

## Word Choice

Understand that proper language varies from setting to setting, and from event to event. One word choice does not work in every circumstance. Word choice can also be critical to defusing situations and in getting people to accept your point of view. Even one word can make the difference in perception and acceptance. In a study by Harold Kelley, students were given a list of qualities describing a guest speaker they were about to hear. Each student read from either one of the following two lists:

1. Cold, industrious, critical, practical, and determined
2. Warm, industrious, critical, practical, and determined

Of course, the students who read number one had less than positive feelings about the speaker. The interesting thing, though, was that the lists were exactly the same except for one word! It seemed that the differing word's placement at the head of the list conditioned how the reader felt in reading through the rest of the list. It didn't matter that none of the following words were negative. Just reading the word "cold" tainted how the students read the rest of the list.

The airline industry has mastered the power of words. They know word choice is critical to getting their point across and to reducing panic. In one situation, a flight attendant had run out of steak as an option for dinner entrée. Instead of telling the customers their only option was chicken, the flight attendant said, "You can have a piece of marinated chicken breast, sautéed in mushrooms in a light cream sauce, or a piece of beef." Consequently, people chose the chicken because it sounded better. I was on a plane once, getting ready to take off, and as we prepared to leave the runway, one of the engines caught on fire. Smoke billowed and the runway was suddenly filled with fire trucks. The pilot came on and called it "slight engine difficulties." I don't know about you, but the situation seemed like a little more than "slight" to me.

When you listen to the flight attendants' instructions before take off, you also hear great word choice. They tell you that in the event of a water landing, your seat cushion can be used as a flotation device. Hello! What they're really saying is, "If we crash into water, grab your seat cushion so you don't drown." Notice they don't say life preserver, but rather they call it a flotation device. Also note that there is no "barf bag" on board – it's a motion discomfort bag. Or "we are experiencing a mechanical difficulty" instead of "the plane is broken." They don't clean the plane; they refresh it. Planes aren't late; they're merely delayed. And, my personal favorite, they never lose my luggage. They misplace it. Yes, airlines know the power of word choice in affecting their customers' point of view.

Sales professionals also use words carefully. They know that one wrong word can send their prospect's mind somewhere else and lose them the sale. Some examples of language that salespeople use to help diffuse a potentially tense situation include the following:

***Words That Repel***

Contract  
Sign Here  
Sell/Buy  
Cancellation  
Salesperson  
Commission  
Cost  
Credit Card  
Problem  
Expensive  
Objections  
Cheaper  
Service Charge

***Better Words***

Agreement/Paperwork  
OK the Paperwork  
Get Involved  
Right of Rescission  
Business Consultant  
Fee for My Services  
Investment  
Form of Payment  
Challenge  
Top of the Line  
Areas of Concern  
More Economical  
Processing Fee

Language also has a strong bearing on how we remember certain details. For example, in a 1979 study conducted by Loftus, when defendants were asked how fast they were driving when they “smashed” into the other car as opposed to “hit” the other car, much higher speeds were reported. In another study, subjects were asked if they had headaches “frequently” or “occasionally” and how many per week. Those who were interviewed with the word “frequently” reported 2.2 headaches per week, while those interviewed with the word “occasionally” reported only 0.7 per week.

In another study, one group of individuals was asked if they thought the U.S. should *allow* public speeches against democracy, while another group was asked if they thought the U.S. should *forbid* public speeches against democracy. Although they bear similar implications, notice the word choice makes them contrary of each other. Still, one might think the answers would be similar, since they drive at the same point. Because of the more forceful language and tone of the second question, however, there was a much higher response to forbid versus allow.

Have you ever noticed all those commercials currently on the air for pharmaceutical companies? They portray all these wonderful benefits and use a soothing, sophisticated voice to highlight these benefits. Then, at the end of the commercial, they have to run through all the negative side effects: vomiting, headache, diarrhea, etc. But they read through these negatives quickly using the same pleasant voice! The effect is that negatives are de-emphasized, and we, as viewers, are still left with an overall positive impression.