



The three of us were on our way to a wedding—mom, dad and home-from-college-for-the-weekend daughter. In response to a particularly tantalizing tidbit of gossip, the college student exclaimed, “Shut up!” Mom went ballistic for a few seconds until it was explained that the two seemingly offensive words were really an exclamation — “You don’t mean it!” or “Are you serious?”

It isn’t just generational lines that form generational walls. The meaning of words is a significant problem in business—particularly when it comes to employee and customer communications, marketing and sales.

Is making a “thing” out of words really worth it? Absolutely. If employees don’t use words the same way, they can’t go in the same direction. If words confuse customers, they react negatively.

CEOs often talk about “enhancing shareholder value.” What do the words mean? In many instances, they’re used to announce layoffs. Or, take “competitively priced.” Does this term send a specific, understandable message or is it just used because someone feels it’s necessary to make a price statement? Including “your satisfaction guaranteed” may make management nervous. What do the words mean? Are there as many definitions as there are customers? Will they open a virtual Pandora’s Box of costly complaints?

Then, of course, there’s the most frequently-used term of all—“full-service.” Although it appears everywhere in ads, flyers and brochures does it really carry a message? It’s one of those “catch-all” terms that’s bereft of meaning. If a company’s employees don’t have an accurate understanding of “full service,” how can they deliver on the promise? If a company’s employees lack a common understanding of the meaning of “quality,” how can they deliver on a common expectation of quality?

As he took off on his Harley-Davidson bike, a perceptive University of Wyoming professor said, “Those who say they know what they mean, but can’t say it, don’t know what they mean.” Far too often, we don’t know what we

## Using Words the Same Way

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mean when we speak—and that costs us customers, sales and credibility. To persist in assuming everyone understands the words we use, a simple exercise can reveal just where we are with our words.

**Measuring the mission statement.** It seems as if CEOs are enamored of mission statements. Never leave the office without it. There’s a flurry of activity and countless meetings until the wording (which is often plagiarized from other mission statements) is finalized and quickly

printed on everything from walls to the backs of business cards. But what impact do the words have on employee behavior? How do they translate into better service and increased sales?

*Exercise #1: Ask employees, customers, management and directors to write three or four paragraphs of how they understand the company’s mission statement or mission.*

**Understanding the corporate culture.** In some companies, the culture is quickly apparent, while in others it may be less well defined. When acquisitions occur, however, the differences in culture can surface almost instantly. One firm that made four acquisitions in a matter of two years assigned a seasoned executive to work on developing a common language to facilitate a common culture.

*Exercise #2: Ask employees, customers, management and directors to describe their understanding of the corporate culture.*

**Recognizing a company’s core values.** While a discussion of mission statements and corporate culture seems more obvious, “core values” deserve even more attention. They often lurk, unarticulated, below the surface of business activity, holding sway over the way every aspect of a business operates. For example, while a company may say publicly that it’s “customer focused,” everyone knows that doing whatever it takes to make a sale is the real “core value.”

*Exercise #3: Ask employees, customers, management and directors to share their perception of the company’s three most important values and what each one means?*

**Answering the customer’s question.** We may think we understand what’s going on in our customers’ heads, but our perception may be more distorted than we would like to think. Asking one question can help expand our understanding of what customers are thinking and how that compares to our views.

*Exercise #4: Ask employees, customers, management and directors to answer the question: “Why do customers buy from us?”*

**The heart of the company.** Is there a common thread that binds everyone together, including employees,



customers, management and directors? Is it an idea, a way of doing business, a feeling or is it something else? Is it positive or even possibly negative?

Exercise #5: *What is the one quality that everyone in our company—employees, management, customers and directors—all agree on—and why?*

The objective of this five-question exercise is to find out if the road map (the words we use) matches the actual territory. While we all approach jobs, ideas, opportunities, the future and problems from an individual perspective, a shared understanding gives a business an accurate picture of itself and where it's going.

Can this exercise in understanding help a company improve its customer relations and better focus its marketing and sales? Absolutely. Consider all the letters and e-mail messages that go out every day. Do they send a common message? One division of a company sent out a fax blast with a message that portrayed the company in a way that undermined the image it was attempting to develop with customers and prospects. If it had not been caught by a consultant (someone from the outside), the message would have hit thousands of customers.

It's not surprising that the most common question asked by Disney World visitors is "Where's the restroom?" But the number two question might cause us to scratch our heads:

"What time does the two o'clock parade start?" Even though the answer may seem obvious, Disney people take the question seriously. Those asking it may mean "What time does the two o'clock parade pass *here*?" Or just as likely, "When can we expect to see Mickey?" We talk about making sure everyone is "on the same page." That's an important issue, of course. But to get there everyone must use the same "dictionary."

There was a time when you checked into a hospital, the admitting person asked, "What is your religious preference?" At least in some medical facilities, incoming patients are asked a less invasive question: "How important is religion to you?" Sensitivity to personal privacy may be driving the change. If the patient responds, "Very important," then there are more questions. Just the way a question is asked creates a feeling about the institution.

What does this have to do with a business? A business administrator asked an advertising agency to meet with him regarding an upcoming project. When he was told that the only available date was almost two months out, he decided not to get together with the firm. The words told him everything he needed to know.

The medical profession seems to recognize that the right words can reduce patient complaints. For example, both physicians and nurses are taking time to explain procedures slowly and clearly, indicating what to expect.

The words are great medicine when it comes to reducing stress and the number of telephone calls, while increasing patient satisfaction.

Then there are the words on a résumé. Most people list a detailed employment history. Is the reader left to figure out what that means? What about specific skill sets, areas of experience and competence? If they are not described, it's as if they don't exist.

There's also the résumé cover letter. Most read as if "one size fits all." They're devoid of anything interesting, exciting and alive. There are no word pictures. A *Wall Street Journal* columnist tells of a woman who finally figured it out and poured her soul out in the cover letter, even saying to the prospective employer, "This is my dream job." Passion is missing in most letters. And that takes the right words.

What's the next step? Take words seriously by having everyone in the company participate in the five-question exercise. Then, have a representative group of five to 10 people review and analyze the responses. Once that's accomplished, ask them to prepare a brief report on their findings that also includes a plan for involving the entire company community in a discussion of the issues.

If everyone in a company uses the same words the same way, chances are that everyone will be going in the same direction with a sense of what everyone wants—a mission.