages).

Which pitch was more credible?



96 percent difference in buyers who said the Telling Details pitch was more credible vs. other messages in the study.

Which pitch was more convincing?



95 percent difference in buyers who said the Telling Details pitch was more convincing than other messages in the study.

why telling *details?*

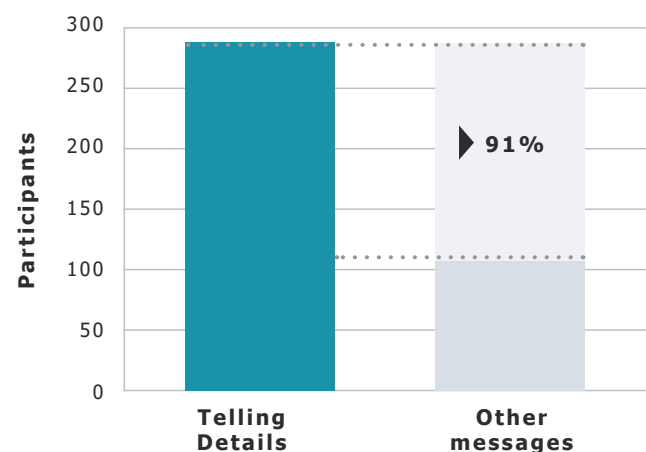
If your message doesn't include rich, detailed, and value-based language about your capabilities, it won't be nearly as believable.

Why does the Telling Details approach work so well? The Telling Details message is:

- **Buyer-focused** – It uses language like “you can” and “that means” to frame each capability in terms of how they apply to your buyer.
- **Specific** – It includes more specific information, including quantitative values to describe each capability.
- **Detailed** – It elaborates on each capability with additional details that enhance and complement the value.

Using this level of detail and specificity adds depth to your message, making it more concrete and believable. **The details act like costly signals that build your buyer's confidence that your solution offers the most value.**

Which vendor offers the most value?



91 percent difference in buyers who said the Telling Details pitch offered more value than other messages in the study.

does timing matter?



Tim Riesterer

Chief Visionary, B2B DecisionLabs

In every test scenario, participants received the Telling Details presentation from OnRoad Logistics and one of the three Highway Fleet Services presentations.

But here's the kicker: The researchers randomized the order in which each participant reviewed the messages to eliminate any potential order effect bias.


That means some participants heard the Telling Details message first, while others heard it last. But in both scenarios, participants consistently chose the Telling Details pitch.


In the context of a competitive selling scenario, the Telling Details message wins out regardless of whether you're presenting first or last or somewhere in the middle.


Simply put: **The better story wins, regardless of when your buyer hears it.**


less is not *more*

Notice how the Telling Details message describes the vendor's large driver database compared to each of the other messages.

 **Telling Details:** "With our 80,000+ known driver database, you can recruit non-stop to shorten or eliminate empty seat time. OnRoad Logistics' full-time recruiters are in constant contact with these database drivers, establishing qualifications and preferences even when no jobs are open. That means you can quickly apply your job criteria to qualified and interested drivers who are known entities."

 **Features:** "Searchable and re-marketable database of 80,000 drivers known to Highway Fleet Services."

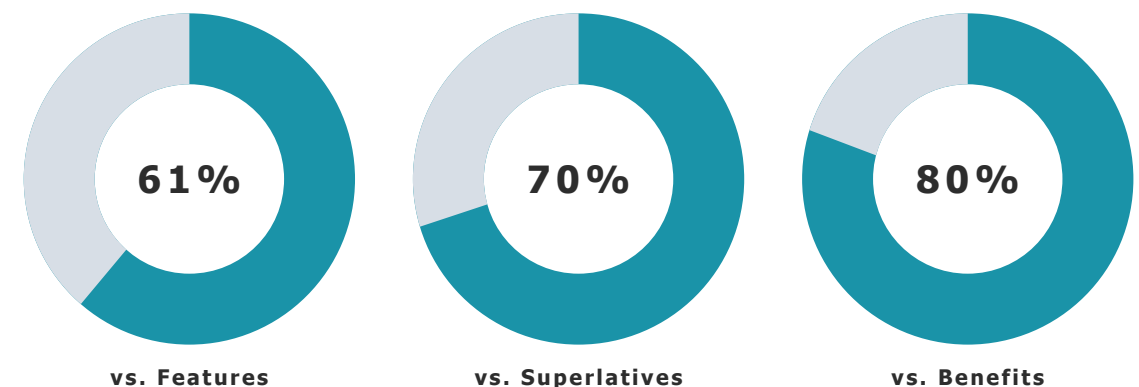
 **Superlatives:** "We have an all-in-one platform and driver database to hire the highest quality drivers."

