

WILLIAM LUTZ

With These Words I Can Sell You Anything

William Lutz (b. 1940) taught English at Rutgers University from 1991 to 2006. He also edited the Quarterly Review of Doublespeak, a publication that collected misleading language and euphemisms by politicians, advertisers, educators, and others. Lutz has worked with dozens of corporations and government agencies, consulting and conducting workshops on clear language. His books include Doublespeak: From Revenue Enhancement to Terminal Living (1989), The New Doublespeak: No One Knows What Anyone's Saying Anymore (1996), and Doublespeak Defined (1999).

Lutz approaches the language of advertising in much the way a literary critic approaches a poem. He encourages his readers to use the same rigor: "Your job is to figure out exactly what each word is doing in the ad—what each word really means, not what the advertiser wants you to think it means." We often presume that the goal of language is clear and accurate communication. As you read his essay (adapted from the book Doublespeak: From Revenue Enhancement to Terminal Living), notice how words can mask reality, or mislead us.

One problem advertisers have when they try to convince you that the product they are pushing is really different from other, similar products is that their claims are subject to some laws. Not a lot of laws, but there are some designed to prevent fraudulent or untruthful claims in advertising. Generally speaking, advertisers have to be careful in what they say in their ads, in the claims they make for the products they advertise. Parity claims are safe because they are legal and supported by a number of court decisions. But beyond parity claims there are weasel words.

Advertisers use weasel words to appear to be making a claim for a product when in fact they are making no claim at all. Weasel

words get their name from the way weasels eat the eggs they find in the nests of other animals. A weasel will make a small hole in the egg, suck out the insides, then place the egg back in the nest. Only when the egg is examined closely is it found to be hollow. That's the way it is with weasel words in advertising.

“HELP” — THE NUMBER ONE WEASEL WORD

The biggest weasel word used in advertising doublespeak is “help.” Now “help” only means to aid or assist, nothing more. It does not mean to conquer, stop, eliminate, end, solve, heal, cure, or anything else. But once the ad says “help,” it can say just about anything after that because “help” qualifies everything coming after it. The trick is that the claim that comes after the weasel word is usually so strong and so dramatic that you forget the word “help” and concentrate only on the dramatic claim. You read into the ad a message that the ad does not contain. More importantly, the advertiser is not responsible for the claim that you read into the ad, even though the advertiser wrote the ad so you would read that claim into it.



“Advertisers use weasel words to appear to be making a claim for a product when in fact they are making no claim at all.”

The next time you see an ad for a cold medicine that promises that it “helps relieve cold symptoms fast,” don’t rush out to buy it. Ask yourself what this claim is really saying. Remember, “helps” means only that the medicine will aid or assist. What will it aid or assist in doing? Why, “relieve” your cold “symptoms.” “Relieve” only means to ease, alleviate, or mitigate, not to stop, end, or cure. Nor does the claim say how much relieving this medicine will do. Nowhere does this ad claim it will cure anything. In fact, the ad doesn’t even claim it will do anything at all. The ad only claims that it will aid in relieving (not curing) your cold symptoms, which are probably a runny nose, watery eyes, and a headache. In other words, this medicine probably contains a standard decongestant and some aspirin. By the way, what does “fast” mean? Ten minutes, one hour, one day? What is fast to one person can be very slow to another. Fast is another weasel word.

Look at ads in magazines and newspapers, listen to ads on radio and television, and you’ll find the word “help” in ads for all kinds of products. How often do you read or hear such phrases as “helps stop . . .,” “helps overcome . . .,” “helps eliminate . . .,” “helps you feel . . .,” or “helps you look . . .”? If you start looking for this weasel word in advertising, you’ll be amazed at how often it occurs. Analyze the claims in the ads using “help,” and you will discover that these ads are really saying nothing. 5

VIRTUALLY SPOTLESS

One of the most powerful weasel words is “virtually,” a word so innocent that most people don’t pay any attention to it when it is used in an advertising claim. But watch out. “Virtually” is used in advertising claims that appear to make specific, definite promises when there is no promise. After all, what does “virtually” mean? It means “in essence of effect, although not in fact.” Look at that definition again. “Virtually” means not in fact. It does not mean “almost” or “just about the same as,” or anything else.

The next time you see the ad that says that this dishwasher detergent “leaves dishes virtually spotless,” just remember how advertisers twist the meaning of the weasel word “virtually.” You can have lots of spots on your dishes after using this detergent and the ad claim will still be true, because what this claim really

means is that this detergent does not in fact leave your dishes spotless. Whenever you see or hear an ad claim that uses the word "virtually," just translate that claim into its real meaning. So the television set that is "virtually trouble free" becomes the television set that is not in fact trouble free, the "virtually foolproof operation" of any appliance becomes an operation that is in fact not foolproof, and the product that "virtually never needs service" becomes the product that is not in fact service free.

