

By honing their speaking and writing skills, information professionals can create stronger and more successful business relationships. Mike Gruenberg, author of *Buying and Selling Information: A Guide for Information Professionals and Salespeople to Build Mutual Success*, uses examples from his own sales experiences to highlight the do's and don'ts of email conversations and in-person negotiations. He explains why word choice, honesty and conviction, and restraint are the keys to effective communication.

The Importance of Your Words

Michael L. Gruenberg



"It's only words, and words are all I have to take your heart away," sang The Bee Gees in "Words" written by Barry, Maurice, and Robin Gibb. The song presents a good sentiment for those hoping for romance, but in business relationships, we have to downplay hope and use our words effectively.

"You can't make this stuff up." I'm sure all of us at one time or another have uttered this phrase in shocked disbelief when our friends, neighbors, or elected officials have said something ridiculous for everyone to hear or sent an inappropriate email for everyone to read. We outwardly laugh, but inside we are incredulous.

I am a strong proponent of the written and spoken word and take the responsibility of being absolutely sure the words I write and speak are in good taste and not offensive. All experienced professionals in any industry know that successful business relationships depend on a better-than-average command of written and spoken communication. Inherent in that skill is understanding the content of what is being written and choosing your words carefully.

What Not to Put in Writing

Our society is entranced by immediate communication. Millions of emails, tweets, instant messages, and texts are sent every day. Instant communication is pervasive in our daily lives. We contact each other literally at the speed of light. However, sometimes in communication speed can be dangerous

While speedy communication is important, taking time to think about your words may be more important. It is almost never a great idea to email or text another person when you are angry or agitated. After emailing or texting in the heat of the moment, even if you apologize or say that you really didn't mean it, the damage has been done. The offended party may re-read that inflammatory email over and over again.

I have counseled many a sales rep to not send any email response in anger, and I would give the same advice to information professionals as well. The best way to handle an explosive situation that cries out for an email response is to write a message but not immediately send it. Wait 24 hours and then read it again. Putting some distance between writing it, thinking about it, and sending it provides time to cool down. On further examination a day later, you can probably amend the language so that the email still gets the point across but does not offend the receiver.

Many real-life situations occur that reinforce this lesson. In the category of "You can't make this stuff up," here is a situation that I recently witnessed first-hand.

My wife is a healthcare professional. She recently decided that she would prefer part-time work as opposed to working 40+ hours per week. She contacted a number of recruiters and, as expected, began to get inquiries about her availability. One such communication suggested that she consider selling healthcare products and services to her friends, family, and neighbors. For my wife to become a salesperson is as unlikely as for me to examine a medical patient. She doesn't want to do what I do for living, and I don't want to do

what she does for a living. In short, the prospect of her even thinking about a sales career is slim to none.

But because she is naturally a thorough person, and because of her medical training, she decided to investigate a possible new road of employment in a sales capacity. She was contacted about a sales opportunity to be conducted from home. She read the printed materials, listened to the WebEx presentation describing her duties, and then followed up with the person who originally contacted her by phone to tell him that she was not interested.

Their phone conversation was brief, businesslike, and professional. All seemed finished until she received the following email from the person she had spoken to on the phone the day before. I have not altered the email in any way. Only the names have been eliminated. Again, I couldn't make this up if I tried:

incredible,

you now have knowledge in your hands that can dramatically effect 100's if not 1000's of people in your circle

and you choose to do nothing with it.

that is terribly short sighted and all because the business model says more to you than a life changing discovery.

just awful ... and incredibly selfish.

This is a graphic example of inappropriate choices of words, a message written in the heat of the moment without much thought of the consequences. It makes the writer look foolish, and its tone of desperation is a poor reflection on the way the company's business is conducted. It would have been a lot smarter for the writer to review the email a day or two later and not send it out at all.

If you're angry, don't immediately convey that feeling in writing. What you write will reflect on you, and, just as important, will make an impression on the person receiving the email,

who is still considering doing business with your organization. Personal recommendations are a significant part of acquiring new business. I know my wife will never recommend this company's products to her friends and associates.

Communicating Honestly

In the world of buying and selling, honest communication can mean the difference between completing a sale or delaying or even sabotaging the sale. A good salesperson chooses his words wisely, and the informed librarian knows what words to listen for.

People sometimes use words to mislead the other party, and in the sales world, this can lead to a failed business relationship. I recently decided to buy a new car, specifically a convertible. The first car I bought at age 22 was a convertible. It was my first and only ragtop, and I liked to feel the breezes blowing through my hair as I cruised down the highway. Of course, getting a convertible at my current age means the wind will be whizzing around my bald head. Nevertheless, I prepared myself for the process of buying a new car, a process that causes many of us to cringe, as we realize some car salespeople are rightly given their notorious reputation.