 **Benefits:** "Thanks to our large driver database, your fleet will get ahead on recruiting qualified drivers."

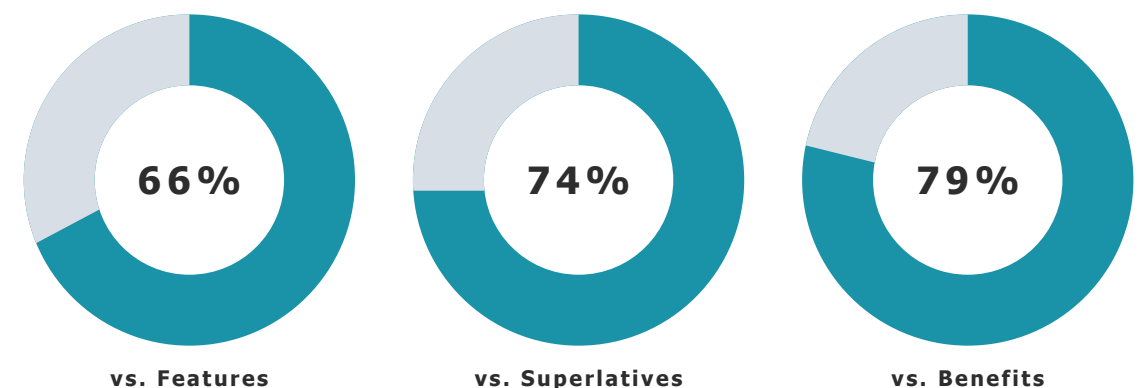
The lesson? Brevity is not always better.

The buyer-focused, specific, and detailed language in Telling Details makes the message longer. But it's not just adding more words for the sake of it—**those additional details bring clarity and focus to an otherwise fuzzy capability description.**

Percent of respondents that preferred Telling Details



Most likely to purchase from OnRoad (Telling Details)





avoid the parity trap

throw away

superlatives

your superlatives

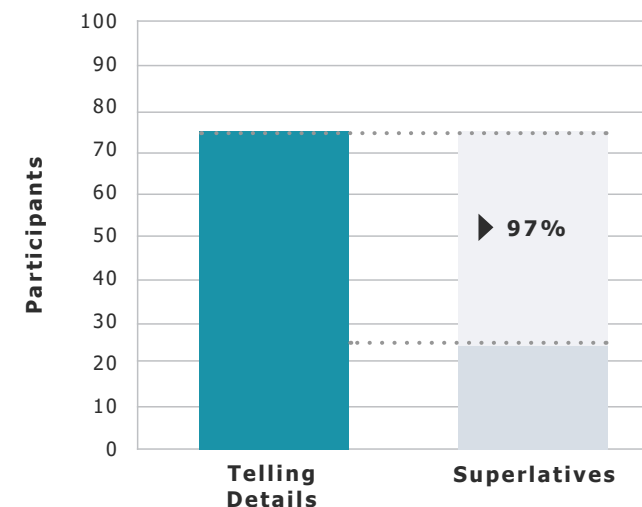
won't save you

Too many sellers and marketers try to inflate their solution stories with exaggerated, hyperbolic, and clichéd language. But if all those superlatives don't articulate any value to your buyers, it's all just hot air.

