

Choose Your Words Carefully

Communicating Successfully, According to Luntz

By Tom Schuman

In earning a doctorate in politics at the age of 25 from Oxford University, Frank Luntz once spoke for 24 straight hours as part of the “Oxford Union Society Guinness World Book of Record” debate. He no longer speaks in such a long stretch at one time, but his words are heard often and in many forums – particularly during an election year.

A pollster by trade, Luntz has helped craft messages for political and business leaders worldwide. He is the author of the highly acclaimed 2007 book “Words That Work: It’s Not What You Say, It’s What People Hear.”

Luntz recently shared strong political and communication messages with members of the Indiana Chamber board of directors during that group’s semi-annual meeting at the French Lick Springs Resort. In this interview prior to his presentation, he provides insights for all to think about and incorporate.

BizVoice®: I read in your acknowledgement how difficult it was to write the book. But was the title a natural? Where did it come into the process?

Luntz: “I had the title before I had the book. Actually, the subtitle was more important than the book. People forget ‘Words That Work,’ but they remember ‘It’s Not What You Say, It’s What People Hear.’ In book reviews, in blog reports, that’s what stands out to people. You want a short title, you want it to be pithy, brief and memorable, but the subtitle is really what the book is about and what it really means.

“Actually, I agreed to write another one (book) and I don’t know why. I hated the first one. I haven’t even started the second one, and I agreed to do it a year ago. It’s not fun for me because I agonize over every word. I’m not a great writer. I write like I speak, and I speak like I write. So it’s not beautiful; it doesn’t make people weep. It’s just very straightforward. It’s a little more artistic than a memo and a lot less artistic than a poem. It’s someplace in that middle ground.”

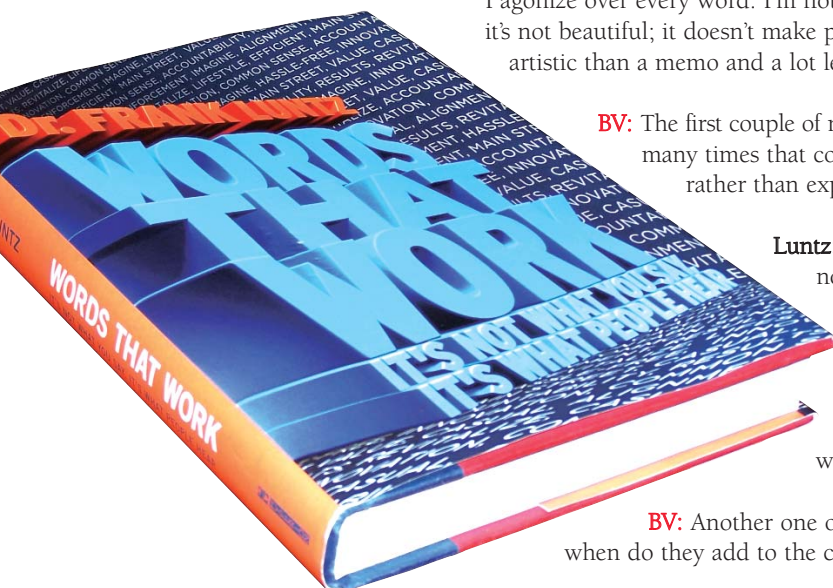
BV: The first couple of rules – using smaller words and shorter sentences. Does it appear many times that communicators are trying to impress people with their language rather than expressing themselves in a style that’s simply understood?

Luntz: “I think many times they forget it’s the impact on the listener, not the feeling of the speaker that really matters. They tend to use language that pleases them rather than language that impacts the person they’re trying to change. I never use podiums; I never stand behind something; I never stand on stages because I want to be as close to the respondent as possible – to see their reaction, to gauge it. And if you’re using big-a** words, it won’t have the impact. It just doesn’t.”

BV: Another one of the rules is to ask a question. When do questions work and when do they add to the complexity or confusion?

Luntz: “I think they almost never add to the confusion. They always clarify.” (He gives two examples). “In the business community, do you really think that this year will end up better than last year? Are you investing for tomorrow or just trying to live for today? Asking a rhetorical question brings a powerful answer.”

Luntz then previewed a pair of questions he often uses in presentations.



“Are you better off today than your parents were at your age?” Then I ask a follow-up question: ‘Are your kids going to be better off when they reach your age?’ The answer to the first one is yes; the answer to the second one is a resounding no. That’s far better than me giving a whole litany of why things stink and why they’re getting worse.

