

Reframing “Big Business”



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Summary

To help foster ties between progressives and forward-thinking members of the business community, Sightline recommends avoiding the term “big business” as an unqualified negative moniker. Instead, progressive communicators can:

- ◆ Use language that emphasizes the real enemies of progress (e.g., reckless business practices, undeserved corporate influence in elections and policy).
- ◆ Reference specific bad actors in the business community (Big Oil) rather than business as a whole.
- ◆ Underscore positive, community-minded business values (responsibility, honesty, playing by the rules).

Analysis

For decades, many progressive communicators have used the term “big business” as shorthand for an ethos of greed, recklessness, irresponsibility, and undue political influence. It’s been an enduring and effective frame: a simple and memorable phrase that conjures up a well-established villain. And no wonder; American public opinion polling from as far back as 1930 has shown a relatively [unwavering mistrust](#) of so-called big business.¹ More specifically, surveys have consistently found a widely held belief that the country’s private-sector [protects its own interests](#) at the expense of average Americans.²

Yet using the term “big business” as an unqualified negative reinforces a false dichotomy between business on the one hand, and progress on the other. Obviously, businesses—big and small—have the potential to foster progress, and many do. And many members of the business community take exception to being painted as greedy and irresponsible.

In short, the term “big business” works as a sledgehammer, when what’s often needed is a more refined tool—if not a scalpel, then perhaps a carving knife. The task for progressive communicators, then, is to identify powerful language that evokes the negatives behind the “big business” frame, without reinforcing the (false) idea that all business is bad business.

A survey of recent public opinion research reveals more targeted language. Americans believe that [special interests](#) are “running the show,” and that voters’ voices are being drowned out by those who heavily fund campaigns.³ One poll found that only [3 in 10 Americans](#) believe the “public good” is a strong factor into the choices of corporate leaders.⁴ Most recently, August 2010 polling in battleground states gives us some examples of specific behaviors—and actors—that draw the ire of the American public as election season approaches. Specifically, corporate influence over elections and policy is a major concern across party lines, and corporate lobbyists, specifically, rather than “big business” more generally, are identified as [foes of economic progress](#) for regular Americans.⁵

Notably, [small businesses](#) are among the only institutions that Americans do trust.⁶

Messaging recommendations

With this context in mind, Sightline suggests that communicators avoid painting all business entities with one broad brush. Instead we recommend language that calls out specific business behavior, both good and bad. More targeted language will allow communicators to make clear distinctions and leverage public distrust of specific behaviors, while rewarding community-minded business activities.

Use the term “big business” as sparingly as possible. Instead, use frames that emphasize real enemies of progress: greed, out-of-control behavior, breeches of shared community values, and undue influence.

- ◆ Special interests
- ◆ Unchecked corporate influence
- ◆ Lobbyists / Business lobby / Industry lobbyists
- ◆ Irresponsible, reckless, greedy, or ruthless business practices
- ◆ Back-room deals / Free-rein / Writing their own rules

In a changing business climate where sustainable, community-friendly practices are increasingly the norm, another strategy is to distinguish between *old* and *new* business models. “Big business” in the negative sense is old, obsolete, bygone, outdated, backward, and an obstacle to progress. On the other hand, business at its best is forward-thinking, embraces new ideas, is adaptable, is innovative, drives progress, and works for and with the community.

Adopt more colorful, visual language that avoids a blanket condemnation of all business and instead calls out irresponsible business practices, questionable dealings, and unchecked corporate influence. For example, instead of “John ‘Big Business’ Doe...”

- ◆ John “Back Room Deal” Doe
- ◆ John “Business Lobby” Doe
- ◆ John “Lap Dog” Doe
- ◆ John “Special Interest” Doe

Reference specific businesses, interests, or sectors rather than “big business” as monolithic.

- ◆ Big Oil
- ◆ Wall Street
- ◆ Big Pharma
- ◆ Out-of-state interests

Underscore positive, community-minded business values.

- ◆ Fairness
- ◆ Responsibility
- ◆ Progress, forward-thinking, far-sighted
- ◆ Hard work
- ◆ Honesty, integrity, accountability / Playing by the rules
- ◆ Community-minded / Working toward community solutions / Working for the public good / Investing in our communities
- ◆ Good neighbors

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1. Gallup, July 27, 2010, “Americans Three Times as Confident in Small vs. Big Business..” (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/141578/americans-three-times-confident-small-big-business.aspx>).
2. National Journal Magazine, August 13, 2010, “A Corrosive Collapse in Confidence” (<http://www.nationaljournal.com/njmagazine/politicalconnections.php>).
3. Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, February 8, 2010, “Strong Campaign Finance Reform: Good Policy, Good Politics” (<http://www.greenbergresearch.com/index.php?ID=2425>).
4. Marist College Institute for Public Opinion, January/February 2009, “Business Ethics in a Time of Economic Crisis” (<http://maristpoll.marist.edu/wp-content/misc/us090309/Business%20Ethics%20Survey/Business%20Ethics%202009.pdf>).
5. SurveyUSA for MoveOn.org, August 3 – 5, 2010, “New Battleground Poll Shows Voters Seek Leaders Who Will Challenge Corporate Corruption in Washington DC” (<http://pol.moveon.org/fwc/battlegroundpolladvisory.pdf>).
6. Gallup, July 27, 2010, “Americans Three Times as Confident in Small vs. Big Business,” (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/141578/americans-three-times-confident-small-big-business.aspx>)