

## Secret Language

By Stuart White

For weeks now we've been bombarded by seasonal advertising. The copy all contains fuzzy, feel-good words and phrases to put us in the right spirit, such as 'festive fun and 'Christmas cheer' and there are lots of references to being with family and friends, the spreading of joy and showing how much you care. Carols have to be sung by candlelight, Christmas lunch is always a festive feast and everything has to be touchy-feely and warm. The bottom line, of course, is that we're supposed to spend, spend, spend but the money message is cleverly disguised by slick advertising copywriting which never actually refers to anything so vulgar.

Advertisers didn't invent jargon, they just perfected it and it's contagious. Every industry has its own buzzwords and new-speak and if you're familiar with the language you can pinpoint the profession with a fair amount of accuracy. A consultant friend told me that at a wedding recently she could tell that the best man was in the same line of work when he stood up to speak because his language was a dead giveaway. He used phrases like 'being on the same page', 'best practise' and 'paradigm' once too often - industry buzzwords that every 'consultant' (another buzzword!) uses over and over again but no-one really knows the meaning of.

But of course that's the whole point, isn't it? Every industry has a wealth of technical terms and jargon that when you look closely turn out to have vague or even contrary meanings. These buzzwords or fashion words are intended to impress one's audience with the pretense of knowledge so for this reason they are usually universal, non-specific and all-encompassing. They mean everything and nothing which makes them difficult to dispute, so much so that fuzzword' might better describe them!

Here are some that in business you must come across frequently. Quality - that elusive Holy Grail of product and service, a word so revered that it's incorporated into almost every company mission / vision statement somewhere, whether their work does or not. Solution - a useful word which has been raped repeatedly and is now as ubiquitous and meaningless as quality. Many businesses use it to describe their products: thus, fixing the hole in the roof and throwing in a new piece of guttering at the same time becomes a "roofing solution".

And when managers are looking for a way forward' (meaning they've no idea where to start) they can claim to be actively seeking a satisfactory solution. Work in progress – still no idea where to start but it sounds like something is being done. Action list - like a to-do list, but more gung-ho and impressive and an essential tool when you're looking for a way forward. Visioning - what used to be called forecasting and a good example of how little regard for the rules of syntax the proponents of buzzwords have, as in Negatively impact - still the example par excellence of managerial newspeak nonsense and more bad grammar.

If negatively impact means harm or damage, why not use one of these fine, transparent words in the first place? Well, if consultancy types did it might become clear that they were stating the obvious and that would negatively impact their ability to charge thousands of pula per day. The one that really drives me mad however is the word 'strategic'. We are supposed to develop strategic relationships, have strategic goals and objectives and approach marketing, finance and sales from a strategic perspective. And what does it really mean? Simply put, well planned, as if anything less would be acceptable from top management!

The recruitment game itself has its fair share of language idiosyncrasies. Let's take an example of typical JOB SEARCH jargon... Competitive Salary (meaning we remain competitive by paying less than our competitors) Having gone through a process of re-engineering (the company is in turmoil). Challenging environment (problems abound.) You must be an ambitious self starter (you're definitely on your own) with forward looking ideas (you will need a crystal ball) but with ability to focus (look for short term solutions and profits) and, my all time favorite and I've used this myself, A rare opportunity (nobody is much interested in this job).

But the masters of jargon and spin must surely be real estate agents who fluently speak an esoteric code that they all understand perfectly but which they take great pains never to let the buying public decipher. This is well explained in the best selling book Freakonomics. The phrase "well maintained" is as full of meaning to an estate agent as DEFCON1 is to a Pentagon Chief; to them it means that a house is old but not quite falling down but to a buyer it implies that it's in great nick and to the 75 year old owner of the house it's a compliment, which is just what the canny agent intended.

If a house is described as stunning or fantastic that probably refers more to the price! Or what about 'a charming house in a great neighbourhood?' You sort of get the feeling the house doesn't have any attributes worth describing but it's surrounded by lots of places that do. Then of course there is – a great buy, meaning it's cheaper than anything else in the market (but there must be a reason), easily-maintained garden (refers to the window box), compact living space (couldn't swing a cat in it) and needs some tender loving care which loosely translated means roll up your sleeves cos over the next few years you are going to be up to your eyeballs in DIY and debt.

And let's not forget acronyms. These are everywhere in the world of non- governmental organisations (NGO's), so much so that we've almost forgotten how to form full sentences ..... "We have just had our general AGM (Annual General Meeting), in attendance was UNICEF, WHO and UNDP where we mapped out our AWP (Annual Work Plan), which also combined an AR (Annual Review) and also R&D (Research and Development) initiatives implemented by our local CBO's (Community-Based Organisations), who are currently awaiting completion of their MOU's for the HIV/AIDS partnership network.

This downsizing and downgrading of words isn't limited to the workplace. SMS talk has taken over the world and youngsters now have their own shortened version of the English language beginning with the new verb 'to text', meaning a form of cellphone semaphore which reduces a msg (message) to its lowest common denominator and makes phonetic spelling look positively erudite. "C u 2moro sorry 4got to call you bk, cn gt thru, ur phne is nt wking, L8tr." Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practise to receive!

But there's light at the end of the tunnel and you no longer need to be out on a limb or feel that we've opened another can of worms in gobbledegook land. Just take a trip down memory lane to the good old days when language wasn't dressed up to the nines but plain as a pikestaff and we called a spade a spade. Cos lets face it, jargon and buzzwords are here today and gone tomorrow and clichés should be avoided like the plague. After all, 'tis the season to be jolly so enjoy some festive cheer and let's talk turkey

Managing Director

HRMC

Phone: 395 1640

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