



How to Confuse Everybody

By Dr. Kathleen Begley, Book Author and Professional Speaker

Note to Readers: Here's another offbeat blogletter on business communication and current events from Write Company Plus, a corporate communications training firm located outside Philadelphia. In respect for your busy schedule, writers and editors have arranged seven at-a-glance ideas at the end of this article. Skip directly there if you lack the time to read the entire document.

The other day, while driving along a road near my home, I noticed a big sign outside a Jaguar-Land Rover car dealership. "Certified pre-owned vehicles," the sign boasted. I blanked out mentally for a few moments as I tried to understand the meaning of those words. "Oh yeah, nice used cars," I translated in my head.

For years, I have questioned the tendency of a wide range of industries to use euphemisms to make things sound different – usually better – than they are. From corporations: "Downsizing" for firing perfectly innocent people to increase profits. From medicine: "Non-compliant" for talking about patients who never follow the doctor's instructions. From funeral homes: "Pre-need arrangements" for paying for your own burial before you kick the bucket. From financial institutions: "Serving high-net-worth clients" for catering only to the filthy rich. From government: "Enhanced interrogation techniques" for torturing suspected terrorists in hidden prisons.

My curiosity about such terms stems from the fact that they have been under criticism for decades – and yet persist. In his book 1984, author George Orwell called such language "doublespeak." The recently deceased comedian George Carlin made euphemisms an integral part of his comedy act. The late NBC newscaster Edwin Newman wrote a best-selling book on the subject almost a half century ago.

So why do euphemisms continue to flourish in organizations around the country? I suspect it's because they feed into human beings' desires to avoid being bearers of bad news. Take a look at this quote from Sally Raskoff, who writes in "Everyday Sociology Blog" on the Internet. "Whether we are aware of it or not, we all work to construct the most positive impression of ourselves as possible," Raskoff writes. "Word choice is one way we do this. Global warming became recast as climate change by those who didn't want to change environmental policy. "

Pretend for a moment that you're a physician caring for an extremely sick person. Would you be more comfortable telling the family that the patient "is dying" or "has inoperative cancer; is dying quickly" or "approaching the end"; "has a disease with no cure" or "needs palliative care?" I suspect option two would be less disconcerting for most doctors.

While I tend to be critical of verbal cover-ups, I'm open to the idea that I may be wrong. In fact. It has happened before. I'm seriously thinking about euphemizing some terms I use promoting my communications training business. You may want to jump onboard, too. Some ideas:

Brag about your mission. In my opinion, landscapers, florists, and nurseries have the perfect opportunity to boast about their "green" operations. Considering that my parents were born in Ireland, I may start doing the same thing. Green by any other name is still green, correct?

Rename your product. The automotive industry could have used terms such as "large sedans" or "small trucks" to describe "sports utility vehicles." But it doesn't have the same ring, does it? In line with this thinking, perhaps I should change the term "workshop" to "funshop." Who wants more tedious stuff to do in a class on change management or customer service.



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Describe time frames advantageously. In recent years, dentists have begun promising “teeth in a day.” That description, which entails insertion of mini-implants, usually works only if you already have dentures and still have healthy gums. I often describe my offering as one-day seminars. Now I’m wondering if classes “of a few fast-moving hours” would sound better.

Avoid one-size-fits-all terminology. Just about no one wants to buy cookie-cutter products and services sold to every Tom, Dick and Harriet. But what if you, like I, have a business where you simply are unable to make a profit if you customize each job? I probably should talk about off-the-shelf seminars as “proven” and “tested” instead of being rolled out for the first time to a demanding client.

Downplay money. If you’re a jeweler, you may want to switch from discussing the “cost” of wedding rings to emphasizing an “investment” in your marriage. What do you think of my telling training prospects that my most popular writing class has a \$3,000 value rather than a \$3,000 price tag?

Pump up the staff. I know hundreds of small businesses without a single employee. Many use temporaries, contractors, and vendors to handle unexpected or large orders. Yet they describe the people to clients with terms such as “my team.” To imply that I’m a massive global organization, I obviously need to step up my description of my three dogs as “the best co-workers I’ve ever had.”

Recast your personal image. Chances are that you’re among the bazillion of Americans currently looking for a job. If you’re on the shady side of 50, you’re undoubtedly familiar with euphemistic terms such as “seasoned” and “veteran” to downplay your age. Personally, I plan to push euphemisms a step further in projecting a youthful, dynamic, high-energy image for myself. In other words, when it comes to age, I’m going to flat-out lie. . . oops, I mean speak euphemistically.

Dr. Kathleen Begley owns and operates Write Company Plus communications training outside Philadelphia. She has written seven books and gives corporate seminars on topics such as writing persuasively, presenting confidently, and managing positively. You can call her at 610-429-1562 or e-mail her at KBegley@writecompanyplus.com. She responds to everybody.