

**9 Danger Words and Phrases
to avoid when in
conversation with customers
and 2 positive ones
that work**

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Danger Words and Phrases to Avoid

But

When people hear the word ‘but’ in the middle of a sentence, they expect and often interpret what comes next as being negative.

Work at kicking the buts out of your explanations. For example, instead of:

“I don’t have the authority to do... but what I can do is....”

Rephrase this to:

“While I don’t have the authority to... what I can do is....”

That way your explanation is a lot more likely to be considered positively.

However

While this is a little softer than ‘but’, it is best to work at rephrasing your explanation. So instead of:

“The XYZ inverter is no longer available, however we do have the QRS model which is....”

Rephrase this to:

“While the XYZ inverter is no longer available, we do have the QRS model which is....”

Umm and Ah

These are natural sounds to make when you are thinking aloud. There is no need to eliminate them from your speech. The danger is when you overuse them and this becomes a habit.

It can be quite distracting for the person you are talking to and may suggest to them that you aren’t confident in what you are saying.

It often helps to use an acknowledging phrase to give yourself more thinking time. For example, *“Sounds like you have a few misgivings about...”*

Focus on what the other person is saying and confirm understanding. As well as letting the other person know you are listening this again gives you more (silent) thinking time.

Also, work on your breathing and concentrate on cutting down the audible ‘Umms’ and ‘Ahs’.

Drawing a Blank

Instead of ‘danger words’ this is about no words, when your mind goes blank and you can’t think of what you were going to say. This usually occurs not because you are forgetful, it’s actually because your brain is jumping ahead.

Most people tend to talk at about 100 to 120 words per minute yet the brain can process information at four to five times this speed. That's why when face-to-face, body language is so important; we are interpreting the other person's body language as well as what is said and the way it is said (words and tone).

The danger is that our brain shoots ahead and without even realising it we 'umm' and 'ah'. Even worse, as we come back to the present, we may draw a blank.

It's a bit like walking into a room to get something and not being able to remember why you are there. The reason this happens is because your mind is somewhere else thinking about other things, and you lose your initial train of thought. In that case, the moment you relax and retrace your steps the brain usually reconnects with your initial thought.

That's harder to do on the phone... especially with someone at the other end in need of a coherent response!

You'll have to

People don't like to be told what to do or what not to do. Ideally it is best to offer options. If this isn't possible, work on your phrasing:

"We no longer have this available. Fortunately, there is an excellent alternative..."

or

"While I don't have the authority to do such and such, what I can do for you is..."

Let's say your customers have to fill out a form or give you their details before you can give them what they want. Instead of, *"You'll have to fill out this before..."* rephrase this to, *"Once you've completed your details on this form I'll be able to do such and such for you."* This sells them the benefits for them of completing the form.

No

In your role there are bound to be times when you have to tell the customer they can't have what they want. Ideally though, try to do so without starting with the word, "No". Because there is every likelihood that your customer will not accept or even listen to whatever you say after that.

Why is this?

"No" is the word that keeps us alive from the time we are toddlers – *"No, don't touch the hot stove"*, *"No, don't play on the road"*. And it's the word that spoils our fun again, and again and again – *"No you can't stay up to watch..."*, *"No you can't play with the..."*

So, by the time we are adults this barrage of No's built up in our brain produces an almost irrational aversion to hearing "No". As Dr. Andrew Newberg, respected medical researcher and co-author of 'Words Can Change Your Brain' explains:

“If I were to put you into an fMRI scanner—a huge donut-shaped magnet that can take a video of the neural changes happening in your brain—and flash the word “NO” for less than one second, you’d see a sudden release of dozens of stress-producing hormones. These chemicals immediately interrupt the normal functioning of your brain, impairing logic, reason, language processing, and communication.”

Unfortunately

“Unfortunately Mr. Leon I won’t be able to help you with that.”

How does that make you feel? You just know that the so-called service provider has no intention of putting any more energy into solving your problem. And all the effort from here on in is going to have to be expended by you!

By leading with *“unfortunately”* the company representative is setting you up for disappointment. It’s as if they are washing their hands of you.

As with ‘but’ and ‘however’, work at rephrasing your statement. For example, instead of *“Unfortunately we can’t provide...”*

Rephrase this as:

“Although we can’t provide..., we do have an alternative option which many of our customers find...”

or:

“While we can’t provide..., there must be some other ways of handling this. Let’s explore...”

The message then is collaboration rather than disappointment. It’s a *“Let me see what we can do”* attitude.

Apparently Apple employees are told to say *“as it turns out”* rather than *“unfortunately”* to sound less negative when they are unable to solve a technical problem.

Words really do make a difference.

“I’ll try”

Let’s say you are holding a BBQ at home or arranging a staff function for work. You say to a colleague, *“Will you be coming on Saturday?”* Their response is, *“I’ll try.”*

Do you expect them to attend?

No, I didn’t think so. What ‘I’ll try’ typically means is, *“I’m too embarrassed to tell you I won’t be coming. I can’t think of a plausible excuse right now but this should let me off the hook!”*

The other thing about ‘I’ll try’ when you say it, is that it’s a poor message to give your brain.

Yoda puts it best, *“Do or not do. There is no try.”*

Be courageous and say what you mean. A statement of intent – ‘I will’ – or at least be honest with yourself – ‘I won’t be able to’.

‘I’ll try’ may seem like a safe way of ensuring you are not held accountable, even by yourself. You owe it to yourself, and in a work situation to your customers, to be more honest than that.

