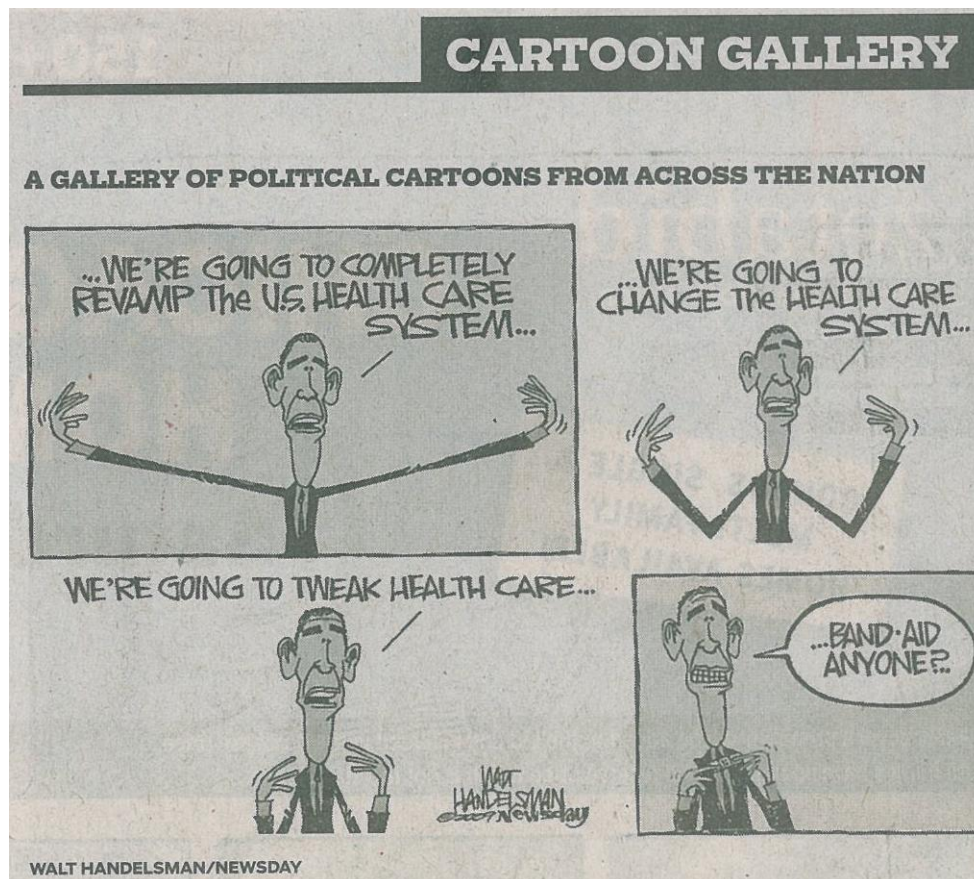


# DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

August 30, 2009

## TWEAKING YOUR COACHING



In his most recent book, *Outliers – The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell talks of aircraft accidents that occur due to what linguists refer to as “mitigated speech.” This refers to speech, which downplays the meaning of what is being said. In one of the cases he cites the failure of the first officer to make clear to the pilot in command that there is a dangerous amount of ice forming on the wings of the aircraft prior to takeoff. The first officer casually talks about the inability of the de-icing equipment to rid the wings of ice but does not make clear that it would be most unwise, and downright dangerous, to progress to takeoff. As a result of the first officer employing mitigated speech and, thereby, not adequately communicating the seriousness of the condition the pilot executed a takeoff. The plane failed to produce sufficient lift, stalled and crashed.

What does this have to do with managing our ad agencies and the development of advertising? Everything! Far too often client managers use mitigated speech when providing direction on agency creative submissions. We tend to sugarcoat (i.e., to make something unpleasant seem much less so) our comments thereby giving the wrong impression regarding our true feelings about the work and what is needed to make it more productive. In a way, this may be attributed to managers not knowing how to conduct an analysis of the work. But it is also a cultural phenomenon. Specifically, the use of mitigated speech is imprinted in the DNA of many organizations where people learn to not just defer but to agree with senior management if they want to enjoy career advancement. What's more they observe the use of mitigated speech by their immediate superiors when dealing with agency personnel. This is reinforced by the lack of confidence in what these managers feel they know about the work or what makes for effective advertising communication.

