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Poets, Priests, and Politicians

Steve Portigal
Portigal Consulting
steve@portigal.com

Poets, priests, and politicians
Have words to thank for their
positions
Words that scream for your
submission
And no one's jamming their
transmission...

De do do do, de da da da
Is all I want to say to you
De do do do, de da da da
They're meaningless and all that's
true

—*Sting, "De Do Do Do, De Da Da Da," Zenyatta Mondatta, 1980*

In "The Persuaders," a 2004 episode of PBS's "Frontline," Douglas Rushkoff profiled Frank Luntz, a consultant who helps political and corporate clients identify the words that generate support for a client's goals. Luntz (and his clients in the Republican party) reframed "estate tax" as "death tax" and "global warming" as "climate change." Of course, we're increasingly exposed to rhetoric in the arenas of marketing

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and politics. It's easy to be cynical and dismissive of relabeling. "It's a feature, not a bug," has long been a cliché in software and technology development, and we are perhaps less likely to examine the possibilities that lie along that tension: the power of words in the process of understanding people and creating new things for them.

A few years ago, I took a client into the field to study how families were using home entertainment technology. We met one family in which the father was visibly proud of his provider role, especially regarding technology. On multiple occasions he mispronounced TiVo, the up-and-coming digital video recorder brand, as "tie-vo." Without looking, I could feel my client (an engineer) wince every time the father did this. But being a good interviewer, I reflected back the language our respondent was using, and in my follow-up questions, I also referred to "tie-vo." When my client asked the family a question later in the session, he was physically unable to use the "wrong" pronunciation, and referred to TiVo as "tee-vo." At that moment, the dynamic in the room shifted critically. The family leader had been shown up by some visitors, and suddenly we were the experts, not him. The interview wasn't ruined, but after that we were sorely limited in how far we could go. Even the mere pronunciation of a word impacted the interaction.

In contrast, consider my sister, who works as a genetic counselor. Part of her job involves advising patients about the results of genetic tests. These people want to know if they have "the gene" for hereditary breast cancer or hereditary colon cancer. But to a medical professional, the indications on our DNA that we are subject to some disease are known as mutations. In popular culture, of course, we know mutants as horrifying (if tragically

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misunderstood) freaks, and who would want to be associated with that, especially when a health care professional is advising you of a newly revealed condition? Yet the term "mutation" is going to come up regularly for the patient as they move through the health care system, and the genetic counselor has an opportunity, if not a responsibility, to prepare them for that experience by explaining and normalizing that word. If they present things as simply and with as little drama as possible, they simply defer the patient's inevitable encounter with the notion of mutation. If they utilize the term, they have to complicate their counseling session with an additional term to be explained and demystified. The professional has to look for learning moments when the right usage of certain words can arm the patient for future experiences. We encountered an analogous issue with a client who was preparing to launch a product with a number of automatic

configuration features. They believed these features would save customers time, but those customers told us they liked that these features would help them get it right the first time, thus reframing the benefit as "smart" rather than "fast." Our challenge was to help them understand the difference and to shift their marketing emphasis.

A colleague who manages large teams talks about his staff (as well as himself) in terms of "strengths" and "development opportunities." I was taken aback the first time I heard it, but he eventually called attention to his choice of words, acknowledged that they had a bit of an overly earnest flavor, but that by choosing not to talk about his "weaknesses," he felt he was more empowered to address them. He used an awkward choice of words to create that learning moment, and I could imagine him explaining to his reports why he wanted to use that language. In this case, the story behind the

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word choice has more power than mere rhetoric, and the interactions to which the choice of words leads can support his goals as a manager.

In my consulting practice, when developing a work plan to share with clients, I go back and forth between using methodological jargon such as "photojournal" and using more plainspoken alternatives such as "having people take pictures of their daily lives." While "photojournal" is hardly a complex term, and used in context it's probably pretty clear, it still isn't as descriptive as the other. But there's value in describing an approach with a proper title: it lends credibility to the recommendation. How do I find the right balance between expertise and accessibility? It's a tension I negotiate constantly.

The late George Carlin built his entire career out of highlighting the cultural baggage that gets attached to words and phrases.

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He managed to offend a lot of people in the process, but that only made his case stronger. The way we use words says a lot about us, and sometimes what's revealed is awfully silly, yet true ("In baseball the object is to go home! And to be safe!"). But without Carlin or his equivalent, we are compelled to deal with words as they are presented, with all their hidden implications, promises, and expectations. For example, as fans of the show "Rescue Me," we were disappointed by the delay of the fifth season until March 2009 (thanks to the writer's strike), but were intrigued to learn about the online release of a number of minisodes. I hadn't heard the word "minisode" before, but I interpreted it as a contraction of "mini" and "episode," suggesting some brief narrative. I watched some of the minisodes and found them lacking in any story development, just a collection of context-free scenes with the familiar characters acting as they do. Rather than any form

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of episodes, these were obviously scenes that were shot for past episodes and perhaps edited to stand alone. We've learned, through DVDs, what deleted scenes look and feel like, and it's nothing like a mini-episode. The producers and marketers of "Rescue Me" identified the most desirable label but failed to accurately set expectations, thus setting up a disappointing experience. I can hear Carlin's self-satisfied character intoning, "But these aren't outtakes, these are minisodes…"

As professionals with titles on business cards, departments we deliver to, and professional organizations to which we seek legitimizing memberships, we're probably quite familiar with the death spiral of naming just what it is we do. Maybe you're fat and sassy as a "senior interaction designer," but pretty soon you're going to need to become a "senior user experience designer," and not that long ago

you may have been a "junior human factors engineer," a "junior interface designer," or a "usability specialist." One firm I worked for insisted on branding the practice as HID (for Human-Interface Design), which really was a pretty useless (confusing, nonstandard) branding, especially if we had to say it out loud. The struggle to respin discipline/department/ professional organization nomenclature does very little beyond giving administrators something they can sink their teeth into amidst so much of the ambiguity that is necessary given the nature of our work.

Now once we agree with our hearts, minds, or wallets on a word that has the right associations, we can be prepared to have that word jammed down our throat. When plastic bottles of drinking water (a disastrously evil product on several levels) are presented as green (i.e., the Eco-shape™ bottle from Arrowhead), well, it's time for another word: greenwashing.

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Maybe we need regulatory controls on buzzwords to keep them at their original potency once they are unleashed into the environment.

Or how's about the latest whipping boy: innovation? Innovation seems like a valid pursuit and a value that we want to believe in, but it's been overused so ridiculously that it has lost most of its meaning. Maybe we need regulatory controls on buzzwords to keep them at their original potency once they are unleashed into the environment. We're gradually realizing that the overuse of antibiotics turns penicillin into pea soup. But will we ever clue in that labeling everything from an iPhone knockoff to a flavor of cupcake frosting to tire treads as innovative is simply creating tomorrow's faded, jaded concept (TQM, anyone?). And if we can't talk about it without evoking winces, we will have a harder time championing it.

Making the right choices in terms of wording is often not obvious. But we should be mindful of the power that our choice of language can have on interactions, whether our goal is to unblock, inform, inspire, reassure, or influence.

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Steve Portigal is the founder of Portigal Consulting, a boutique agency that helps companies discover and act on new insights about their customers and themselves.

Steve has been studying customer behavior and corporate culture for more than a decade and has advised dozens of clients on the creation of new products, services, and innovation processes.

Steve speaks and writes about consumer research, innovation, design, and contemporary culture. For a complete list of speaking engagements and publications, visit www.portigal.com/about-us/

If you'd like more information on Portigal Consulting, contact Steve at (415) 894-2001 or steve@portigal.com

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