

Are your words harming your brand?

How to make what you say and write work harder for you

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How's your branding? No, not that awesome logo. And no, not the great colours on your business cards and brochures. I'm talking about the words you speak and the words you write.

Most of us put a lot of thought, effort and money into developing a brand. We want it to be strong and credible and memorable. We want our graphics and our packaging to speak loudly on our behalf. We want our brand to shout out that we are great people to do business with.

But sometimes we forget that the logo and the kit folder and the website are only a part of our brand. We forget that our brand starts with us.

Branding starts with 'Hello'

Our brand goes on show every time we smile, reach out a hand and say 'hello'. A veteran super-salesman I know always reminds me that before a client can buy a product, the client has to like, know and trust the salesperson.

Here are some tips on making your spoken and written words work harder for you. These are techniques to make sure the words you speak and write do justice to you and your product or service.

You'll be surprised at how many fun people present a dull image to the world because of the way they write and speak. You'll be shocked at how many great products get overlooked because the words are flabby and unconvincing.

Let's make sure that the words out of our mouths or keyboards are working as hard on our behalf as the expensive artwork.

Apply some of this advice and you will turn your words into a competitive advantage.

How words hurt your brand

I think it's time for a couple of examples to illustrate just how badly our words can let us down.

This is from a glossy newsletter sent by a hotel manager to all guests:

“We have scheduled training modules to improve our Associates ability to heighten our overall Guest experience and mechanisms to solicit Guest feedback on ways in which we can meaningfully improve.”

Let's forget the content for a moment and consider the style. What does the language say about the author? Pompous? Definitely not a person to use a simple word when a more elaborate one can be pressed into service. Self-important? Those random and unnecessary capitals might suggest that. Trying to impress? Maybe - but sticklers for punctuation may be unimpressed by a missing possessive apostrophe.

This manager definitely didn't want us thinking like this about his newsletter. He wanted to impress us. The trouble is, he didn't trust his normal vocabulary to do the job. So he sent out for a few more syllables to help him. (A friend of mine, an outstanding writer, used to say 'A thesaurus is a wonderful book to have, but is best kept on a very high shelf.')

The result? Instead of being impressed by the hotel's concern for guests' comfort and welfare, we start thinking this is not a man we'd want to share a coffee or beer with.

From pompous to pleasing

But if we change the language, and get to the point more easily, we can change the impression of the manager and his hotel:

“We’re doing everything we can think of to make your stay as enjoyable as possible. Please tell us if we’ve forgotten anything.”

Sometimes we fall into an inflationary trap. The more important the message, the more we try to dress it up. At times like that it's good to remember the advice of the man who famously once said:

“We shall not fail or falter; we shall not weaken or tire. Give us the tools and we will finish the job.”

The message was pretty important for Winston Churchill. He had to inspire a nation to win a war. But this life-long champion of clear, simple language didn't forget his own advice: “Broadly speaking, the short words are the best, and the old words best of all.”

There's a tool we use in all our [Podium Media & Communications Coaching](#) workshops, and you can use it to check the clarity and simplicity of your words. The tool is just two words - 'Hi Mom'.

Try 'Hi Mom'

Before you check over anything you have written, pop the words 'Hi Mom' in front of your sentences.

“Hi Mom, we have scheduled training modules to improve our Associates ability...”

“Hi Mom, we’re doing everything we can think of to make your stay as enjoyable as possible...”

Keeping your writing simple is not easy. Finding a simple way of expressing complex ideas demands time and patience and skill. But your readers and listeners will thank you for the effort. They’ll applaud your authenticity, and that’s a great start on the road to having a client like, know and trust you.

Avoid jargon

Here’s an example of a presentation one of our clients prepared (BEFORE she learned how to [TalkitOut™](#)- our breakthrough technique for improving speaking and presentation skills).

“It was the goal of the MPA group to initiate a radical and innovative shift in the way information and knowledge are created and leveraged by the members.”

Steer clear of jargon. It’s confusing and alienating to anyone who doesn’t speak the same code. And it’s not the way we talk to people we care about.

Time to apply the ‘Hi Mom’ test. If the words still sound like you are talking to a friend, great. But if they sound strange, you know you have to simplify and be more conversational. Try keeping a straight face when you say:

“Hi Mom, it was the goal of the MPA group to initiate a radical and innovative shift in the way information and knowledge are created and leveraged by the members.”

What the client was talking about was developing an effective way of exchanging information within an organization. When she learned to TalkitOut™ she created a much more engaging and persuasive speech. She simplified the language, threw out the jargon, and built the presentation round a metaphor of a street market.

Remember, speeches and presentations are about changing people's behaviour and attitudes. To do that, the audience has to buy in. To buy in, they have to engage with you.

By making simple changes to her language and style, and telling a story rather than simply dumping data, she greatly increased the chance of getting buy-in.

