

THE STRATEGIC POWER OF POSITIVE LANGUAGE

One of the great epiphanies for communicators is the recognition of how destructive negative language is and how powerful, controlling, and strategic positive words are.

Contrary to popular belief and much pr mythology, negative stories and headlines are generally driven by the negative language, stories, and examples spokespersons use – verbally but also in writing. You might have noticed that even the best interview often results in a story with a negative slant simply because a single negative phrase was used. Reporters and adversaries habitually and intentionally phrase their questions and information requests in negative ways that demand negative responses.

Another negative speech habit is to talk in double and compound negatives, perhaps because spokespersons mistakenly assume that more than one negative creates a positive result: “It’s wasn’t our intent to not seem sensitive.” “You can’t believe that we didn’t care.” “Don’t be silly; he won’t really care.” “No problem, it won’t be any trouble at all.” “Certainly not. Please don’t hesitate to call.” “We had no idea it wouldn’t work.” “I don’t disagree.” “Change doesn’t come without a price.”

The critical reality of positive language is that if you wish to establish a pattern of long-term improvement in relationships, and control the conversation and the environment in which communication takes place, it is positive language that gives you control of your destiny, your opposition, and the distractions on your way to victory.

What is it about negative language that makes negative words so destructive?

1. Negative language is non-communication

If I say to you, “That’s not how we do it,” or, “That’s meaningless,” what have you learned? I’ve probably put you off because the answer is somewhat accusatory, like you should have known more than you did.

2. Negative language is destructive

If I say to you, “You’re wrong,” you are now a victim. I haven’t provided information that would help you know what is right. Even if I follow that comment with some useful, positive information, chances are that you’ll have difficulty hearing it because I have seriously insulted or hurt you, and you are licking your wounds, not listening to me.



PRODUCT DETAILS

Newsletter: 4 pages

Language: English

Price: \$5.00 U.S.

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James E. Lukaszewski (loo-ka-SHEV-skee) advises, coaches, and counsels the men and women who run very large corporations and organizations. He is an expert in managing and counteracting tough, touchy, sensitive corporate communications issues. The fastest growing portion of his practice involves civil and criminal litigation. He is one of the few who can and truly does coach CEOs.

He is a prolific author (several books, hundreds of articles), lecturer (corporate, college and university), coach, and counselor. He is quoted in publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Miami Herald*, the *Harvard Business Review*, and industry trade journals. He is a columnist, advisor, or editor for almost every major public relations periodical. His 1992 book, *Influencing Public Attitudes: Strategies that Reduce the Media's Power*, remains a classic work in the field of direct communication. He is an internationally recognized speaker on crisis management, ethics, media relations, public affairs, and reputation preservation and restoration. Visiting his Web site, www.e911.com, is like attending the University of Crisis Management.

An accredited member of the International Association of Business Communicators (ABC) and the Public Relations Society of America (APR), Mr. Lukaszewski is a member of the PRSA's College of Fellows (Fellow PRSA) and Board of Ethics & Professional Standards. He served as a crisis communications advisor to the International Disaster Advisory Committee, Agency for International Development, Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance from 1989 to 1992, and is a civilian advisor to several other federal agencies. He lectures annually at the U.S. Marine Corp's East Coast Commander's Media Training Symposium and was the second recipient of its Drew Middleton Award. He is the recipient of both Ball State University's 2004 National Public Relations Achievement Award and the 2004 Patrick Jackson Award for Distinguished Service to PRSA, and is among the winners of the 2005 *PR News* Lifetime Achievement Award. His name appeared in *Corporate Legal Times* as one of "28 Experts to Call When All Hell Breaks Loose," and in *PR Week* as one of 22 "crunch-time counselors who should be on the speed dial in a crisis."