NEW AND IMPROVED

If "new" is the most frequently used word on a product package, "improved" is the second most frequent. In fact, the two words are almost always used together. It seems just about everything sold these days is "new and improved." The next time you're in the supermarket, try counting the number of times you see these words on products.

Just what do these words mean? The use of the word "new" is restricted by regulations, so an advertiser can't just use the word on a product or in an ad without meeting certain requirements. For example, a product is considered new for about six months during a national advertising campaign. If the product is being advertised only in a limited test market area, the word can be used longer, and in some instances has been used for as long as two years.

What makes a product "new"? Some products have been ¹⁰ around for a long time, yet every once in a while you discover that they are being advertised as "new." Well, an advertiser can call a product new if there has been "a material functional change" in the product. What is "a material functional change," you ask? Good question. In fact it's such a good question it's being asked all the time. It's up to the manufacturer to prove that the product has undergone such a change. And if the manufacturer isn't challenged on the claim, then there's no one to stop it. Moreover, the change does not have to be an improvement in the product. One manufacturer added an artificial lemon scent to a cleaning product and called it "new and improved," even though the product did not clean any better than without the lemon scent. The manufacturer defended the use of the word "new" on the grounds that

ADVERTISING DOUBLESPEAK: QUICK QUIZ

Test your awareness of advertising doublespeak. The following is a list of statements from some recent ads. Your job is to figure out what each of these ads really says.

DOMINO'S PIZZA: "Because nobody delivers better."

SINUTAB: "It can stop the pain."

TUMS: "The stronger acid neutralizer."

LISTERMINT: "Making your mouth a cleaner place."

CASCADE: "For virtually spotless dishes."

NUPRIN: "Little. Yellow. Different. Better."

ANACIN: "Better relief."

ADVIL: "Advanced medicine for pain."

ALEVE COLD AND SINUS: "12 hours of relief."

PONDS COLD CREAM: "Ponds cleans like no soap can."

MILLER LITE BEER: "Tastes great. Less filling."

PHILLIPS MILK OF MAGNESIA: "Nobody treats you better than MOM."

BAYER: "The wonder drug that works wonders."

KNORR: "Where taste is everything."

ANUSOL: "Anusol is the word to remember for relief."

DIMETAPP: "It relieves kids as well as colds."

LIQUID DRÄNO: "The liquid strong enough to be called Dräno."

JOHNSON & JOHNSON BABY POWDER: "Like magic for your skin."

PURITAN: "Make it your oil for life."

PAM: "Pam, because how you cook is as important as what you cook."

TYLENOL GEL-CAPS: "It's not a capsule. It's better."

ALKA-SELTZER PLUS: "Breaks up your worst cold symptoms."

the artificial scent changed the chemical formula of the product and therefore constituted "a material functional change."

Which brings up the word "improved." When used in advertising, "improved" does not mean "made better." It only means "changed" or "different from before." So, if the detergent maker puts a plastic pour spout on the box of detergent, the product has been "improved," and away we go with a whole new advertising campaign. Or, if the cereal maker adds more fruit or a different

kind of fruit to the cereal, there's an improved product. Now you know why manufacturers are constantly making little changes in their products. Whole new advertising campaigns, designed to convince you that the product has been changed for the better, are based on small changes in superficial aspects of a product. The next time you see an ad for an "improved" product, ask yourself what was wrong with the old one. Ask yourself just how "improved" the product is. Finally, you might check to see whether the "improved" version costs more than the unimproved one.

"New" is just too useful and powerful a word in advertising for advertisers to pass it up easily. So they use weasel words that say "new" without really saying it. One of their favorites is "introducing," as in, "Introducing improved Tide," or "Introducing the stain remover." The first is simply saying, here's our improved soap; the second, here's our new advertising campaign for our detergent. Another favorite is "now," as in, "Now there's Sinex," which simply means that Sinex is available. Then there are phrases like "Today's Chevrolet," "Presenting Dristan," and "A fresh way to start the day." The list is really endless because advertisers are always finding new ways to say "new" without really saying it.

ACTS FAST

"Acts" and "works" are two popular weasel words in advertising because they bring action to the product and to the advertising claim. When you see the ad for the cough syrup that "Acts on the cough control center," ask yourself what this cough syrup is claiming to do. Well, it's just claiming to "act," to do something, to perform an action. What is it that the cough syrup does? The ad doesn't say. It only claims to perform an action or do something on your "cough control center." By the way, what and where is your "cough control center"? I don't remember learning about that part of the body in human biology class.

