

William Lutz on The Language of Advertising

The Language of Mass Media and Advertising: With these words I can sell you anything

The great enemy of clear language is the language of insincerity. Language can exploit and manipulate. And finally language has the power to to say one thing or appear to say something but really says the opposite or in fact, nothing at all.

Weasel Words:

Advertisers use weasel words to appear to be making a claim for a product when they in fact are making no claim at all. Weasel words get their name from the way weasels eat eggs they find in the nests of other animals. A weasel will make a small hole in the egg, suck out the insides, then place the egg back in the nest. Only when the egg is examined closely is it found to be hollow. That's the way it is with weasel words in advertising.

"Help"

Help means to aid or assist, nothing more. It does not mean to cure, solve, heal or end. But as a weasel word it makes much stronger claims because it modifies words coming after or before and so that we read much more into its use.

Cold medicine: "helps relieve cold symptoms fast" Ask yourself what this claim is really saying. What will it aid or assist in doing? Why "relieve" your cold "symptoms?" There is not fact that it will end your suffering or cure your symptoms. *How much* will this product relieve your symptoms? In fact the ad does not really claim that it will do anything at all.

"Helps keep you looking young": But many things help keep us looking young. For example, proper exercise, rest, and diet will help to keep us looking young. A facelift will help us to look younger. More importantly, this ad only says it will keep you "looking young" and not make you look young. What does it mean to look young? By whose standards?

"Helps prevent cavities": This toothpaste ad does not say that it *prevents* cavities.

"Helps keep your home germ free" but it does not say that it *kills germs*.

"Fights" and "Controls" are two other weasel words. "Helps control dandruff symptoms with *regular* use. What does this really say? What is *regular* use?

"Fast"

What does "fast" mean? Does it mean ten minutes, two minutes, two hours, or two days? What is fast to one person can be very slow to another.

Look at ads in magazines and newspapers, on the television and radio and you will find these words, especially "help" in all of them repeatedly. "helps stop" . . "helps overcome" . . ."helps eliminate" . . . "helps you look" . . . Analyze your work to see where these weasel words appear and you might discover that these ads are saying nothing.

"Virtually"

This word is so innocent that people generally do not pay attention to it. After all what does virtually mean? It means "in essence of effect, although not in fact."

"When taken as directed, the tablets offer virtually 100% protection."

In 1971 a federal court rendered its decision on a case brought against a woman that got pregnant while taking birth control pills. She sued the manufacturer to no avail. Why?

"Leaves dishes "virtually" spotless. Not spotless just "virtually." What does this really mean or say if nothing but the opposite or better yet nothing at all.

"New and "Improved"

What makes a product "new"? According to the laws governing the ethics of advertising, you can only say something is "new" if it has been changed in some functional or material way. What does a *material functional change* mean exactly? One manufacturer added an artificial lemon scent to a cleaning product and claimed that it was "new" and "improved". They argued that the artificial scent changed the chemical composition, even though the product does not clean any better. Ridiculous. No?

Which now brings us to the word "improved." When used in adverts "improved" does not mean "made better", "changed" or "different than before." A detergent can add a plastic spout on the container and call the product "improved", despite the fact that nothing about the product itself has been altered.

"Acts Fast"; "Acts against"; "Acts to prevent" or "Works against"; works like"; "Works longer".

"Acts on the cough control center" Discuss.

"Like Magic"

The word "like" is a weasel word to be sure. "For skin like peaches" claims the ad for skin cream. There is no verb in the sentence so how does the product make your skin "like" peaches and cream? The ad is making no promise or claim whatsoever. You are the one who must read the meaning into the ad. How about the wine that claims "It's like taking a trip to France." or "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should". The ad does not claim that cigarettes taste good or if they do it is certainly subjective. Moreover, note the use of the conditional "should." Should cigarettes taste good?