Whether you are speaking or writing, here are more tips to ensure your words are supporting your brand.

Avoid embarrassment

This is a good time to remind you to check your writing really carefully, and to offer a tip to help you.

First, here are a couple of examples of the problems that can undermine your credibility. Here's a sentence from an elaborate, graphics-rich e-letter from an advertising agency, promoting a new service:

“We thought a rehearsal for regional advertsing exectives would be a great opportunity for us to prepare.”

If you missed the typos the first time, read it again. Maybe the rehearsal they are talking about would be a great opportunity to check the spelling of 'advertising executives'.

Now if you are thinking 'ah, it's just a typo, it happens', let me try to persuade you otherwise.

Creating a brand is about managing people's perception of you and your company. Credibility and reliability are perceptions you want to encourage.

The example I quoted above might send the opposite message: it might say you are careless, you don't check important documents, you're in a hurry and you don't value your reputation.

Another example: the website of an international author and speaker promoted him as:

“one of the top leadership guru's in the world”

Now wouldn't you expect a guru - especially a top guru - to know the difference between plural and possessive?

If your words cause a raised eyebrow, even for a moment, they may be working against you rather than for you.

Print before proofing

A tip that can help eliminate those embarrassing mistakes is this: don't try to proof text on a computer screen. Print it off and proof the hard copy. Don't ask me why, but it's a lot easier to spot mistakes on printed copy than it is on a screen.

So far we've looked at the impact of the written word on your brand. Exactly the same points apply to the way you speak. Often the stakes are higher when you make a presentation or speech.

After all, 23 per cent of people in one poll said they feared public speaking more than death. And the comic actor, producer and after-dinner speaker George Jessel once said 'the human brain starts working the moment you are born, and never stops until you stand up to speak in public.'

Tips for speakers

In our [Talkitout™ Presentation Skills](#) courses we insist that the key to authentic speeches is using words that slide easily off the tongue.

Sounds obvious - but from our experience that's not the way most people prepare for a speech or presentation.

Most speeches and presentations are prepared in silence. The author sits hunched over a keyboard, staring at a blank screen, praying for inspiration. Slowly the words are pecked out on the keyboard; the sentences are evaluated by the eyes and the brain, and modified by the fingers.

The whole process by-passes the two most important organs - the mouth and the ears.

Too often we write in silence, rehearse in silence, and only speak the words aloud when we stand in front of an audience. Sadly, that's when too many people discover they can't speak some of the clunky words they've created. And they can't put emphasis into the long sentences they've written because they're too busy trying to find a place to draw a breath.

So the person who in private is bright and engaging offers in public a brand that is dull and formal.

Watch your language

Here's why we sometimes fall into that trap. We all draw on two different vocabularies. There's one we use when we speak: we use smaller words, simpler expressions and we tend to wrap them in short sentences or maybe just fragments of sentences.

When we write we draw on a larger vocabulary. This is the one with the grander words, the ones with more syllables; we work harder to find synonyms and antonyms; and we wrap them all in longer, more complex sentences. Sometimes we play tricks with our written sentences. We invert them. We write 'Born in the USA, she moved to Canada at the age of 12.' We never do that in conversation.

A problem arises when we use the grander vocabulary and some of these written-word devices when we are speaking. It doesn't work. The words sound wrong. The sentences are too long. And we sense that we are losing the connection with the audience.

Of course we are. The audience came to hear us speak. They didn't come to have us read a letter or essay to them. The audience is used to hearing the spoken word and reading the written word. They are not used to hearing the written word read aloud.

Talk the words onto the page

So if part of your brand is being authentic, you need to change the way you prepare for a presentation or speech. Get the words out of your mouth before they come out of your fingers and onto the keyboard.

That's the essence of our TalkitOut™ Technique for speakers - and it works. If you want to see it in action, we have [videos](#) on our web site of clients [before and after](#) they learned the technique. Follow the [link](#) and click on any of the three Transformation videos. Each one is only 90 seconds.

Four more great tips

Are you using a sniper's rifle or a shotgun? Does your message go directly to its target? Or is it scattered and spattered against the side of the barn? This is all about focusing your thoughts clearly and narrowly. The more you try to say, the less the message sticks.

People will remember a couple of ideas. They may remember three. But if you add a fourth - they'll likely remember nothing. Strip your core message down to the essentials. Try to express it in 20 words or less. (That's about the length of the average television sound bite).

Are you sticky? If people pick up your newsletter or land on your webpage, will they stay and read more? Make sure you are talking about benefits rather than features. People are seeking you out because they want solutions to problems.

Make sure your copy clearly explains how you fix the problems and make the pain go away. We have to remind ourselves it's about the client - not about us. Which of these descriptions would persuade you to spend money:

“As a Certified Speaking Professional, Jimmy Cricket is one of the top ten per cent of speakers in Canada. His workshops take him around the world.”

or...

