

## OUR CHOICE OF WORDS - NOT JUST SEMANTICS

Email, web sites, blogs, and powerpoint presentations have become our most useful means of communication, if not our most abused. These message delivery systems certainly do not inspire the kind of linguistic perfection that we learned in grade school, but they do accomplish the important goal of delivering a message efficiently.

The challenge is to use our modern communication tools without resorting to soundbites, incorrect English or worse, words that do not even exist. This particularly important to professionals who are responsible for communicating their business strategy to investors and analysts. It is also relevant to anyone whose goal is to impart information clearly and desires to be understood.

### MEANING

**“Yesterday, December 7, 1941-a date which will live in infamy-the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.”**

This is the first line of Roosevelt’s appeal to Congress for a Declaration of War on Japan. This sentence is a powerful example of the ways in which a person’s choice of words can sharply define the outcome of a speech. “A date which will live in infamy” has become a statement that will live in world history. Pun intended. This first line succinctly conveys the sentiment of Roosevelt, and the entire American nation, on the day that Japan attacked the United States, at Pearl Harbour, Oahu. What is less commonly known is that Roosevelt made some important semantic changes in his speech just prior to presenting it to the nation. “Infamy” was originally “world history” and “suddenly” was “simultaneously”. Had he not made those changes before speaking Roosevelt would have said: “Yesterday, December 7, 1941 – a date which will live in world history – the United States of America was simultaneously and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.

“Infamy” is defined as an evil or criminal act, or a state of extreme dishonor. The use of the word accurately and fully describes the event of the day, and arguably, it is Roosevelt’s choice of using this word – as opposed to “world history” - that turned the phrase into a historical statement, one which has made infamy almost synonymous with the attack on Pearl Harbour. Using the word “suddenly” is considerably stronger in tone than “simultaneous”; the word imbibes emotion into the speech.

Starting with the premise that we have to say is based on truth and is of value to our audience, we then must find the correct and precise to convey our thoughts, while being respectful of our audience and their needs. These are simple rules but difficult to consistently apply.

Below are comments on two areas of language that we may take for granted in business communications: value and clarity.

### Strategic communication is built on a foundation of truth and meaning, supported by a clear and consistent message

This short example illustrates how a single word can make an enormous difference to what we say, and furthermore, how we are remembered.

The practical point is that one can **speak “through the senses”**. It is often useful to appeal to more than a person’s intellect or logic. To convey meaning, emotion and a heartfelt belief in our strategy one can use words that connote a sense of place or a sense of time, effectively tell a story in order to connect with the listener.

- To communicate a sense of quantity or distance, try comparing your metric to something everyone can visualize (i.e. football fields, flight times, a drop of water relative to a bucket...)
- Provide visual examples. Don’t assume and describe fully (i.e. colours, textures, sounds, noises...)
- Tell a story, narrate! I will elaborate on this technique in a subsequent bulletin.

Do not assume that your understanding of an issue will lead to the audience’s comprehension. Even if they comprehend the issue, do not presume you will be remembered. With that in mind, be clear and ask yourself what the audience really wants to know, why they should care and how you can express yourself to convey the importance of your message.

To see the full speech online, including the handwritten changes click here: <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/day-of-infamy/images/infamy-address-1.gif>



---

## CLARITY

Often we use words without ensuring they are precisely the correct term to use. Strive for clarity and precision and use your dictionary when in doubt.

Focus on “commitment”, “goal”, and “objective”. People often use commitment, goals and objectives as if they are interchangeable, thereby diluting their meaning and consequently, their impact. These are in fact defined terms; and they should have the same meaning to both your internal resources and your external stakeholders: if it is not a corporate commitment within your organization, then it should not be named as such to the outside. Similarly with goals and objectives. Equally important is to keep company goals and objectives consistent over time. If at all possible, avoid confusing a “goal” with something that is temporary. You may just have an area of focus, exploration or interest.

The short news briefing below illustrates a number of errors in language and grammar. Do you see them? Test yourself! **The Capital Lab** web site has the correct version <http://www.thecapitallab.com/reinvent.html>

*XYZ Energy announces today that its lead investigator has determined that the Company has less exploration wells set for drilling than previously indicated. The Company is currently involved in Phase I of the exploration program, located in the Deep Basin. The new metallurgical evidence implies that 4 of the 10 wells in the defined area cannot be drilled at this time. The Company is not offering further guidance on how the exploration schedule will be impacted and how this data will effect future projections. Most importantly, the Company will continue with the exploration strategy, on schedule and as previously planned.*

---

## IDEAS

To speak or write with the aim of being understood requires hard work. It involves diligence against **imprecision, incorrectness and confusion**. Below are my best suggestions to improve your general communication skills, applicable to both the written and spoken word.

1. To improve understanding, associate your message with what people can tangibly **see, hear, touch, smell or feel**. Engage by telling a story.
2. If you think your sentence is too long, it probably is.
3. If you think the word you are using is vague or trite, it probably is. Spend the time to say exactly what you mean.
4. **Proofread**. Spellchecking is not proofreading! Print your document and read for clarity and understanding.
5. **Verify** terms and definitions if in doubt.
6. **Omit needless words**. Adjectives and adverbs are not always necessary and often they are best removed.
7. **Don't assume**. In particular, don't presume the audience's familiarity with your business, your industry or technical terms unless you are speaking to an industry crowd.
8. Avoid excessive use of pronouns such as “it”, “they”, “them” and “we”. They confuse.
9. **Highlight, enumerate and group ideas or issues** for ease of understanding. Remember to use the same sentence structure in your lists.
10. Sometimes the best option is to **be silent and listen**.

---

Comments? Questions? Looking for further guidance on strategic communication issues?

Contact: **Belinda Labatte** at [belinda@thecapitallab.com](mailto:belinda@thecapitallab.com) | **Phone 416.726.4403**

**The Capital Lab** works with clients in a variety of industry sectors in the area of business development and strategic investor relations. For more information please visit [www.thecapitallab.com](http://www.thecapitallab.com).