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THE SUBLIMINAL POWER OF WORDS

Handle them carefully, for words have more power than atom bombs.

— Author and poet Pearl Strachan Hurd

While it seems so obvious that words have great power to persuade, in fact, I'd argue that words are the basis for all persuasion. Your words either persuade you or you use your words to persuade another person.

The simplest of words lathered on the heart of stone can cause the hard exterior to reveal the beating cradle of human connectedness. The same words hurled like spears can pierce the soul, leaving behind an empty vessel to wander the earth with a wound that can be healed only by better words not often found.

As a persuader, it is important that you completely understand the great responsibility that comes with learning how to use words. Words can be weapons of mass destruction (deception),

and as levers and fulcrums for change, and all have their place. It is up to you to choose how you'll use your words.

The subliminal power of words comes with your ability to speak to different parts of the person you are influencing. You may move him to emotion, to action, to inaction, or to intense rage to create change. But it won't be you or the words themselves, it will be the combinations you choose and the intensity with which they are delivered.

Roy Williams, the author of *The Wizard of Ads* and founder of Wizard Academy (wizardacademy.com) does some of the most fascinating exposition on words that I've ever seen. Thanks, Roy! In one exercise, he starts out by getting people pumped on Bruce Springsteen's rock anthem "Born in the U.S.A."

"Born in the U.S.A." is an anthem whose music gets the blood pumping of most everyone who hears it and fills hearts with pride. When you take a close look at the words, however, cleverly disguised by amazing music, the feeling begins to change. The lyrics actually tell the story of a beaten-down veteran who was abandoned by the United States and the system he fought for. If you've never read the actual lyrics of "Born in the U.S.A.," I strongly suggest that you google them and read them now. Words, when combined with something that distract, can paint a completely different picture and engage us deeply subliminally. They even often confuse us to the extent that we praise the U.S.A. for abandoning one of its own after he served his country in the name of patriotism.

ATTENTION

The first key in subliminal language is being heard. You must have a powerful opening in person or in print if you hope to

have the opportunity to persuade. The best opening is one that creates immediate interest in what you have to say or induces intense curiosity.

The Zeigarnik Effect is attributed to Russian psychologist Bluma Zeigarnik. The Zeigarnik Effect says that people are more likely to remember things that are left incomplete than those that have been completed. This was first observed with waiters when it was noted that they remembered more of what was required by customers who had not paid their bills than those who had. The Zeigarnik Effect is also often referred to as the basis for the idea of cliffhangers in movies and books. Something is left incomplete, which creates tension that begs for closure, which keeps people watching. Howard Gossage was famous for using this technique in the 1960s, sometimes creating ads that just ended right in the middle of a thought. People had to know what came next. Internet marketer Mark Joyner was one of the first to repopularize the idea in direct marketing and persuasion.

The Zeigarnik Effect is a very powerful attention maintainer once you've gotten attention. By creating a cliffhanger, you leave people wanting to know more. They need closure and they stay with you as you implement your persuasion strategy.

Subliminal Selling Secret

When you are trying to persuade an individual or an audience, create tension by intentionally leaving something out. For example, give a list of three things that will make them successful with your product. Give them the first two ideas, each building up to a bigger and bigger crescendo with the
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conclusion in number three. Before you give them number three, go into another piece of information. Allow the tension to build as they create an internal need for closure. Then give them number three, which will be a key idea that you want them to remember. Watch what happens to retention around the fulfillment piece; you'll be amazed.

SHORT AND SIMPLE

Every time I'm having difficulty getting a point across, it is because I violate this rule. Short sentences and simple words sell. If people need a literature professor or an Oxford English dictionary at hand to understand what you are saying, they won't be able to remember your point.

Simple words and short sentences are easy to digest. They make swallowing new ideas easy. Don't get me wrong, I'm a big advocate of extremely large vocabularies, but they are unnecessary in persuasion. I adore creating and reading an obtuse word salad, but it won't sell. Remember when we were talking about propaganda and covered sound bites? Sound bites are ideas reduced to their simplest form using the most understandable words.