It's not surprising that the Superlatives message didn't win in this study. But the margin of defeat is worth noting. Participants said the Superlatives message was **102 percent less clear** and **97 percent less credible** than the Telling Details message.

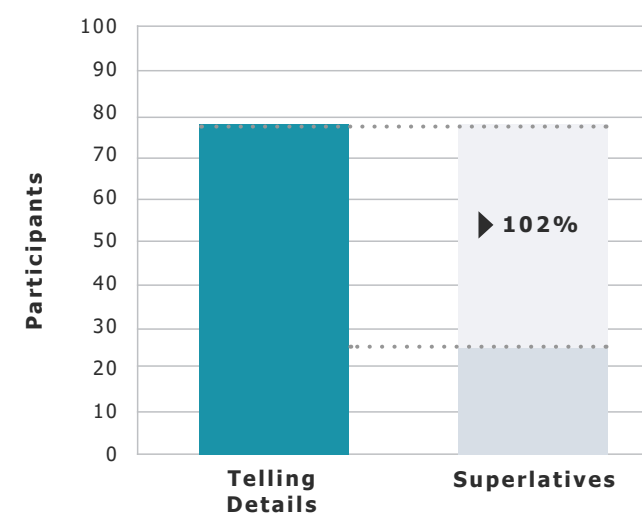
People aren't persuaded by exaggerated marketing language. In fact, those **superlatives make it difficult for buyers to understand what you're offering**. They need to work harder to filter through your words and interpret what you're trying to say. And that lack of clarity makes your claims less credible.

Which pitch was more credible?



97 percent difference in buyers who said the Telling Details pitch was more credible than the Superlatives pitch.

Which pitch was more clear?



102 percent difference in buyers who said the Telling Details pitch was clearer than the Superlatives pitch.

show value, not flair

Why did the Telling Details message perform so much better? Consider how each message describes the vendor's geographic footprint:



Superlatives: "And with a comprehensive network of local offices, you can scale your business as demand fluctuates."

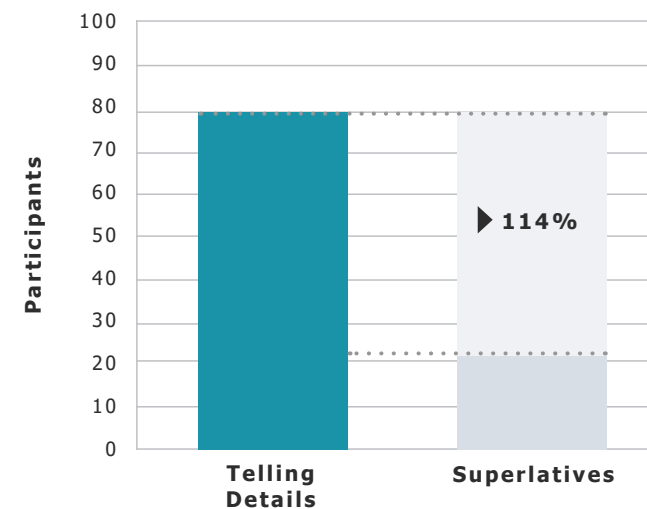


Telling Details: "And our unmatched geographic footprint—with 300+ locations led by tenured regional managers with deep ties to local driver pools—means you can match your hiring to demand."

The Superlatives message boasts a "comprehensive network of local offices," but it's not clear what that means or how it works. The Telling Details pitch takes it several steps further, providing a concrete number of locations, adding more specific detail about the tenured regional managers at those locations, and then clarifying how those capabilities benefit the buyer.