This description from influence and persuasion specialist, Rob Jolles puts it well:

“The best part about the words, ‘I’ll try’ is if you use them, you’ll never fail. If you succeed in whatever you’re trying to do, good for you! If you are unsuccessful, it’s no big deal; at least you tried.

In fact, ‘I’ll try’ is almost like your own personal, ‘Get out of Jail Free Card’. You can use that phrase every time you’re not fully committed to succeeding. Of course, the problem with this particular ‘Get out of Jail Free Card’ is that, unlike the game of Monopoly, where you can only use it once, you can just keep using the card over and over again. Each time you use it, the card becomes easier and easier to use. And failing will be easier and easier to accept, too.”

Take heed of Yoda and Rob Jules words and tell yourself, ‘There is no get out of jail free card’. Far better to say ‘I will’ or ‘I won’t be able to’. Be honest with yourself and others.

ASAP

What is wrong with these two statements?

“As soon as Sheila has finished on the phone I’ll have her call you.”

“Shane is expected back in the office at 2.00pm. As soon as he’s back I’ll have him call you.”

In both cases the person making these promises to the caller has made a commitment on behalf of a colleague that may be unreasonable.

What else do Sheila and Shane have to do when they have concluded their current activities? Is there urgent information they have to send? Are there other urgent, already promised calls they have to make?

Unless you are 100% sure, don’t set unnecessary deadlines for your colleagues.

It might be safer to say, using Shane’s case as an example, *“I’ll ask him to phone you when he returns. If Shane’s not able to get back to you this afternoon would you like me to email and let you know?”*

It's also not advisable to use a phrase like 'as soon as possible' (ASAP). To you ASAP may mean in about 90 minutes after you've got three other critical tasks out the way. To the receiver of your message ASAP could be interpreted as 'in the next 5 minutes'.

It is a lot safer to be specific.

Sometimes service providers say to me, *'I don't want to give a specific time in case there are hold ups beyond my control'*. As my previous example demonstrates, giving a vague timing can be interpreted as a deadline by your customer. So, give a reasonable estimate. Preferably one that allows you to under-promise and over-deliver. And do get back to them to advise of any delay that takes it beyond your promised timing.

Words that work

The classic lesson in service is, 'Don't tell customers what you can't do, tell them what you can do. For example:

Instead of *"You're order won't be ready until..."* say *"Your order will be ready on..."*

Instead of *"We'll need to order you a replacement..."* say *"The best way for me to handle this is to..."*

Because...

Studies have shown that people are more likely to comply with a request if you give them a reason why. They don't like to be told things or asked to take action without a reasonable explanation.

So, when you need people to be receptive to your line of thinking, give them reasons why. And the most effective transition word when giving a 'reason why' is **because**.

It seems we are conditioned by the word 'because' and we are more accepting of the request or views imparted... even if the reason given makes little sense. That's right, apparently we don't pay much attention to what goes after the word because... unless it is a big request.

Child: "Why do I have to clean my room?"

Parent: "Because I said so."

Still sceptical?

Here's the initial research from way back in 1978 by Ellen Langer a psychology professor at Harvard University. It was included by Robert Cialdini in his classic book 'Influence: Science and Practice'.

The researchers arranged for a person in a hurry to use an in-office copy machine. The tests examined how different requests might affect people's willingness to allow this person to jump the queue.

In the first test, the participant simply said: *"Excuse me, I have 5 pages. May I use the Xerox machine?"*

In this scenario, **around 60%** of people allowed him to cut in line and use the machine first.

In the next scenario, the participant said: *"I have 5 pages. May I use the Xerox machine, because I am in a rush?"*

Did you see the ever-so-subtle difference between the two?

The request was only minimally changed. Yet, "because I'm in a rush" wouldn't stand up as a valid reason, would it? Most of us are busy, aren't we?

Despite what you might expect, around **94%** of people allowed him to cut in line this time!

If you think that's strange, check out the request used in the 3rd test:

"Excuse me, I have 5 pages. May I use the Xerox machine because I have to make copies?"

That went from having a barely passable reason to absolutely no reason at all for letting this person cut in. In spite of this, **93%** of people let him cut in, only a 1% drop from when he had a weak reason – *"I'm in a rush"* – and a 33% improvement compared to the first test.

They also repeated the experiment for a request to copy 20 pages rather than five. In this case, only the "because I'm in a rush" reason resulted in compliance.

So what does this tell us?

If the stakes are high, then there is a little more resistance, but still not too much. Use the word "because" and try to come up with at least a slightly more compelling reason.

In summary then, there is a principle of human behaviour which says that when we ask someone to do us a favour we will be more successful if we provide a reason. People like to have reasons for what they do... even giving weak reasons increases your odds of getting a positive response.

Sources: Gregory Ciotti and Robert Cialdini.

Sorry or Thank You?

Callers don't like being put on hold. Unfortunately, at times, it's something we have to do.

Whenever possible, ask for permission before you put a caller on hold and wait for an answer in the affirmative. Perhaps they are phoning from a mobile phone and their battery is low. You don't know so you must ask and wait for permission.

When you come back to your caller after they have been on hold, it's polite and considerate to say *"Sorry to have kept you waiting"*. However, you will get a better reaction and have a more positive person at the other end of the line, if you say *"Thank you for waiting"* or *"Thank you for your patience"*.

People don't get thanked very much, and when it's genuine like that, it tends to put them in a better frame of mind and make them easier to deal with.

Yes, words really do make a difference.

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Jurek Leon is a trainer, consultant and customer experience designer. His entertaining, energising seminars and workshops are filled with practical tips, ideas and down-to-earth examples on word-of-mouth marketing, motivation, selling for non-sales people, and designing and managing the customer experience.

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