

Book Review: *Words that Work*

By Robert Rader
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Dr. Frank Luntz has long spoken about using words that succeed in persuading those who are listening, whether in politics, advertising or in policy making. He is perhaps best known as one of the creators of the 1992 Contract with America and has become well-known for his ability to find words that are persuasive.

In *Words that Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear*, he lays out a very strong case that board members, running at election time, superintendents advocating for programs and budgets and both, trying to influence legislators, the public and the media, would do well to heed.

Luntz, who grew up in West Hartford, uses focus groups and other research methods to determine the exact words which work best to portray certain ideas. While Luntz is known as a Republican strategist, in his book he discusses both Republican and Democratic successes and failures.

One example of the use of precise words was shown in a *Frontline* television program broadcast in 2004. Luntz showed speeches on environmental issues to members of focus groups while they used handheld gadgets used to determine what they thought of the ideas and how they were expressed. When the participants indicated that they really liked the concept, it was noted, so that it could be used when politicians discussed the issue.

Government officials obviously listen to Luntz. The narrator noted that he had gotten Republican congressmen and others to switch their language and the program showed video clips of this happening. For example, Luntz found that it was better to use "global climate change", which is "less frightening" language than "global warming". A video clip showed a congressman starting to say "global warming" and then quickly changing to "global climate change". Others also were also shown using the new language.

His book explains in detail why changing words can change the whole debate. Let me give you one example, towards the beginning of the book, that, for obvious reasons, resonated with me, though I obviously have a very different point of view than Luntz

on the issue:

Luntz stated that he is on the side of those who would provide vouchers to enable students to attend schools of their choice. His research has "found that calling the financial component a 'voucher' rather than the more popular 'scholarship' trivializes the powerful opportunity and financial award that children from poor families receive" under these programs.

He'd prefer to call it "parental choice in education" than "school choice" because it is really the parents who make the choice. He would even prefer to call it "equal opportunity in education" and his polling has found that this phrase tests best.

Ten Rules to Be Successful

Luntz sets out ten rules of successful communication. The language used, according to him, should fall within the following rules and the more it does, the better:

1. **Simplicity: Use Small Words.** As he explains towards the end of the book, Americans are not as well educated as we might think. Small words enable us to better understand what is said.
2. **Brevity: Use Short Sentences.** "Sometimes two or three words are worth more than a thousand."
3. **Credibility Is As Important As Philosophy.** According to Luntz, "if your words lack sincerity, if they contradict accepted facts, circumstances, or perceptions, they will lack impact...the words you use become you—and you become the words you use."
4. **Consistency Matters.** Repetition. Repetition. Repetition.
5. **Novelty: Offer Something New.** Even if it's a variation of an old idea, try repackaging it.
6. **Sound And Texture Matter.** "A string of words that have the same first letter, the same sound, or the same syllabic cadence is more memorable than a random collection of sounds."
7. **Speak Aspirationally.** Luntz spends a lot of time on this idea, suggesting that optimism, rather than pessimism helps persuade others to follow.

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8. **Visualize.** “Paint a vivid picture.” Asking people to “imagine what life would be like if...” helps them to understand and see themselves in your vision.
9. **Ask A Question.** A rhetorical question can have much more impact than a plain assertion. “Are you better off now than you were four years ago?”
10. **Provide Context And Explain Relevance.** This is sometimes known as “framing” and it’s about putting things in the proper context by providing the “why” of a message before... the ‘therefore’ and the ‘so that’”.

Luntz discusses language and people, including a description of the “Average American” (Jennifer Smith is a “white female, most likely German or Irish... married with two children and lives in a three-bedroom house in the suburbs that she and her husband, Michael, moved into about four or five years ago”). His “myths” include that Americans read (newspaper readership is declining), consumers respond well to patriotic messages (no, they’re more interested in American “pride” than over-the-top patriotic appeals) and that Americans are happy (we’re “fed up, fed up, fed up” with partisanship, decline of culture, losses of jobs to overseas workers, etc., etc. etc.)

And, yes, Luntz gives many examples of the “right” and “wrong” words to use in politics,

business or even communicating to family. Whether Republican, Democrat or Independent, he gives you a lot to think about.

Now, here’s a rhetorical question for board members and superintendents that makes Luntz’s point: *What good are your best ideas, if those with whom you are communicating hear different things than what you are really trying to say?*

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