Ads that use such phrases as "acts fast," "acts against," "acts to prevent," and the like are saying essentially nothing, because "act" is a word empty of any specific meaning. The ads are always careful not to specify exactly what "act" the product performs. Just because a brand of aspirin claims to "act fast" for headache

relief doesn't mean this aspirin is any better than any other aspirin. What is the "act" that this aspirin performs? You're never told. Maybe it just dissolves quickly. Since aspirin is a parity product, all aspirin is the same and therefore functions the same.

WORKS LIKE ANYTHING ELSE

If you don't find the word "acts" in an ad, you will probably find the weasel word "works." In fact, the two words are almost interchangeable in advertising. Watch out for ads that say a product "works against," "works like," "works for," or "works longer." As with "acts," "works" is the same meaningless verb used to make you think that this product really does something, and maybe even something special or unique. But "works," like "acts," is basically a word empty of any specific meaning. 15

LIKE MAGIC

Whenever advertisers want you to stop thinking about the product and to start thinking about something bigger, better, or more attractive than the product, they use that very popular weasel word, "like." The word "like" is the advertiser's equivalent of a magician's use of misdirection. "Like" gets you to ignore the product and concentrate on the claim the advertiser is making about it. "For skin like peaches and cream" claims the ad for a skin cream. What is that ad really claiming? It doesn't say this cream will give you peaches-and-cream skin. There is no verb in this claim, so it doesn't even mention using the product. How is skin ever like "peaches and cream"? The ad is making absolutely no promise or claim whatsoever for this skin cream. If you think this cream will give you soft, smooth, youthful-looking skin, you are the one who has read that meaning into the ad.

The wine that claims "It's like taking a trip to France" wants you to think about a romantic evening in Paris as you walk along the boulevard after a wonderful meal in an intimate little bistro. Of course, you don't really believe that a wine can take you to France, but the goal of the ad is to get you to think pleasant, romantic thoughts about France and not about how the wine tastes or how expensive it may be. That little word "like" has

taken you away from crushed grapes into a world of your own imaginative making. Who knows, maybe the next time you buy wine, you'll think those pleasant thoughts when you see this brand of wine, and you'll buy it. Or, maybe you weren't even thinking about buying wine at all, but now you just might pick up a bottle the next time you're shopping. Ah, the power of "like" in advertising.

THE WORLD OF ADVERTISING

A study some years ago found the following words to be among the most popular used in U.S. television advertisements: "new," "improved," "better," "extra," "fresh," "clean," "beautiful," "free," "good," "great," and "light." At the same time, the following words were found to be among the most frequent on British television: "new," "good-better-best," "free," "fresh," "delicious," "full," "sure," "clean," "wonderful," and "special." While these words may occur most frequently in ads, and while ads may be filled with weasel words, you have to watch out for all the words used in advertising, not just the words mentioned here.

Every word in an ad is there for a reason; no word is wasted. Your job is to figure out exactly what each word is doing in an ad—what each word really means, not what the advertiser wants you to think it means. Remember, the ad is trying to get you to buy a product, so it will put the product in the best possible light, using any device, trick, or means legally allowed. Your only defense against advertising (besides taking up permanent residence on the moon) is to develop and use a strong critical reading, listening, and looking ability. Always ask yourself what the ad is really saying. When you see ads on television, don't be misled by the pictures, the visual images. What does the ad say about the product? What does the ad not say? What information is missing from the ad? Only by becoming an active, critical consumer of the doublespeak of advertising will you ever be able to cut through the doublespeak and discover what the ad is really saying.

For Discussion and Writing

1. According to Lutz, if " 'new' is the most frequently used word on a product package, 'improved' is the second most frequent" (par. 8).

What do these words mean in the context of packaging and advertising? What words do advertisers sometimes use in place of “new”?

2. Lutz addresses the reader as “you” throughout the essay. Why do you think he writes in the second person? How does this choice affect his main point and the essay’s overall effectiveness?
3. **connections** Compare Lutz’s “weasel words” with the various techniques in Donna Woolfolk Cross’s “Propaganda: How Not To Be Bamboozled” (p. 71). According to her, “propaganda works by tricking us, by momentarily distracting the eye while the rabbit pops out from beneath the cloth” (par. 2). Does the misleading language in Lutz’s essay fit into any of Woolfolk Cross’s categories? Evaluate “weasel words” as propaganda.
4. Lutz gives a quiz within his essay to test our awareness of tag lines, slogans, and doublespeak in advertising. Choose an advertisement—online, in a magazine, on television—and examine its language. Does it contain “weasel words”? What do they mean? Is the ad misleading or deliberately ambiguous? If the advertisement contains images, do they trick us, or redirect our attention from the product?