What is the result of mitigated speech in managing the ad development process? Well, it's pretty much the same as the result of mitigated speech in aircraft accidents. The work crashes and burns. The only difference is no one dies. At least we hope not. Managers live to crash more advertising development assignments and, perhaps, even some careers along the way.

Here is an example of client direction to the agency:

*"Thank you agency for all of your ideas. I can tell you put a lot of work into this and it's **really great!** Overall it is **very good** but maybe we have an opportunity to improve upon it. The first idea is a bit confusing. I'm not sure I totally get it. So I'd like you to work it a little more. The second submission doesn't show our customer. So our target might not get this one. We think this is something to look at. I wonder if we can work it a bit more. The third idea needs to be strengthened some. We have an opportunity to explore it a little more and maybe make it better. If you can hone it some then we can bring it to life. So agency this is a **really good start**. I'd like you go back and tweak these. Then I think we'll be ready."*

So, what was really said by the client? Here it is: Did you understand that? (If you can't get it from reading the previous paragraph then you are less likely to get it from hearing it stated, with a smile on the speaker's face, rather quickly.) Neither do we understand exactly what was said. And the agency won't understand it either. All we got is a bunch of gobbledygook. The truth is the client doesn't know what s/he is saying. Therefore, how can anyone else?

Confounding the lack of clarity is the use of mitigated speech. There appears to be a lot of work that the agency needs to do but it is not stated as such. In other words there is ice forming on the wings of this ad assignment and nothing is being done to attend to it in a meaningful way. It is much too subtle. The pilot, in this case the agency, is sitting there totally oblivious to what the situation is and what is really needed. (Actually it sounds like a total rework is needed. But what needs to be done and the extent of the rework is not clear. The agency won't work at hearing the truth if you don't tell them either. They are under the gun to meet unreasonably tight deadlines imposed by the client to produce advertising. So if you don't tell them what you want the agency to do, clearly, you are not going to get it.)

There are a number of common phrases in the mitigated speech lexicon of coaching advertising. They are present in the aforementioned client comments to the agency. Undoubtedly, you've

heard or even used some yourself. How many of these do you recognize? (*The italics represent what they agency wants to hear, interprets it or thinks about the comments.*)

- I can tell you put a lot of work into this (*When does the shoe drop?*)
- Great work ... but (*The shoe is dropping BUT you said it is "great."*)
- It needs a little more work (*Oh, so we're in good shape but what's a little?*)
- Take another look into/something to look at/look into (*Is this for me to investigate or is there something more specific you want me to do?*)
- If you have a chance (*Are you kidding me? I'm way too busy.*)
- If you think (*Obviously if I thought differently we would have presented something different. You don't think I need to do whatever it is otherwise you'd tell me.*)
- I wonder if (*We don't have time to wonder. We have to act now if we are going to meet the deadline for airing and/or publication.*)
- Work/explore it a little more (*So what is this supposed to mean? We've already explored this as well as we could in the limited time you provided us.*)
- Maybe we can develop it further (*Maybe.*)
- Strengthen it (*The work must be really close.*)
- Hone it (*We're even closer than I thought. Maybe just a couple of word changes.*)
- Bring it to life (*It will come to life when we go to production. Just wait. You'll see.*)
- Fine tune (*We're almost there. There are very few adaptations needed - si? no??*)
- If we can tweak this (*Again, all we need is some minor work.*)

We've heard marketing managers proclaim to their agencies that the work is "great" and by the time they finish their ramblings one may reasonably deduce that they didn't like anything and are nowhere close to approving the creative which, is what we appear to have in the example of the client's direction to the agency.