“Ask people those two questions, and you’ll hear a murmur as people intellectually understand the consequences of that – and they hate it. It’s so much better because instead of me declaring something to you, you declare it to yourself.”

BV: When you look at some of the examples in the book, is there an experience that was the most difficult, in which you had the hardest job convincing the people you were working with, and for, that these truly were the “words that work?”

Luntz: “My issue with the death tax is that it affects wealthy people. I didn’t think the average American cared about it, and I was shocked to find that they not only care, but even though it doesn’t affect them, they care about it deeply. They don’t believe that individuals, families, even if you have been successful, that you should be taxed when you die. You’re taxed on your income, you’re taxed on your investments and you’re taxed on your savings.

“So why should you also be taxed just because your heart stops beating? That one was tough, because I myself was skeptical.

“The one that was the toughest probably is ANWR (Arctic National Wildlife Refuge), trying to get oil companies to stop talking about drilling and instead use the word exploring – and to try and get them to focus more on deep sea rather than offshore. Offshore is 100 feet from the beach and people see it; deep sea is miles from the shore and people don’t. Drilling is black goo and rigs; exploring is kind of touching the ground. It sounds so obvious, but trying to get these people to use it ... I’ve never had a problem (getting people to agree), but it’s getting them to actually use it that is always the challenge.”

BV: You use many examples of advertising jingles and language. Many people claim not to be impacted, but what lessons can be learned from those successful advertising messages?

Luntz: “First, and most important, it has to be authentic and genuine. If you have an unseen announcer, that is much less credible than the politician or CEO or product speaking for itself. Hillary Clinton never did the voice for her ads. She always had someone else talking about her. That just didn’t resonate with people because they wanted to hear what she had to say. Barack Obama did exactly the opposite. All his ads featured him, and they had a much greater impact.

“Number two is that visuals are more powerful, but less judgmental. They’re much more neutral. There is a great difference in how a 23-year-old receives information and how a 53-year-old does. The 23-year-old is much more gender neutral, race neutral, and they’re looking more at the product. The 53-year-old is absolutely looking at the person in the ad and making a judgment based on them.

“Anyway, the best ads don’t come across as ads. Anheuser-Busch has the best ads in America. The Bud Light ads –



Effectively using words that work has brought numerous professional and personal opportunities to Frank Luntz.

Frank Luntz

Business clients: General Motors, Federal Express, Disney, American Express, AT&T, Pfizer, Kroger, McDonald’s, and entire soft drink and motion picture industries.

Political focus group clients: All major television networks, the BBC, *Wall Street Journal*, *Newsweek*, *The New Yorker* and *U.S. News & World Report*.

Television guest appearances: “Meet the Press,” “Nightline,” “The Today Show,” “The News Hour with Jim Lehrer,” “Good Morning America,” “Hannity and Colmes,” “Crossfire,” “Capital Gang,” “Charlie Rose,” “Real Time with Bill Maher” and “Hardball with Chris Matthews.”

Classroom experience: Lectures at two dozen colleges and universities, including seven years as an adjunct professor at the University of Pennsylvania and stints at Harvard and George Washington.

Public television’s Bill Moyers on Luntz: “He’s a magician with a gift for the politics of words and what words best connect with the hearts and minds of the public.”

Comedian and Democrat Al Franken on Luntz: “Asking Frank Luntz if he understands public opinion is like asking Julia Child if she knows how to make a soufflé.”



Luntz offers political and communications insights to the Indiana Chamber board of directors during the group's spring meeting.

kids don't look at them as ads, they look at them as little stories in 30-second form that makes them laugh. That is good advertising."

BV: You have a chapter on what people really care about. Keeping that in mind, what are some of the key principles that we need to use in crafting our messages?

Luntz: "The problem with that is it depends on age. It depends on economic status in life; it depends on where you live. I was warned before I came here to remember this is the Midwest. Be careful about the words you use. Be careful about your language. The expectations are different because what people value is different here.

"We all want our kids to do better than us. We all want a safe and secure job. We all want a retirement that is happy and healthy and filled with possibilities. But we still look at things differently. There is a different attitude toward cultures, a different attitude toward society. My gut is that this (West Baden/French Lick) is a very, very religious area. This looks and feels almost like the Bible Belt. It does not feel that way in the northern part of Indiana, where I have spent more time. Things you value are very different, just based on that."

