

Emotion-Packed Words

“Sticks and stones can break your bones, but words can make your blood boil.” -Cullen Hightower

The words we use can hurt others and cause tension and resentment. Words can even cause wars. Humans tend to create and use words that hurt, label, or call names. Hitler used labeling and name-calling during his rule in Germany. He called the Jews many negative things, including vermin, sludge, garbage, lice, sewage, and insects. Labels extend far beyond the names people are given into the way we describe things in a negative light, for example, broken home, single-parent family, or blended family. While we think of these terms as essentially neutral, to those people to whom the terms apply, the words can carry significant negative weight.

As you design your persuasive message, you must consider the emotional impact of each word and phrase. When you want to create emotion, choose words that will trigger feelings. If you want to downplay the event or situation, use an unemotional word. Notice the following words generally have the same definition but carry different emotional weight, for example, calling someone thrifty versus cheap, traditional versus old-fashioned, extroverted versus loud, careful versus cowardly, and eccentric versus strange.

There are many words that are emotionally loaded and represent different values to different people. These words can get people to pay attention and alert them to know what significance the message has for them. It is hard to find a neutral word. Your word choice will paint different pictures for different people because the way we define words is based on our belief systems, our past experiences, and our social roles.

The beliefs we hold about a word will dictate our actions and how we respond. Some cultures view death as a celebration of life; others view death as a tragedy. Depending on where you live in this country, the following words have different connotations: Republican/Democrat, Freedom/War, Union/Right to Work, or Right to Arms/Gun Control. These words trigger different responses depending on your life experiences.

Sometimes, if used improperly, positive words can still lead to a negative response. For this reason, persuaders will often avoid certain words, although generally positive, and instead use words that may still bear positive associations, but are more ambiguous. For example, in the world of politics we hear phrases like “freedom of choice,” “fiscal responsibility,” or “responsible taxation.” When politicians use such generalities, people of differing viewpoints can actually both be appeased. They will fill in the blanks and provide their own definitions.

We can give words emotional color by lengthening or shortening them. Generally, shorter words are more blunt, direct, harsh, or sharp. Consider words like kick, hit, force, stop, or no. Longer words, like lonely, depressed, or painful, are drawn out to evoke colors of melancholy or suffering.

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