“Need to motivate your staff? Need to stop good people leaving? Jimmy Cricket has the answers you need.”

Are you miserly with words? You should be. As you write, imagine you have to pay a dollar for each word. These are tough times, so start saving those dollars. Strip out every word that isn't working hard. You'll be amazed how many words are not doing any heavy lifting. If the words are lazy, the message gets muddled and the brand gets diluted. You could write:

‘My mission is a simple one.’

But you could save a couple of dollars by writing:

‘My mission is simple.’

If you can save two words out of six, how many can you save out of sixty? Or six hundred? How much clearer and more muscular will your message be? A lot, I promise. Stripping out the clutter is the single quickest way to give your writing more impact. And that supports your brand.

Are you telling or selling? Facts tell but stories sell. Facts on their own are forgettable. Stories make information memorable. Stories let audiences know who you are and what you believe in. Are you telling people how good your product is? Or are you selling them on the story behind the making of the product?

E-Mail

We're all slaves to email now. But some people are victims of emails. At workshops we hear a lot of references to bosses or colleagues being rude, snarky, inappropriate - even humiliating - in public emails.

Here are the top two complaints:

1. Correcting an email in a group response - in a way that embarrasses the sender. (Think twice, and then think a third time, before hitting 'reply all'.)
2. Emails that have a disrespectful tone.

Studies of communication impact indicate that 93 per cent of your impact on another person is non verbal. But email has no body language. The reader cannot see your face or hear your tone of voice so chose your words carefully and thoughtfully. Put yourself in the other person's place and think how your words may come across.

Here are a few more email horrors you should avoid:

- **Forgetting the subject line**

It makes no sense to send a message that reads 'no subject'. We all get so much email these days. If you want your message to be read, take the time to put in a relevant and interesting subject line. The subject line is the hook.

- **Not personalizing the message**

OK, email is informal. But we should still start with some form of salutation. Without that simple courtesy, you may be perceived as

rude and cold.

- **Spelling, grammar and punctuation errors**

Letting mistakes slip through raises questions about how careful you are, your attention to detail, about whether you rush into print without checking. Don't simply rely on automatic spell-checkers. They're great, and you should use them. But they won't spot the difference between *their* and *there*. They won't save you if you wrote *insure* instead of *ensure*. The spell-check will tell you if the word is spelled correctly, but it won't tell you if it's the right word in the context in which you are using it.

For many people, emails are where they get an introduction to your brand. The damage done by a badly-written email is hard to overcome.

Business proposals

When it comes to the world of business, no communication is as critical as a proposal to a prospective client.

Here are five tips for making sure you have a dynamite proposal, in a logical structure that showcases your company and your credibility:

1. **Show you understand the client's problems.**

The lead paragraph should be a quick, clear statement of the customer's needs.

2. **Set out the solutions.**

Explain how you will fix the problems. Keep it simple and straightforward. No false modesty, but no promises you can't deliver.

3. **Identify benefits.**

Set out clearly the deliverables. ("As a result of our solutions, the customer will benefit by ...")

4. **Demonstrate credibility.**

This can be a make or break section. What makes you so good? Who have you worked for? What have you done? What testimonials do you have? What awards have you collected?

5. **Provide evidence.**

Do you have samples? Can you point to examples of your work elsewhere?

A crucial element of the business proposal is that it is clearly targeted at the intended audience. A lot of times you will hear me say ‘avoid jargon and go for simplicity’. This is one time I won’t say that. If your audience is technical, they may have certain expectations of the language. Speak to them in that language. Of course, if the audience is non-technical - stick with simple language.

News releases

You have things to talk about - ideas to promote - events to publicize. You have all the tools of the social media world to draw on. But a really effective way of reaching a very large audience is still through the news media.

Getting a story in the newspapers or on television is still a great way of getting publicity. And it’s free. Not only that. You pick up a little credibility by getting your stories in the media. It’s a powerful way of enhancing your brand.

But it can be really tough getting the media to pay attention to you. Here are a few tips from my perspective as a former journalist. I’ve worked in newspapers, radio and television. I’ve been a reporter, a producer and an executive.

First, accept that there may be a disconnect between what you want and what a newspaper or television station wants.

You want publicity - promotion. A newsroom wants a news story. They do not want to give you free advertising. That's what commercials are for.

So you need to give them something that looks and sounds like a news story, or can be incorporated into a news story.

- Adopt a news style of writing.
- Simple, no hype, no jargon, informal.
- If you can build it round a person - so much the better.
- It has to be new and different.
- It helps if there's a conflict in there somewhere - simply in terms of an obstacle being overcome. Journalists thrive on people bumping up against obstacles.
- Make it relevant to a broad audience.
- Keep it short.

