

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

Be Understood

I've spent the last 35 years arguing with customers when I really should have been telling them what they wanted to hear. Yes, a beginning student does need a good instrument, but convincing parents who say, "We want to start off cheap to see if she sticks with it," has been a struggle. Maybe I've just been using the wrong words.



Fortunately, message expert and political pollster Dr. Frank Luntz has written a book that explains exactly how to find and use the right words. In this classic tome, *Words That Work*, Luntz demonstrates the effective — and failed — use of words in politics and commerce. He was kind enough to put his central theme on the cover and to repeat it every few pages: "It's not what you say, it's what people hear."

As the sidebar shows (see page 30), basic communication isn't that complicated, but not surprisingly, it's the encoding and decoding that cause problems. We give a lot of attention to our encoding, producing messages planned to persuade and convince. We're often stunned by our own brilliance, only to be frustrated when we have to say the dreaded sentence, "No, what I meant to say was ...," because our words were decoded (and therefore understood) by the receiver in ways we hadn't intended. In other words, what people hear has more to do with how they decode your message than the message itself.

If what people hear is more important than what we say, shouldn't we try to tell them what they want to hear? Thinking about the listener and how our words will be received might be even more useful than creating a compelling argument. For instance, a mom inquiring about guitar lessons for her son likely has more on her mind than the number of pickups on the guitar. She may be thinking about his social

development or reluctantly honoring a promise. There's no way we can know for sure what her agenda is, but the right words can reassure her and reinforce that she's doing a good thing.

Following a few simple rules of communication will make our message likely to be understood the way we hoped it would be. Dr. Luntz provides several of these rules, and many of them are

particularly relevant for us.

First, **use simple words.** Find simple ways to explain complex issues. Most clients will tune out if you tell them a product has an asymmetrically curved bridge. But they might be happy to learn that because of new technology, it will stay in tune longer and sound better than a cheaper model, creating a better performance experience for the student. Apple spends almost no time talking about how its products work. It shows us how they will enhance our lives.

Along with simple words, **use short sentences.** For instance, saying, "Kids do better on better instruments," is more effective than saying, "Scientific evidence supports the conclusion that students with access to higher-quality instruments have superior outcomes than control groups with only average instruments," especially if the statement's followed up with a true story about the first time you played a really good instrument and how you felt. You can always use hard data if you need it, but most of the time, you won't need it.

People live in a near-constant stream of information, and they're pretty good at filtering out anything that even hints at boredom. We have to **be compelling and interesting.** We have to grab their attention and grab it again every few minutes. Using the right words can help, if we

It's not what you say that matters — it's what people hear. Here's how to reach them

know what the right words are.

Often the right words are words that have found their way into **popular culture**. You can't click on a news item lately without hearing about "accountability" or "consequences." We might remind our clients that we hold our music teachers accountable for our students' progress, and we hold the students accountable for their practice time. We may make the case that students can practice on lower-quality instruments, but there will be consequences. "Austerity" sends a chill down most people's spines these days, so avoid that one. The most effective word in advertising, year after year, is "free." Find a way to use it.

Here's a quick way to find other magic words. With a high-

lighter, turn to any page in this magazine. Highlight every word in an article or ad that makes you feel something — good, bad, queasy or sad. These are the words you want to use or avoid.

One word you always want to avoid is your competitor's name or brand. If you must mention competitors at all, it's better to refer to them as "the other guys" and their wares as "ordinary products." Don't advertise their brands or infer credibility by saying their names out loud.

Find a way to **reinforce your clients' intentions**, and don't challenge their preconceived notions. There's little to be gained by confrontation. The most successful mass communications experiment in history is Fox News. Ideology notwithstanding, it has

a remarkable formula. It knows the preconceived opinions of its viewers, and it constantly reinforces them. And every time viewers hear something they decode with agreement, they are rewarded with a shot of dopamine from the pleasure center of their brains, making them very loyal viewers.

If you need to challenge bad ideas, **speak aspirationally**. Nobody wants to hear about why you stopped carrying brand X. They want to hear that the one you carry will fulfill their desires. Every day, we talk with parents who are concerned their kids won't stick with the piano. Years ago, we promised to take the piano back, but today, we speak of the wonderful impact music has on kids' lives and aca-

ademic success. If we reinforce their hopes and dreams, we can trigger a little dopamine rush. (And people are more likely to make a buying decision based on emotion than logic.)

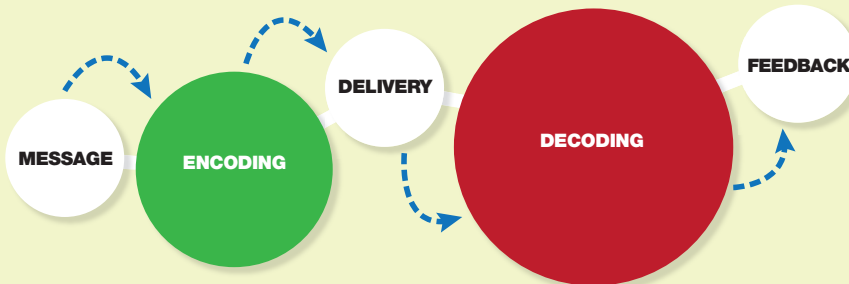
Credibility is now as important as philosophy. Don't be shy about telling clients your personal story and your commitment to music. You can see my employes roll their eyes when I tell clients I was assembling piano benches for 25 cents each in my dad's store when I was 7 years old or show pictures of my grandfather's band. But that story and those pictures reassure my clients. "Family" and related words, such as "dad" and "grandfather," are words that work well with our clients.

Finally, **consistency matters**. Refine your story using all the right words, and tell it over and over. Then refine it, and tell it again. What are the words that will work for you? They're all around you. Spend some time thinking about your customers and what's important to them. What are the words that will be red flags? Avoid them. What are the words that will elicit an emotional response? Use them. Don't be afraid of trial and error.

Let's make a conscious effort to figure out what words will be effective and use them often. Customers won't mind being told that better things cost more money if spending more will give them greater rewards, but they must receive and understand your message. So, use the right words to tell customers what they want to hear. Then, follow through. Offer great value, route the kids to the best teachers and provide exceptional service. **MI**

Greg Billings whispers to customers at the Steinway Piano Gallery in Naples, Fla. He welcomes questions and comments at greg@steinwaynaples.com.

THE FIVE PARTS OF COMMUNICATION



1. THE MESSAGE. A thought, idea or concept. It can be as simple as a birthday wish or as complex as the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

2. ENCODING. The sender composes a message in a particular form. It could be a language spoken or written, a picture, an icon, or even music. Invariably, the preferences, biases and peculiarities of the sender corrupt the purity of the message — sometimes unconsciously, sometimes deliberately.

3. DELIVERY. The medium. TV, radio, newspaper, Morse code, e-mail, Facebook, smoke signals and simple conversation are all ways to distribute a message. Some are more efficient or more fun than others, but all are simply delivery systems.

4. DECODING. The message's receiver interprets the message using intellect, while coloring it with his or her personal preferences, biases and peculiarities. This framing of the message is subconscious and not deliberate, but it's powerful in determining how the message is understood. Again, "It's not what you say, it's what people hear."

5. FEEDBACK. The action taken as a result of the message — or confirmation that the message was received and, hopefully, understood.