The Language of (Forgive Us) Change, As P&T Enters the Digital Age

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One of the great things about working in the office instead of at home—aside from the computer support (no, really)—is the relatively easy access to my fellow editors, who are on the same corridor and just around the corner. This being the 21st century, we have multiple methods of communicating with one another, depending on the circumstances—if the loud non-editors have taken over the hallway and we editorial types want to keep our doors closed, there is the interoffice phone and/or e-mail.

When the hallway is relatively quiet and we feel like being more sociable, or if we happen to bump into one another at the printer, the conversation periodically degenerates into a contest to see who received the worst manuscript, letter, or press release. I can guarantee that it will not be the one with the most typos or the dangling modifiers, although they are frequently serious contenders. No, the worst piece of writing is the one with the most public relations jargon (e.g., offering “solutions” to problems you don’t have) and corporate clichés, many of which involve turning perfectly good nouns like impact, money, partner, trend, and leverage into verbs—all of which we despise.

Sometimes the users of the Supreme Annoying Phrases (SAPs), as I call them (I just made that up), borrow the most irritating words from one another’s vocabulary and inject them into their own limited lexicons. For example, not a day goes by that we don’t all receive a press release announcing the merger of two companies, at least one of which will have some tangential association with pharmacy. These releases, I have learned, are not allowed to go out the door unless they contain a sentence, usually a quotation from the CEO of one of the companies, that goes something like this:

“This strategic alliance truly leverages the core competencies of our two organizations.

The use of multiple SAPs in a single sentence (like the one just cited) is undoubtedly what inspired the TV commercial with the employees in the lecture hall playing “Buzzword Bingo” instead of concentrating on the substance (?) of the boss’ speech. However, the idea behind that commercial did not originate with some ad agency exec; Buzzword Bingo made the rounds on the editors’ blogs ages ago. It was probably a frustrated editor who invented it in the first place! I didn’t search all of the 61,800 entries on Google, though, so I can’t be sure.

Perhaps you too see SAP-laden corporate memos weekly, daily, or hourly. In that case, you have my condolences. For the word-obsessed, however, it can sometimes be entertaining, akin to watching the train-wreck performances on “American Idol.” It doesn’t matter if we’re 10 minutes from deadline; the truly desktopable SAPs will instantaneously make the rounds of the entire editorial staff, complete with our venomous commentary and occasionally maniacal laughter. We can’t help it; it’s in our nature. When it comes to words, we’re picky. And we’re traditionalists (most of us, anyway).

For those of us who also happen to be political junkies, you can imagine the field day we’ve had with all the incessant talk among both Democrats and Republicans about change. And it isn’t because we’re averse to all types of change, or even because the word is used incorrectly. It’s just that what was once a perfectly acceptable multipurpose noun and verb has now been used to death—to the point where some of us can’t even stand to hear the word anymore. The politicians have ruined it, in much the same way that the media have ruined the word “green” for me (hello, it used to be a color) in their zeal to invoke the word in every story about the environment and global warming. Or the way every local TV news story about a homicide begins with “Shots rang out in the [fill in the neighborhood] section of [fill in your city].” Please, find another verb! Besides, everybody knows that shots don’t really ring, anyway.

So I was mildly surprised when my fellow editors started getting philosophical about change in their editor’s memos about the new digital editions of our publications (P&T, Managed Care, and Biotechnology Healthcare). Hadn’t we banned that word? But then I thought, how else are you supposed to talk about the evolving technology? It is what it is—you see? Clichés are sometimes useful—and so we’re reclaiming the word for our own noble editorial purposes.

For those of you who are wondering if I’ll ever get to the point, here it is: Positive changes are coming to P&T! Starting now, you can link to an interactive, digital edition from our Web site, www.ptcommunity.com. As with the PTCommunity site itself, you will eventually need to register in order to use the digital edition of the journal—but a trial version of the digital January issue is available now, complete with “flash animation.” Check it out!

We know you’re going to like it; for one thing, it’s more than just a static page of HTML. With the digital edition, you can search for key words in the issue, zoom in and out to adjust the size of the text, and get to the content in two ways: you can either “flip” the pages by clicking at the bottom of the page (it looks just like the print edition), or you can jump directly to an article from the table of contents. You can also jump to other Web
content from the embedded hyperlinks.

If you're interested in the products contained in the ads, you will eventually be able to click your mouse inside the ads to get to Web links and product information. In the near future, we also hope to be able to offer additional online-only content, such as audio and visual feeds, PowerPoint downloads, electronic readership surveys, and other interactive features.

So tell us what you want—what you really, really want. We might be sticks in the mud when it comes to spelling and grammar, but when it comes to technology, we're open to, you guessed it, change. ■