Dennis Miller and Bill Maher are two of the funniest political comedians working today. I'm not sure there is another human being close to Dennis Miller as measured by the number of facts and references he has in his head. He also has one of the largest vocabularies I've ever heard. Guys like me find Dennis Miller hilarious, but many Americans don't, because they don't get his references or the subtlety in his language.

Bill Maher, love him or hate him, has an amazing grasp of facts and vocabulary as well. Bill is able to break ideas down into very simple sound bites that you can understand. Whether you agree with him or not, you get it. I'd love to see Bill Maher and Dennis Miller square off on a no-holds-barred pay-per-view debate. The verbal carnage and obtuse connections would be at epic proportions. Television would never be the same.

When you find resistance to persuasion, start looking at how the message is communicated. You'll nearly always find that there is confusion in the words and ideas that brevity and clarity will clear up.

Clarity and brevity equal belief.

**TELL THEM WHAT YOU ARE GOING TO TELL
THEM, TELL THEM, AND THEN TELL THEM
WHAT YOU TOLD THEM**

So the old adage goes. When it comes to subliminal persuasion and words, it is advice to heed. Consistency in your message makes it easier to understand. The more times someone hears something, the more they begin to believe it as long as it doesn't conflict with a deeply held belief. And, when it comes to changing beliefs, it just takes more time and more consistent messages with different levels of proof.

When you are developing arguments, it is often useful to have multiple setups that lead to the same conclusions. Those conclusions should be brief and easy to understand. When you present the argument in a number of different ways, the audience begins to feel that the core idea is familiar. Once they've heard many arguments, they will find one they agree with and accept.

Consistency also offers us great comfort. Use your words to create predictability to increase persuasion. You've probably had the experience of being able to finish someone else's sentence. Being able to draw a conclusion that completes your idea is a brilliant word strategy.

ASK THEM A QUESTION AND TELL THEM WHAT THEY WANT TO HEAR

One of the most overlooked persuasion tools is the use of powerful questions. Questions allow you to elicit the information that people need to hear to be persuaded. Once a question is answered, you simply have to craft a story that gives people the answer that they want to hear. Even when you have to present information that isn't the answer they want, you start by acknowledging what they want.

In the movie *Our Brand Is Crisis*, James Carville's political consulting firm is working on winning a presidential election in Bolivia. They poll nearly every day. The results of the polls become the basis for tomorrow's message. This strategy worked for them, as they generated a slightly over 1 percent victory, which is a win, but a very weak one. They went wrong because they didn't create big enough stories with enough consistency. Your stories must be easy to understand, consistent, and they must be self-fulfilling prophecies.

Vagaries in language allow you to let people fill in the blanks of their expectations. Being intentionally vague can often be beneficial as long as the audience fills in the blanks correctly. When people fill in the blanks, they need proof that they made the right decision. The defining step is to present them with what you know will occur as what they should expect.

The best way to understand what people need to hear is to ask very carefully crafted questions. Your questions must be directed at discovering the emotions, the processes behind the decisions that they make, and the beliefs that they hold. Questions that tend to get the most information are very specific open-ended questions. Here are a few examples:

- How do you know?
- Can you explain how _____ happens?
- How specifically does _____ occur?
- Has there ever been a time that _____?
- If you were going to explain _____ to someone, what would you say?
- Tell me about your experience with _____?
- How does _____ make you feel?
- How will you know when you've been successful with _____?

By asking open-ended questions that have a specific point in them, you get the information you need to feed back to them in your answers. When you are conducting mass persuasion, you need to feed the information back in a way that will allow people to hear what they need to hear but doesn't feel like they are being pandered to. Lip service is a persuasion killer. Ideally, when you present the information that they need to hear back to them, it is important that you allow some time to pass before you tell them.

There will be times, however, that you need to immediately tell them what they need to hear. There are two ways to handle it. One is to agree that whatever they need to hear exists.

The second way is to tell them what they need to hear in an example of you doing it for someone else. The third-party example doesn't feel like pandering and it demonstrates how it might work for them as well. For example, I might say to someone who has revealed that they need to get the approval of their spouse for a purchase. "A client yesterday explained to his spouse that buying and planting these trees added \$10,000 in appraised value to their home and that really seemed to make sense to her. It is tough to say no to adding equity, isn't it?"

