

Vague Words Leave Customers in a Quandary

By Dianna Booher

We're a nation and an industry that doesn't say what it means—publicly or privately. Not that we don't *intend* to say what we mean specifically and concretely. I take that back. Politicians know exactly what issues they're skirting and what problems they're not purporting to solve. It's the rest of us who have the best of intentions.

Do you recall some of the latest vague terms bandied about political circles?

“Trickle-down economics.”

“Wealthy Americans.”

“The middle class.”

And these vague terms in our own industry:

“Total quality management.”

“Rightsizing.”

“Empowerment.”

“Self-paced instruction.”

“Multimedia.”

Would anyone argue these have very different meanings from company to company, from manager to manager, from trainer to trainer?

We use vague, abstract terms when specific, concrete words would do nicely, thank you. We give instructions customers can't follow. We present theoretical concepts that training participants can't understand well enough to use. We pitch good products that prospective customers fear, and we push poor products that people pay for.

The account rep says, “We'll have that paperwork to you in a few days” Is that two days or ten days? The job manual says, “You'll need to set these thermostats much higher when the machines are idle” Is that ten degrees or twenty degrees difference?

Not keeping promises—a common complaint customers have against the people they do business with. Correction: About the people they *stop* doing business with. In the majority of situations, you can trace the difficulty to a vague statement an account

executive made that was interpreted quite differently by the customer. The result? The customer concludes that the company intentionally or carelessly screwed up. Can you afford vague words and phrases in your proposals and courses?

#

285 words

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