The use of mitigated speech is disingenuous. It does not express your true feelings. It does not communicate where you stand on the work or what you need the agency to do. It leads the agency down the wrong path. It doesn't help the creative development process. In fact, it hinders it. It results in the agency spending time with creative work that you would like dropped onto the cutting floor and/or feel has little potential for success. At the best it results in a band-aid to work-over what is in bad, very bad, shape. In addition to squandering precious talent it undermines the client-agency relationship since the direction is misleading or, at best, merely unclear. And, it leads to ineffective advertising.

Cut mitigated speech from your coaching to not just avoid disaster but to improve the likelihood for the development of successful advertising communications.

## **BOATS & HELICOPTERS**

Here are several suggestions regarding how you can avoid mitigated speech.

1. ***Get to know your agency personnel, including the creative people.*** We're talking about getting to know each of them on a personal level. This leads to teamwork. In this way

there will be far more candor in discussing the work. If you see the creative people as highly emotional (bordering on irrational) then you will handle them with kid gloves and hold back expressing your true feelings. Unfortunately many agencies use account managers to serve as buffers between the creative team and their clients, which contributes to the misperception that the creative folks speak another language, one that you do not and are part of another team, or planet.

2. ***Know what you think about the work before you comment.*** If you don't know what you think then you are going to ramble and no one else will know what you think either. You certainly will not be able to provide cogent direction. It will lack conviction.
3. ***Say what you mean and mean what you say.*** This takes work. And it takes courage too. It takes work to express yourself so clearly that you are incapable of being misunderstood. It takes a lot of work! And, it takes courage to get people to push beyond what they thought possible to find a better way. It takes the courage of your convictions to push, pull, whatever, to get them to move beyond self-satisfaction to achieve exceptional performance. So you better be prepared to stand behind it.
4. ***Be aware of mitigated speech.*** Look over the list of mitigated speech phrases and words we shared in the body of this DISPATCHES article and identify those that you currently use. Strike them from your speech. Also, listen to others and note when they use mitigated speech with others, and you! If you don't quite understand what is being said (as in the extent of the work needed) then it is probably mitigated speech. If you feel there is more than is being said then it is probably mitigated speech. And, if the language appears complimentary but you don't quite feel comfortable with it then it is probably mitigated speech too. Become aware of it and avoid it!
5. ***Invite your agency team members to dialogue with you.*** We don't want to be blindly stubborn either. Give the agency room to express their feelings particularly in those situations where you are unsure of possible directions the work can go. If you have gotten to know each of your agency team members on a personal basis (see point #1) then they will be more likely to be open and dialogue with you. This will result in a shared understanding of the work and importantly what needs to be done.
6. ***Direct, don't prescribe.*** Let the agency know what needs to be done and leave it to them to choose the way to get it done. Relate your direction back to realizing the strategic direction of the creative brief and each of its parts. Also, give direction that will add-value to the creative ideas that they have shared with you.
7. ***Don't settle.*** Your job as a manager is to lead the development of a BIG Campaign Idea. One that will build the business for a long, long time. Keep in mind that mitigated speech lowers the bar and results, at best, in settling. You won't get BIG Campaign Ideas that way!

Good luck!

Richard Czerniawski and Mike Maloney

**Richard Czerniawski**

.....  
430 Abbotsford Road  
Kenilworth, Illinois 60043  
tel 847.256.8820  
fax 847.256.8847  
.....

Reply to Richard:

[rdczerniawski@cs.com](mailto:rdczerniawski@cs.com) or  
[richardcz@bdn-intl.com](mailto:richardcz@bdn-intl.com)

**Mike Maloney**

.....  
1506 West 13th Street, #17  
Austin, Texas 78703  
tel 512.236.0971  
fax 512.236.0972  
.....

reply to Mike:

[mikewmaloney@gmail.com](mailto:mikewmaloney@gmail.com) or  
[mwm@bdn-intl.com](mailto:mwm@bdn-intl.com)



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