

## Million Dollar Words, or Words That Sell

The sales counter plays a dual role as a call center and storefront, and is thus undoubtedly the voice of a wholesale distributor. This means that, for a counter pro, whether face to face or over the phone, communication skills are critical. The frenetic energy—with phones ringing, intercom paging, and customers waiting—can test the patience of even the most even-tempered employee. It requires extra effort to keep stress from stealing into the voice. A frazzled tone translates as annoyance and impatience. Yet, the counter pro who has mastered this extraordinary instrument can just as easily transmit enthusiasm and empathy. Inflection is key. Consider the importance of inflection in the commonly used expression “not bad.” Downplay the first word, emphasize the second, and it sounds like an upbeat compliment. But stress the first word and fade out on the second and it sounds like indifference. By merely changing the emphasis, the same two words can convey high praise or mild approval. Varying volume and tone can turn a casual remark into a cutting insult. For instance, I once questioned the legitimacy of a customer’s product return by asking, “Are you sure you bought that here?” But my tone of voice was both accusatory and condescending—it was no surprise that the customer asked to see my boss. When confronted, I innocently said, “I only asked, ‘Are you sure that you bought that here?’” This time I spoke with a calm, neutral voice. It didn’t fool my boss. He knew from the customer’s mood that that wasn’t the way I had originally asked the question. What’s in a word? Words are a powerful force. They can express ideas with clarity and intensity. And when combined with a voice of authority, they can communicate a brand and influence the perception a customer has of your company. The following are five suggestions for using voice and words strategically and persuasively:

1. Lose the filler words and phrases. Filler words don’t add any meaning to a sentence—such as well, you know, and like. Filler phrases are overused clichés that state the obvious or don’t mean anything at all. Examples include “See what I’m saying?” and “At the end of the day.” Some other catchphrases that are easily ignored by customers include cutting edge, industry standard, and world class. Avoid these like the plague.
2. Turn on the high voltage. A flat sine wave on an electrical test meter indicates a lack of current. Likewise, emotionless speech patterns can be just as flat and lifeless. Voice inflection makes conversation more interesting, and customers are more apt to buy when they hear enthusiasm in a salesperson’s voice.
3. Avoid gobbledygook. Using the language of the industry, a salesperson could carry on a conversation with a coworker that would be unintelligible to an outsider. The electrical distribution industry has its share of jargon, acronyms, and abbreviations. Electrical contractors have their own jargon as well. In some areas, these two worlds overlap, but in most, they don’t. When speaking with customers, it’s important that they understand what is being said. Sometimes it’s hard to remember what’s jargon and what’s not. But because most people are hesitant to admit when they don’t understand something, it’s up to a salesperson to pay attention to the physical cues that indicate that the customer is confused. Never try to impress a customer by using technical jargon; it sounds belittling and dismissive. Remember, the intention is to educate, not intimidate.
4. Accentuate the positive. A single word can trigger an emotion—and a customer’s attitude can be influenced by the words used. For example, depressed, lousy, gloomy, and stupid have a completely different impact from the words pumped, excited, thrilled, and energized. Words are units of energy— they can pierce like a bayonet or soothe like a bandage. Replace negative words with positive ones and the result will be happier customers.
5. Take the “cus” out of customer service. Though an R-rated vocabulary seems to be widely accepted, or perhaps tolerated, there are still some people who don’t like profanity. Others find it outright offensive. A good filter for language is the “Grandma factor.” Before letting fly with those colorful colloquialisms, consider whether the same word choices would be made if Grandma was within earshot. Freeing the voice is a popular idea that each person has a natural voice. At one time, this may have been true, but most voices undergo restrictions and transformations due to poor posture, tensions, and improper breathing. In fact, the natural voice has almost been lost. It requires a conscious act of will to uncover it, but the results are worth it. Be selective of the words that are spoken and talk in a voice that freely expresses your personality, and it will make a positive impact on the bottom line.

## About the Author

Lifeline Australia is using new technology that integrates online communications with conventional teleconferencing to support and train their trainers.

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