People in newsrooms are busy. So help them:

- Write a headline that makes you go wow
- Write a first sentence that gets to the heart of what's new and exciting
- Put a human face into it - with people and quotes
- Put it in context - why it matters
- Emphasize why it's such an achievement
- Make sure the contact details are all included
- Try to keep it all on one page

Don't rely on faxes and emails. Lift up the phone. Make a call.

Identify your core values

Tiger Woods had an affair. And caused the public relations fiasco of the last couple of years.

Michael McCain's company sold a product that killed 22 people. Yet he's hailed as a hero of crisis communications.

What can we learn from the cases of Tiger Woods and Maple Leaf Foods? And from other communications disasters?

Why did Tiger Woods get it so wrong? On Day One he tried to minimize what he sought to dismiss as a 'minor car accident'. The next day he kept his head down while cops had to say they'd not been able to interview him, as they had planned.

The next day he posts a message on his web site. He admitted responsibility for the accident, and added some phrases "I'm human and I'm not perfect", "this is a private matter", "unfounded rumours about my family".

Day Four: he still has his head down - pulls out of tournament - cops say they've still not spoken to him. By the sixth day a girlfriend has gone public and Woods has put another message on his web site. He admits transgressions, and attacks the media for intrusion.

And so it kept building and building - and getting worse and worse for Woods. It was handled so badly it haunts him to this day.

Listeria was discovered in some products prepared by Maple Leaf Foods in Canada. People started to die. By the time the outbreak was over, 22 were dead. And many others had been sick.

Michael McCain, the company's CEO, immediately went on TV. He said:

"When listeria was discovered in the product, we launched immediate recalls to get it off the shelf, then we shut the plant down. Tragically our products have been linked to illnesses and loss of life. To Canadians who are ill and to the families who have lost loved ones, I offer my deepest sympathies. Words cannot begin to express our sadness for your pain . . .

“But this week, our best efforts failed and we are deeply sorry. This is the toughest situation we have faced in 100 years as a company. We know this has shaken your confidence in us; I commit to you that our actions are guided by putting your interests first.”

McCain’s response has been praised by PR professionals. And it’s been praised by academics who studied the way the crisis was handled. Everyone is agreed that it was a triumph because of a number of factors.

- The quick public statement of responsibility
- The quick action to limit the damage - plant shutdown, shelves cleared
- The public apology
- The fact there was no attempt to shift the blame

McCain was almost certainly under pressure to minimize liability. You can imagine the conversations... “we can’t say this” and “we shouldn’t say that”. But McCain has said he was driven by two considerations:

1. to do the right thing
2. to act in accordance with his core values

Maple Leaf Foods [core values](#) are posted on their web site. They include:

- Do what’s right
- Transparency
- Humility

The website explains the Maple Leaf Foods communication strategy as:

“...having the self confidence and courage to be completely candid and direct; willing to communicate openly in a trusting manner; acting with passion, conviction and personal humility.”

We should all ask ourselves:

- What are our core values?
- Have we written them out?
- Do we talk about them with our team?
- Does everyone on the team understand and follow them?

Figuring out those core values will help when you are creating messages. And they'll really help when you have to decide between following your head or your heart.

Spot the disconnect

Think of the last time you went into an up-market store and had a bad experience. Think of a store that promotes itself as caring and customer-friendly, but which disappointed you.

I think of a recent experience in a telephone store. I'm a long-standing customer, I'm upgrading to an expensive iPhone, and I'm not happy. Why? Because I heard racist comments from one sales assistant after a customer left. And when it was my turn to be 'helped' I heard "I don't know" three times and was told to check a web site for an answer.

Branding is only as good as the customer experience and perception. If there's a disconnect between the promise and the reality, no amount of expensive artwork will fix it.

The Podium Coaching Communication Mantra

In our Presentations Skills and Media Skills [workshops](#) we talk about our Communication Mantra:

1. Have something to say
2. Believe in it
3. Say it simply
4. Shut up

When you apply the first three points to your written or spoken words, you enhance your brand. But you have to make sure your staff understand point 2 and believe in what they are doing and saying.

You can train your staff to say words that look good on paper. But if they don't believe in the message, there will be no authenticity. And without authenticity, the words will harm rather than help your brand.

Afterword

These ideas come from our various [writing workshops](#). You can find out more by clicking [here](#).

By the way, if you want more free tips, sign up for our monthly [newsletter](#). It's packed with ideas to help you communicate better.

There are a couple of other resources you might try. One is our [blog](#). Another is our [Resources Page](#). You'll find plenty of ideas to improve your speaking, writing and media skills.

USEFUL LINKS

[Presentation Skills](#)

[Media Skills](#)

[Writing](#)

[Podium Coaching blog](#)

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