

Zip It!

Handling Communications Slip-Ups and Blunders

By Karen Friedman

In business as in life, even a seemingly harmless remark can backfire. Think about it—how many times have you hit send and wished you could get that e-mail back? How many times have you regretted something you said that hurt someone or positioned you poorly in an important meeting? It happens to all of us including those in the public eye who can be embarrassed on a far bigger stage. It's a reminder to all of us that we are responsible for what we say which is why it's so important to keep the end result in mind.

The blunders are endless and spark different degrees of offensiveness. Learning how to better handle slip-ups and prevent future errors in judgment can actually help you turn negatives to positives. No one understands the import of this better than actuaries!

For example, a television reporter I know aired a scathing report about broken security cameras at one of this country's busiest airports. The report was loaded with inaccuracies, but did not threaten public safety. Instead of calling management and blasting the reporter as airport executives wanted to do, we took a different tact to try to help them

change the end result. Airport communications professionals phoned the number one local television station in town and offered them an exclusive behind-the-scenes look at airport security. The station jumped on the chance to have a private tour that resulted in a positive story watched by a much larger audience. If executives had simply reacted and called to complain, they might have generated more negative publicity by creating an even bigger controversy. The lesson: think about the outcome you seek and program your internal GPS to take you there before you shift into gear.

Too often, companies with bruised egos overreact instead of thinking through how their words and actions can affect outcomes. Before picking up a phone or texting a publication to set the record straight as you see it, it's important to take this quick true or false test:

True or False: *This has nothing to do with my ego; it's about providing critical information for readers that could affect their safety or wellbeing.*

Yes, the statement is almost always false. Just because you don't like the tone of a report is not cause for you to keep talking.



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That leads to a story that didn't have such a happy ending when a leading expert in homeopathic medicine agreed to do an interview with John Stossel, co-host of ABC-TV's "20/20." The title of the segment: "Gimme a Break" should have been his first clue. Refusing media coaching, the spokesperson decided

he was fully capable of debunking myths and handling any tough questions that might come his way. And they came. When Stossel stated that perhaps homeopathic medicine was for “suckers,” the spokesperson said, “You can choose to call us suckers, but we have experience that suggests otherwise.” Not only did he inadvertently validate what Stossel suggested by repeating negatives, but also, those words became his words—devoid of message.

As you can imagine, the spokesperson was outraged at the edited television program that misrepresented a scientific study of homeopathy in its visual portrayal of how homeopathy works. In a memo to colleagues, he labeled it a “story of science fiction” and “reality television” to “discredit homeopathic medicine.” He wanted to demand a retraction from ABC and send letters to the editors of numerous national publications denouncing the broadcast. We advised against it explaining it’s important to realize

what was upsetting to him is not as big a deal to those who saw the piece. But when someone then writes emotionally charged letters with titles like “Junk Science,” the spokesperson was keeping the negative alive instead of looking for ways to educate people, share the positives of homeopathy and position the industry in a credible light. “Until you start focusing on what you can control,” we told the spokesperson, “you will never further your own agenda.”

Clearly, we’ve all made mistakes and have said things that unintentionally offended others without stopping to think about why the words we use or context we use them in is inappropriate. People sometimes use words like “gay” or “retarded” in contexts that have no relevance to homosexuals or challenged individuals without realizing how hurtful and offensive these words are to others or how what’s acceptable and non acceptable changes according to the times.

As an example, the word gay used to mean merry and flight attendants used to be called stewardesses. Administrative assistants were secretaries and housekeepers were once called maids. It used to be okay to refer to someone as “the Korean woman” which could be interpreted as a racial slur today. It is far more appropriate to identify that person as “the dark haired woman in the green dress” instead of referring to her ethnicity.

So, when a celebrity or politician says something offensive, in an oddly positive way, the remarks call attention to right versus wrong and should redirect all of us to think before we speak in an effort to prevent blunders that can have long lasting results. As former White House Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater once said: “You don’t have to explain what you don’t say.”