After some perfunctory analysis of car performance reports, I narrowed the search to a particular brand and model. At a local dealership, I was told that I was in luck—there was a “Sales Manager’s Special” available that day. Apparently, it was the car driven by the sales manager the previous year, and it had low mileage and what the dealer assured me was a reasonable price. It was even a color that I liked, so I test drove it. I was delighted with all the features included for what I thought was an attractive price. I thanked the salesperson for her time spent with me, and then decided to go home and do some further research before making the commitment to buy. I promised to call the sales rep the next day with questions and comments.

Going back to my research that night, I noticed that the Blue Book price for the model and year in question was considerably lower than the price being quoted by the dealership. The next day, I dutifully called the salesperson and questioned the price she had given me the day before, expecting her to offer some accommodation. Her explanation for the price differential was that the car, although driven more than 7,000 miles by the sales manager, was never registered, and therefore the dealership classified it as a new car, not a used one. What they were calling “new” was actually “used” as far as I was concerned.

Paying a new car price for a used car was not an option for me. As a result, neither the salesperson nor I got what we wanted. The car sat in the lot unsold, I didn’t get a car, the salesperson didn’t get a commission—in all, a lose–lose situation.

When a database salesperson is speaking to a librarian, the goal is to create an atmosphere that will lend itself to a win–win situation, where both the seller and the buyer get something they want. Similarly, when the librarian approaches a salesperson, that same atmosphere of trying to achieve a mutually beneficial outcome is necessary. The seller wants to sell and the buyer wants to buy. It’s as simple as that. To achieve success, both participants need to speak with honesty and conviction:

“Bill, I heard that your new aerospace database has serious bugs in it. If I make the purchase decision, will you and the company stand behind your offer of a full refund?” a librarian might ask.

“Of course we will. I know the bugs are minor and being addressed as we speak,” the salesperson might respond. “You have my assurance that it will work for you, but if you’re still uncomfortable, we can write those refund terms into the order form. It’s my job to make sure that you are a satisfied customer.”

In this case, both parties spoke with honesty and conviction. Whether the customer buys or not, the salesperson has established an atmosphere of professionalism and trust. Those are good conditions for the two parties to come to an agreement.

The Words You Choose Make a Difference

The information industry resides in a continuously changing environment. Today's exotic, boundary-breaking, game-changing technology is forgotten tomorrow. New terminology, new acronyms, and names of new communication devices have to be learned daily. When making buying and selling decisions, both the salesperson and the information professional must understand the terminology.

But it's not always just new terminology that can cause a misunderstanding. The sometimes casual and inconsistent use of common words can negate all the hard work leading up to the moment of agreement. Here is an example of a typical conversation at the close of a sale:

"It's just about time to sign the contract," the sales rep informs the librarian.

"Gee, Bob I don't know if I have the legal authority or responsibility to sign a contract," the librarian may respond. "Looks like a lot of legalese. I'll need another opinion before I can even think about signing this."

Upon hearing the phrase "sign the contract," the librarian suddenly is apprehensive about committing. Many people associate the word *contract* with legal matters. Buying a car, buying a house, or making any major purchase usually involves some sort of onerous contract with numerous places to sign on multipage documents, with spaces reserved for many signatures. ("Just sign here and there and initial here, and don't forget to sign on the back, check the box marked under severe penalty ...")

It does not evoke pleasant memories, does it? Why would a sales rep want a prospective customer to be reminded of past unpleasant experiences when buying an information product? In some cases, the prospect of making a major monetary purchase that requires multiple signatures can overwhelm anyone with worry. The more money involved in the purchase, the more likely lawyers will be involved as well.

A different choice of words could be all it takes to avoid evoking all these unpleasant thoughts. For example, a far more appealing phrase at closing would be “Authorize the order form.” The word *authorize* implies the power is with the person signing, in other words, that she has the power to get the deal done. The term *order form* also conveys power, as the word *order* clearly implies the action taken is in the hands of the buyer. Another more empowering choice of words would be “Can I have your signature on the form so we can finalize this purchase?” When the salesperson shares the power with the customer, both parties feel in control.

Just consider the difference between the following statements:

The sales rep at XYZ Data sold me a database about archeology.

or

I bought a new database about archeology from XYZ Data.

They’re talking about the same outcome, but the second statement tells the listener that both the sales rep and the info pro were part of the buying and selling process, as should always be the goal.

KNOWLEDGE POINTS

- Whether a sales rep or info pro, always think before you speak or write.
- Never send an email, text, or tweet in anger. If you write it and send it, you can't deny what was written. Give yourself a day to calm down before sending it.
- When salespeople and librarians engage, both parties need to communicate honestly, in order to create a win-win situation.
- Sales reps should choose words that empower a customer in the purchasing process, not words that connote negative thoughts.

About the Author

Michael L. Gruenberg is president of Gruenberg Consulting, LLC (www.gruenbergconsulting.com), providing information services companies with sales source analysis, market research, executive coaching, and trade show analysis. A long-time sales professional serving the library industry, he also offers workshops and training sessions on negotiation skills for information professionals.

This article is from the new book *Buying and Selling Information: A Guide for Information Professionals and Salespeople to Build Mutual Success* by Michael L. Gruenberg. For more information visit <http://books.infotoday.com>.