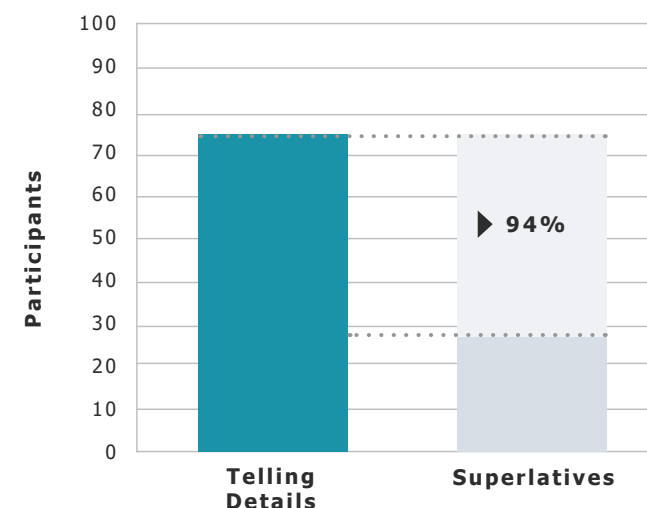
If you're looking for better ways to differentiate your solution, fight the urge to add in superlatives. Instead, use Telling Details to assign greater credibility to your claims about the value your capabilities bring to your buyer.

Which pitch was more unique?



114 percent difference in buyers who as many buyers said the Telling Details pitch was more unique than the Superlatives pitch.

Who are you most likely to purchase from?



94 percent difference in buyers who said they would purchase from OnRoad Logistics (Telling Details) vs. the Superlatives message.

make your message more *concrete*

Your prospects might remember your message precisely or they might just get the gist.

If you're in a highly competitive space, your goal must be precision. Otherwise, people might get the gist from you and the gist from the competition, and after a while they won't remember who said what.

Neuroscience research from Dr. Carmen Simon and B2B DecisionLabs underscores the importance of making your messages and content more concrete and specific.

Much like the Telling Details message in this study, Dr. Simon's research shows that **people are more likely to understand, remember, and act your message when you elaborate with specific details and examples.**

To encourage more precise memories, you need to include more precise information.

For example, saying, "Digital transformation can help you innovate" is too abstract. Elaborating with a specific example of how Home Depot uses innovative technology—like augmented reality to help customers find products in store and place virtual products in the real world using their phones—helps people understand and visualize what "innovation" means.

are you the peacock
or a parrot?



Dr. Carmen Simon

Cognitive Neuroscientist,
B2B DecisionLabs

From a neuroscience perspective, the words and visuals you choose should ease your buyer's cognitive workload and help them make sense of your message.

Unfortunately, too many companies use buzzwords, jargon, and cliché phrases as a crutch. Most products these days seem to be "cutting-edge," "data-driven," "end-to-end," and "game-changing."

Using the same lazy language as everyone else doesn't make you memorable—it makes you a parrot.

Specifics are memorable because they mobilize the brain. Concrete words and visuals set your messages and content apart from hundreds of other vendors that all sound the same, and distinction leads to better recall.

When carefully chosen, telling details attract more attention and ignite people's senses, which leads to stronger and more precise memories.



avoid the parity trap

fall back on
features

sell features, not just benefits

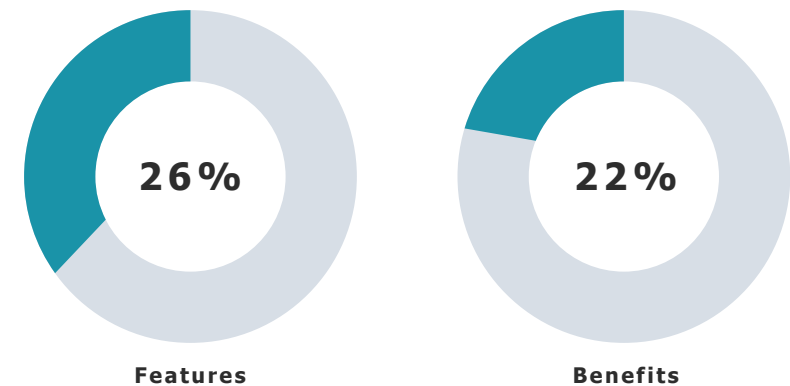
Contrary to the nearly universal admonition to “sell benefits, not features,” **the Features message scored better than the Benefits and Superlatives messages across almost every variable tested.**

The Features message included some of the specific quantitative details from the Telling Details pitch. That suggests your buyers want to know precisely what your solution offers—not just how you think it might benefit them.