Subliminal Selling Secret

Begin your persuasion sequences by asking people to tell you what they need to hear. Ask them very powerfully engaging questions and listen carefully. Challenge what you hear to make sure you understand what you heard. I challenge by asking the question: "Does _____ mean _____?" or "What does that mean to you?"

By asking that question, you get to the real explanation of what they mean by things that seem key. If they really are key, they'll explain themselves in a way that has some intensity or emphasis. They'll clarify for you. This is where you'll be paying particular attention, because this is often the information that you'll be spinning and giving back to them later.

PAINT BIG WORD PICTURES

The more vividly you describe something, the more likely people are to get pulled in to the explanation. Detail counts when you are building word pictures. You should focus on involving all the emotions possible. Let me paint a word picture of persuasion for you.

“You can tell when persuasion is occurring. First, you get a feeling of understanding that washes over you. Then just behind that comes that sense of surety that starts in the pit of your stomach. You can see the others around you as they get it, too, the understanding and excitement are nearly palatable. It feels exciting to get it. You feel compelled, moved forward as if on autopilot, to the action you must take. The voice in your head that normally questions your decisions is quickly quelled. You achieve a sense of peace, of determination. And, there is the anticipation of what is to come now that the decision has been made.”

That is a large word picture. Allow me to show you another one.

“The skin on her right arm had the consistency of used sandpaper: cracked, worn out, and dried up from the sun.”

These kinds of word pictures are easy to understand and for people to imagine. The subliminal persuader uses word pictures to cause people to imagine, because once they imagine, they enter the picture and become part of the experience themselves. They project the experience onto themselves, good or bad. If it is good, they want more; if bad, they want the solution. Your next word picture should walk them into the solution.

COVERT LANGUAGE

Before I start on this topic, I want you to understand I’m a big fan of neurolinguistic programming (NLP) and hypnosis as communication modalities. Used appropriately, they can have intensely effective results. Most people, however, pick and choose pieces from the modalities and don’t understand how to use them. The result is that they often don’t work and just end up sounding like bad language. Worse, people who hear you

talk think they understand what you are doing and start telling you how much they admire your language patterns because of something they believe they heard.

Wow, it really feels good to get that off my chest. I'm not suggesting that you shouldn't study NLP or hypnotic language patterns. Quite the opposite, in fact. I'm suggesting that if you want to learn them, that you actually have to study them, and you should do it with a qualified trainer.

There is a lot of emphasis put on covert language in the persuasion community. You'll hear people talk about embedded commands, marked-out language or text, or hypnotic language structure. And while there is some validity to all of it, it is designed to be delivered when people are in a trance. It takes a very highly skilled linguist with a knowledge of hypnosis to make these kinds of techniques work. You don't learn them from a book; you learn them from face-to-face experiential training. You have to have someone show you what reactions you are looking for in people to understand whether you are being effective or not.

It sounds really cool to say that if you hide some words inside a sentence that people will take action based on it. Let me give you an example. Read the following sentence out loud.

By now, you may find yourself asking the question, "Will I take this now?"

Now, that sentence contains what some people would consider embedded commands. The first one is "By now." *By now* employs the idea of phonological ambiguity. A word that sounds the same as another in context is translated in context in the brain. So *By now* becomes *Buy now*. The next command

is to “find yourself asking the question, ‘Will I take this now?’” This is a combined command of telling you to ask yourself a question, then telling you to “take this now.” Again, this could work in the right conditions, but most people are simply not skilled enough nor do they have enough time to properly condition the listener. The other problem with this kind of language and embedded commands is that in written form, people who don’t know how to use this language won’t read it properly in their head, so the impact is diminished.

A much better use of cover language is metaphor. The American Heritage Dictionary defines metaphor as “A figure of speech in which a word or phrase that ordinarily designates one thing is used to designate another, thus making an implicit comparison, as in *a sea of troubles* or *All the world’s a stage* (Shakespeare).”

Your audience is able to interpret metaphor much more easily because they have experience not only interpreting, but creating, metaphor. Even when metaphors that have the same meaning are mixed, for example, “You reap what you sow and they will always come home to roost,” your audience still understands what they mean.