BV: In today's world, with all the information sources, do the words that work vary by the medium that is being used?

Luntz: "I'm not going to use different words, but I'm going to use the amount of words differently. If I'm on the web, I know I have to get to the point. I know that it has to be more pithy, more ironic than if I'm using words on television. The web tends to reward brevity and punish those who can't make a point quickly.

Television, even though you only have three minutes, four minutes, eight minutes, whatever the segment is, I find that you can explore things more than on the web. The other thing

on TV is that because it is a visual medium rather than a written medium the actual style of the communications is a little different. On television I find myself doing, 'There are three different things that matter most, one, and two and three, because that helps organize it.' If I'm writing for anything that is written-based communication, I don't have to do that as much because the paragraph is your break."

BV: Words and phrases for the 21st century. What are some of the powerful ones, ones gaining each and every day in impact?

Luntz: "This is going to be in the new chapter that is coming out in August. The word consequences – very personal, very dramatic – it grabs people's attention immediately. Consequences say there will be a difference in your life. This room could be filled with 30 people not paying attention and you say 'consequences of this action' and you'd actually see them sit up and listen. It grabs your mind and it doesn't let go because they assume that what you are about to say is important.

10 Rules of Effective Language

1. Simplicity: Use small words
2. Brevity: Use short sentences
3. Credibility is as important as philosophy
4. Consistency matters
5. Novelty: Offer something new
6. Sound and texture matter
7. Speak aspirationally
8. Visualize
9. Ask a question
10. Provide context and explain relevance

"I covered the importance of efficiency (in the book), but what I've added to that is reliability because time is such an important component right now. We're prepared to pay more to ensure we don't have to expend time in the future. That's where reliability comes in, and genuine and authentic. People will spend 30% or 50% more on groceries because the groceries are organic or all natural. That essence of genuine or

authentic has become very powerful in our lives when everything seems plastic and synthetic."

BV: Small businesses may not have the resources to conduct focus groups or surveys. What are some practical ways they can test messages?

Luntz: "If they're in retail, they pick a specific hour of a specific day and they ask each and every customer who comes in to walk around the store for five minutes and tell them what they see and how they feel. Then they give them 20% off for that five-minute investment. If they're service-oriented, for 15 minutes they take everyone's phone number who calls in. Then you call them back, after you have provided your service, and ask about the quality of the service. All of this can be done internally.

"If your business is primarily done through the mail, on a specific day everything that goes out includes a questionnaire. Not quantifiable, but qualifiable. They describe their reaction to your product or service, rather than give it an A, B, C, D or F. It is basically picking a certain point when you just talk to your customers. And customers like that. Too often in speeches you invite people to ask you questions, and you think that's interactive. A much more powerful approach is for the business person to

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Frank Luntz

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ask the employees and ask the customers questions. That's where they appreciate being consulted, and that's how you build a relationship."

BV: We have Newt Gingrich coming to our Annual Awards Dinner in November, two days after the election. Tell us a little about the qualities you have seen from him over the years.

Luntz describes Gingrich as quite probably the "smartest politician" he has come across for his strong knowledge and understanding of issues. That also proved to be a drawback, when sometimes Gingrich "would go over the head of his audience."

Luntz: "I've seen it every time though. When you see him speak and when you leave, he creates converts. If he could have spoken to everyone in the 1995-98 period, he would have been the most credible politician in America. But he got demonized by the press, and he didn't know how to get around it."

BV: Who are some of the other fascinating people you have

come across as a result of the work you do?

Luntz: "I'm having dinner Monday night with Prince Charles in London to talk about the rainforests. On Sunday, I shared a Diet Coke with Jack Nicholson at his home talking about politics. I had dinner with Mike Connors (of "Mannix" TV fame) and Jamie Farr (Klinger on "M*A*S*H)."

He describes an upcoming backyard barbecue dinner at his home with political and business leaders, as well as a few celebrities. "Because of the work that I do, I can now have very, very interesting dinners at my home. We're just going to sit around and talk for three or four hours. The chance to just sit around and exchange ideas is very cool."

"I had dinner at Henry Kissinger's house last month. He invited me over because he wanted me to do a presentation – he had eight guests. Three times during the dinner, I made him laugh. And that was AWESOME! To see Henry Kissinger actually laugh and know that I helped trigger it is a very cool feeling."