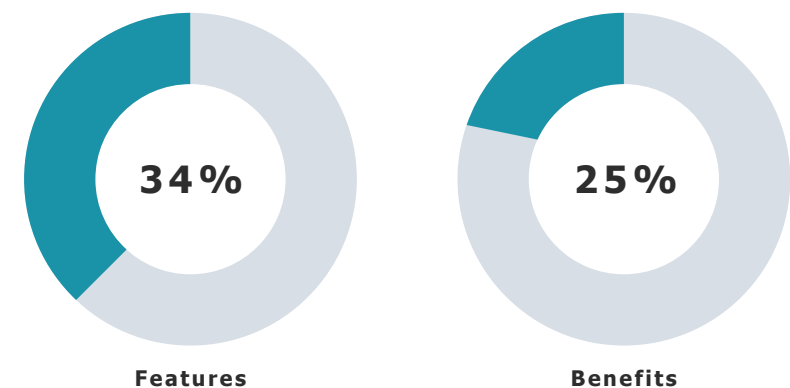
This once again shows that shorter is not always better. When you shorten your message and choose between features vs. benefits (instead of including both), you lose.

But unless you can reach the level of Telling Details with a more detailed, concrete, and buyer-focused message, the research is clear: You’re better off simply listing your solution’s distinct features.

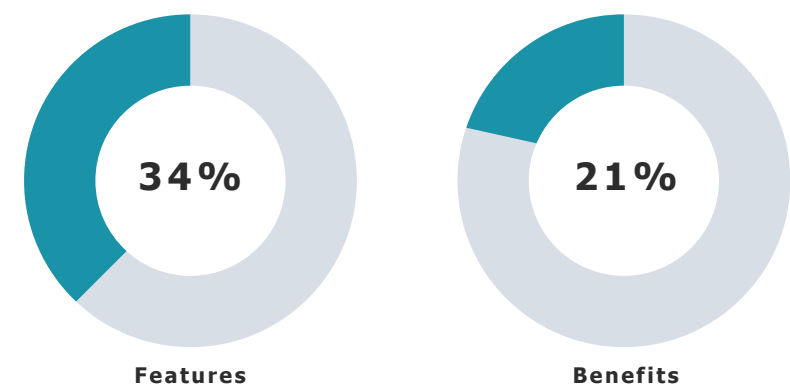
Which pitch was more unique?



Which vendor offers the most value?



Who are you most likely to purchase from?



avoid the parity trap

Even if your message is based on the exact same capability set, how you tell the story dramatically changes your odds of winning.

When building your capabilities messages, don't just talk about features or benefits. Don't use empty language to try and spice up your pitch. Instead, use specific, telling details and descriptive language to make your message more believable, increase your impact, and avoid the parity trap.

► SHARE TELLING DETAILS

Use rich, detailed language about the specifics of your capabilities to make your message more buyer-centric and concrete.

.....

► THROW AWAY SUPERLATIVES

Avoid using fluffy and flashy superlatives to superficially dress up your message.

.....

► FALL BACK ON FEATURES

If you can't include all the telling details, describing features in detail will perform better than just benefits.



about B2B DecisionLabs

B2B DecisionLabs is the only B2B research firm dedicated to studying how decision-makers frame value and make choices. Unlike traditional market research and advisory firms, B2B DecisionLabs conducts rigorous research studies based in several Decision Science disciplines:

- **Behavioral studies** – understand why buyers behave the way they do.
- **Neuroscience research** – observe what's going on inside their brains.
- **Field trials** – validate your approach in the real world.

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in partnership with



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Doug Hutton leads all product development and management activities at B2B DecisionLabs. He works with scientists and research partners to create a scientific foundation for solutions that help sales, marketing, and customer success teams have more successful customer conversations. Doug is co-author of *The Expansion Sale: Four Must-Win Conversations to Keep and Grow Your Customers*.

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