

The Power of Your Words

It is an exciting time to be in the communications business—selling and speaking. The burgeoning field of neuroscience is working its way into most professions, especially sales. Neuroscientists are using sophisticated brain imaging technology to peek inside our brains as our minds work. Their findings are yielding fascinating insights that can benefit salespeople in their messaging. We now have hard-science proof that what you say and how you say it predisposes the buyer to your message.

Everyone knows or suspects that projecting a negative attitude affects other people. We now have scientific evidence that your negativism releases stress-inducing hormones in the sender's brain as well as the receiver of the messaging. This negativism is reflected in words and non-verbal signals. A simple frown can induce anxiety and irritability in the receiver of your message. Couple that with a negative comment and you have relationship kryptonite.

Negative thinking is self-perpetuating. The more you do, the more difficult it is to stop. The negativism feeds on itself. Negative words, because they are emotionally tagged, do even more damage. Fear-provoking and stress-inducing words (risk, failure, accident, illness, death, unsafe, mortality, and no) send alarm messages to that area of the brain that trigger the fight or flight mechanism. This center in the brain is ever-vigilant for perceived threats.

One of my clients sells a hybrid feed for fish. One of their stated benefits is a “lower mortality rate.” Mortality is a fear-inducing word. A better way to frame this is a “higher survival rate.” Another company found that buyers perceived 95% fat-free milk as healthier than 5% fat, even though it is the same product. When you present “less downtime” as a benefit, “downtime” is a negative image trigger word. It is not perceived as a benefit. It evokes fears of downtime.

Compounding negative words is how you present them. If you project a less-than-confident attitude about your pricing as you present a price increase, you will guarantee its failure. The words “increase” (versus adjustment) coupled with negative non-verbal signals ensure that you will struggle to make the price change stick.

People who communicate professionally must become serious students of language. Words and gestures are tools of the trade. I fear we have gotten sloppy with our communication but remain hopeful and optimistic we can get better. Sales training is all about getting better. I know we can improve our messaging. Selecting carefully the words we use to communicate our value and consciously attending to the attitude we project will make us more effective messengers.

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