Metaphor works because it allows you to take complex ideas and make them understandable by replacing the troublesome piece with something people already understand. They can make the connection. You should regularly use metaphor in all of your speaking and writing to become more persuasive. Metaphor is the fuel that combusts in the engine of persuasion.

Closely related to and often confused with metaphor is analogy. The definition of *analogy* at dictionary.com is “a similarity

between like features of two things, on which a comparison may be based: *the analogy between the heart and a pump.*” When used properly, analogies are great clarifiers of ideas that may be hard to grasp.

When I was selling point-of-sale software that had integrated accounting, something that at the time was not common, I often used an analogy to make the connection for people. I’d say, “Integrated point-of-sale is like an ATM: You swipe your card, you get your money, your account is debited. When the customer makes a purchase, the point-of-sale software does the rest.” The analogy was an easy way for them to get their head around how it might work based on a system they already understood and used.

Metaphor and analogy allow you to take the focus away from the technicalities of the language or the persuasion. They move the audience’s focus to something they can understand and easily accept. Once they’ve accepted the metaphor or analogy, they are already agreeing, in most cases, with what comes next.

The covertness of the language is what is concealed by the analogy or the metaphor that slides in under the radar of critical analysis.

DEVELOPING EFFECTIVENESS WITH WORDS

You must constantly practice how you use words to become most effective with them. You must also pay particular attention to how other people use their words to influence as well.

Regardless of your political views, there have been some amazing communicators as presidents. The thing to pay attention to

is how their words are combined. Most presidents don't write their own speeches; they are written by professional speechwriters. It is even better to observe and listen to the delivery and then read the words by themselves. My suggestion is that you carefully study the speeches of:

President John F. Kennedy

President Ronald Reagan

President Bill Clinton

Martin Luther King Jr.

These are some of the most profoundly effective persuaders of our time. When you understand how they use their words and overlay their model onto yours, your words will move into the background and your ideas will ignite the masses. That ignition of the people is the true essence of subliminal persuasion. It is where the seduction occurs.

Subliminal Selling Secret

Break apart one of your favorite speeches from one of the people in the earlier-mentioned list and practice delivering it until you can do it with the same intensity as the person who delivered it. Emulate their speaking style, their body language, and their eye movements. Practice their inflection and their intonation. Make it as precise as you can. Once you've mastered it, practice delivering your sales pitch in the same format. Emulate them completely, but make the words yours this time. This is true subliminal persuasion and leverages the power of someone who has mastered persuasion.

Language in persuasion is one of the least-understood subliminal persuasion tactics for several reasons. First, it is the area where people incorrectly assume proficiency exists; it doesn't. Proficiency in language comes from practice. The second reason that it is misunderstood is that proficiency takes a lot of practice. The more you practice your language, the better your skills will get. The better your skills get, the more people will be moved.

The more you study language and practice language in all forms, in writing and in person, the better you'll become at correctly identifying what people need to hear and be able to present it to them on a dime in any situation. But more important, you'll be able to deliver the information in a way that is simple and easy to understand, which leads to massive action.

Leverage your language. It is the most powerful tool you own.

Implementation Is Everything

Money Follows Action

Before you read the next chapter, take the following actions:

- Develop a question set that you can use to extract the information that people need to hear so that you can build it into your persuasive strategy.
- Find the most complicated pieces of your presentation and see how you can use simpler ideas, better words, metaphors, or analogies to take the focus away from the complexity and increase understanding and acceptance.
- Identify the three best communicators in your field right now. Study them carefully, what they say, and how they say it.

Understand what makes them compelling. By doing a detailed analysis, you'll quickly understand exactly what you need to do to move the masses in your favor. You'll also find their weaknesses and those weaknesses that can be exploited to move the audience to your side.

ESSENTIAL FURTHER STUDY

Books

The Stuff of Thought—Steven Pinker (Viking, 2007)

Words That Work—Dr. Frank Luntz (Hyperion, 2007)

Movies

I Have A Dream—Martin Luther King Jr. (MPI Home Video, 2005)

Search YouTube and Google Video for clips of all presidents' major speeches.

Television

Choose at least one politician in whom you are interested and follow his speaking style. Listen to the words he uses, the way they're delivered, and the stories they tell.