

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.

3. **Negative language causes defensiveness (yours)**

Once I've told you, "That's not the way we do it," or, "It won't work," if I care about you at all, I know I haven't communicated, I know it's not what you wanted to hear, therefore I feel that I must now do something to overcome my non-communication. This is what defensiveness is, a feeling of inadequacy brought on primarily by incomplete, negative, stupid, or erroneous communication.

4. **Negative language drives communication out of control**

As soon as I say, "That's not the way we think," what are your options as a victim responder? You'll ask me why not, why isn't it, and why won't we? These are all negative responses, which drive communication even further off any positive, productive track. Your situation is now sliding into the verbal ditch. You are out of control, and you can feel it.

5. **Negative language causes a kind of intellectual deafness**

Reporters, protestors, activists, and angry opponents seem to need negative language. In fact, the fulfillment of their mission revolves around the use of it. When they get negative language in response, the communication immediately becomes driven by it and its power to continue, even expand conflict. It is impossible to be positive enough to punch through the negative shield, once it has formed.

The news media especially use negative language as a means of balancing almost any positive news or information:

- Man Lands On The Moon, But Cost Overruns Mar The Occasion
- Life-Saving Medication Introduced Today In Cleveland, 17 Deaths During Clinical Trials Raise Questions

- Religious Icon Rises From The Dead, Relationship With Prostitute In Previous Life Under Investigation

6. **Negative language never brings closure**

Negative language is used in the mistaken belief that a negative response somehow brings closure to allegations, assertions, and negative questions. The actual affect is just the opposite.

Besides, when challenged or insulted, we tend to want to strike back because it feels so good. I refer to this as *testosterosis*, an emotional state affecting both men and women when their favorite ideas are assaulted, questioned, or impugned.

While negative language can seem responsive, the recipient automatically understands and senses important aspects of who you are, where you are, how you are feeling, and whether or not you can actually win the argument. You are uncomfortable, defensive, non-communicative, and have no idea how to accommodate or win.

7. **Negative language never achieves victory**

Victory is supposed to be a positive event. If you haven't defined victory, there is no language strategy that will get you there. Or, to say it positively, define victory and you'll be able to structure a verbal and written strategy to achieve it.

8. **Negative language weighs more than positive language**

Risk communicators have learned that characterizing serious issues and topics in negative language, even if just a little, is almost impossible to overcome no matter how many positive words, phrases, and thoughts are used. Verbally, it seems, negative words weigh five times as much as positive words weigh. Negativity is memorable.

WHAT IS THE POWER OF POSITIVE DECLARATIVE LANGUAGE?

To build better employee relationships, resolve labor problems, and get a labor agreement, sooner or later one has to resort to positive, useful, productive language to strike a deal, get a contract, end the dispute, and to hear. It's harder if you begin by waging verbal warfare. If you want to win an argument, the verbal struggle, you're going to have to come up with useful, positive, helpful examples that illustrate the proof of your own assertions and assumptions.

If you wish to control the dialogue, you're going to have to drive the discussions forward using meaningfully specific, positively stated examples, verbal illustrations, and stories that teach, illustrate, draw others toward your point of view, and persuade.

TOXIC RETORTS KILL IDEAS & ENERGY

Ideas, concepts, and forward thinking are often controlled or destroyed by the use of toxic retorts. These destructive, negative responses generally end discussion and kill concepts.

Here's my favorite list of toxic retorts.

- I don't like that idea
- I don't see the connection
- I wouldn't say that
- It can't be done
- It didn't happen that way
- It didn't work before
- It won't work now
- It's against company policy
- It's never been done before
- It's not my responsibility
- It's not affordable
- Let's not over-react
- It's too much trouble
- No comment
- Not my job, unfortunately
- Not that again
- Our boss would never buy it

- Our customers wouldn't like it
- Our people would never do that
- That isn't our problem
- That won't build our product
- That's impossible
- That's not a good question
- That's not our fault
- We aren't that bad a company
- We can't change that fast
- We can't talk about it
- We couldn't have known
- We did all right without it
- We didn't know
- We don't care
- We don't have enough studies
- We don't have the resources
- We don't have the time
- We won't have the money
- We can't because we're just too busy
- We're not ready for that
- What you're not saying is . . .
- Why won't you use everything I say?
- You didn't talk to me about this
- You're mistaken
- You're wrong

OVERCOMING TOXIC RETORTS & NEGATIVE LANGUAGE

There are two techniques for overcoming negative and toxic language: Using positive declarative language and power words.

Positive Declarative Language

Here are some examples of converting negative approaches into positive declarations.

1. Negative: I don't believe it . . . or you.
Positive: Here's what I believe. Here's what we believe.
2. Negative: It won't work; it never worked.
Positive: Here's how it might work. Here are some suggestions to make it work.
3. Negative: That's a lie.
Positive: Check the facts more carefully and you'll find . . .
4. Negative: That's not our style.
Positive: We're known, even respected for . . .

5. Negative: We don't do that.
Positive: Here's what we actually do.
6. Negative: We don't invest in benefits our employees won't use.
Positive: We have three categories of employees, each with distinctly different needs.
7. Negative: We've never done that.
Positive: Here, specifically, is what we do . . .
8. Negative: You're wrong.
Positive: Let's look at the facts . . .

POWER WORDS

Power words add energy, thickness, and momentum to the conversation. Power words are critically important for confronting color words*, words that are emotionally negative in nature, words like ashamed, afraid, worried, frightened, embarrassed. Color words grab the spokesperson or an audience by their guts.

Use **power words** to make important statements and to manage the emotional power of color words:

1. Was it a bad or stupid choice?
2. Power response: In their place, I would have made ***different*** choices.
3. It sounds like they hate your plan.
4. Power response: As we ***emphasize*** solutions, they'll be more positive about what we're doing.
5. Will this problem destroy your reputation?
6. Power response: These matters are certainly ***urgent***, and we will do our best to deal with them.
7. Shouldn't your company be ashamed of its performance?
8. Power response: We're ***surprised*** at the public response, but intend to respond ***powerfully*** and ***aggressively*** to the public's concerns.

Other power words include:

- Different
- Emphasize
- Empathize
- Prioritize
- Proud
- Strong

- Energize
- Exciting
- Fascinating
- Great
- Hopeful
- Legitimize
- New
- Powerful
- Surprised
- Sympathize
- Tough
- Unique
- Unusual
- Urgent
- Value

POSITIVE LANGUAGE POSTULATES

1. Say less; make what you say positive, powerful, and therefore more important.
2. Saying nothing can be very powerful and positive (because in some cases the other side just wants to be heard).
3. Peace, success, and victory are won only with positive language.
4. Compassion and empathy sometimes use negative color words such as:

- Ashamed
- Concerned
- Disappointed
- Embarrassed
- Failed
- Humiliated
- Mortified
- Regrettable
- Shocked
- Tragic
- Unfortunate
- Unhappy
- Unintended
- Unnecessary
- Unsatisfied

Be very careful how you express empathy. Empathetic sentiments can cause toxic retorts.

5. The positive responder controls the level of negativity of any verbal or written exchange.

* For more information and lengthier discussion on this subject and a more complete list of color words, contact the author by E-mail at tlg@e911.com or explore his Web site at www.e911.com.