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I

The Ten Rules of Effective Language

"Broadly speaking, the short words are the best, and the old words best of all." —WINSTON CHURCHILL

"When we disregard the rules altogether we get anarchy or, worse yet, Enron." —POLITICAL HUMORIST BILL MAHER

Rules govern our daily lives. Some of these rules are explicit, imposed by government: "obey the speed limit," "no parking," "April 15 is tax day." But most are informal, often unspoken cultural norms—rules of politeness, rules of conduct in the business world, rules of interaction between people. Most are commonly understood traditions that have built up over time, habits so ordinary that we usually don't even think about them.

Unfortunately, not all such involuntary habits and subconscious conventions are positive or productive. American business and political communication is rife with bad habits and unhelpful tendencies that can do serious damage to the companies and causes they seek to promote. Just as in every other field, there are rules to good, effective communication. They may not be as inflexible and absolute as the rules against speeding or avoiding your taxes, but they're just as important if you wish to arrive safely at your destination with money in your pocket.

The rules of communication are especially important given the sheer amount of communication the average person has to contend with. We step out of our houses each morning into a nonstop sensory assault: advertising and entertainment, song lyrics and commercial jingles,

clipped conversations and abbreviated e-mails. A good deal of noise also comes from inside our homes, from our TVs to our sound systems to our computers and now our iPods. How do you make people hear your words amid all this chatter? "Great language has exactly the same properties as great music," says Aaron Sorkin, the brilliant writer/creator of the hit television drama *The West Wing*. "It has rhythm, it has pitch, it has tone, it has accents."* So in a cacophonous world, how do you ensure that your musical note stands out?

This chapter seeks to examine the principles behind good communication and, in the process, to discourage some of the most common bad habits that plague everyone from senators to CEOs. The ten rules I offer, identified through a career devoted to real-world research, are equally valuable in ad agency conference rooms and political war rooms (and, for that matter, in conversations with an angry spouse or an anxious teenage daughter). When applied, they give rise to language with color and texture. Language that gets heads nodding. Words that pop, the kinds of words and phrases you only have to hear once before they burn themselves into your mind and drive you to action. In short, these ten principles give rise to words that work.

First, allow me a few caveats. This chapter and this book are not concerned with words that are beautiful, words that are timeless, or words that are ideal in some abstract, philosophical sense. Rather, it is concerned, again, with *words that work*—language of everyday utility, language that generates practical results. My concern is with the unadorned, commonsense language of small town, middle America, not the intellectual gamesmanship of the ivory tower. It's with language that has bubbled up from the American people themselves.

There is certainly a time and a place for high-flown, literary language. But to capture a listener's attention the language doesn't need to be urbane or erudite—or use words like, well . . . urbane or erudite. It does not necessarily need the uplifting, ennobling tone of Ted Sorenson (John F. Kennedy's friend and speechwriter) and Peggy Noonan (gifted scribe for Ronald Reagan), the two great speechwriters of our time. The lofty language of Sorensen and Noonan transcends ideologies and generations, moving listeners just as much today as when their words were

*Adds Sorkin, "There'll be actual music that I'll hear while I'm driving in my car, and I'll think right there, 'I want to write to a place where that piece of music can come in,' or I want that piece of music under what we're doing."

first spoken by others decades ago. Noonan was once asked to reflect on the craft of wordsmithing and speechwriting, and I think she had it right:

> Most of us are not great leaders speaking at great moments. Most of us are businessmen rolling out our next year's financial goals, or teachers at a state convention making the case for a new curriculum, or nurses at a union meeting explaining the impact of managed care on the hospitals in which we work. And we must have the sound appropriate to us. . . . Your style should never be taller than you are."[1]

In an ideal world, everyone would have all the knowledge they need, a home library, and our political discourse might take place on the elevated level of a Lincoln-Douglas debate or at least *The Newshour with Jim Lehrer*. People would not speak simply, in concise sentences, but obtusely, in dense paragraphs full of tremendous detail, classical allusions, and subtle theoretical insights—more like Bill Buckley than Bill O'Reilly.

That might be a comforting fantasy, but it isn't reality. For most of us, communication has never been and should never be elitist or obscure. It is *functional* rather than an end in itself. For me, the *people* are the true end; language is just a *tool* to reach and teach them, a means to an end. We live in an age when the world is no longer ruled as it once was by the Latin of the elites, but by the common, democratic tongues of the people. And if you want to reach the people, you must first speak their language.

My second caveat concerns the limits of language. Democratic strategist George Lakoff, a Berkeley professor by trade and a linguist by design, has argued that left-wing ideas would have been plenty popular with the public if only they had been "framed" with the right narratives and metaphors. But this ignores the screamingly obvious: *Some policies and ideas really are more popular than others—no matter how they are articulated.* Language is tremendously important—after all, politicians and an increasing number of corporate warriors live and die by it—but it's not everything. Language alone cannot achieve miracles. Actual policy counts at least as much as how something is framed.

When I tell a political client that a given idea is unpopular, it's to his credit if he sticks to his principles and pushes ahead with it anyway, but I'm not serving him well if I explain away the dilemma altogether so that

he's never forced to confront that hard choice between conviction and popularity. To me, the truth matters. My job, as I see it, is to remain agnostic on the underlying philosophical issues and keep my personal opinions from infecting my work. It doesn't matter what I think about tax policy or welfare or the minimum wage. Sure, I have opinions, but they remain just that—my opinions. People hire me to tell them, as objectively as possible, what the general public believes on those issues, and why. They want the truth as it is, not as I wish it to be.

You would be amazed and angry if you knew just how little respect the typical pollster, PR guru, or advertising executive has for your opinion. The Republican pollster who gave America Senators Jesse Helms and Al D'Amato once said to me, and I quote, "I don't care what the people think. I only care what I think." A media consultant to three presidents warned me never to "fall in love" with my clients or the people they represent. "They're all flawed."

Perhaps I take a different approach. Before you can create, and certainly before you judge, you have to listen to people and respect them for who they are and what they believe. Just because you may not ultimately accept or endorse someone's subjective perceptions is no excuse for refusing to acknowledge that they exist. I have sought to listen to the American public—not just *hear,* but truly, actively *listen.* It is informed not just by raw data but by intuition and experience. It is empirical more than theoretical, emotional as well as rational. The process is really quite simple. Through national telephone surveys, focus groups, one-on-one interviews, content analysis, and simple day-to-day interaction with people, I learn the language of America. In fact, what you eventually hear either from your elected representatives or in ads for the products and services you use is often spoken first by you and then translated by me.

I'll say it again: What matters is not what you say, but what people hear.

THE TEN RULES OF SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION

Rule One
Simplicity: Use Small Words

William Safire, William F. Buckley, and the people who solve the *New York Times* crossword puzzle will resent this first rule: Avoid words that might force someone to reach for the dictionary . . . because most Americans won't. They'll just placidly let your real meaning sail over their heads or, even worse, misunderstand you. You can argue all you want about the dumbing down of America, but unless you speak the language of your intended audience, you won't be heard by the people you want to reach.

Simplicity counts. The average American did not graduate from college and doesn't understand the difference between *effect* and *affect.** Sophistication is certainly what Americans say they want in their politics, but it is certainly not what they buy. Newt Gingrich is arguably one of the smartest political figures of the past fifty years, yet his overtly intellectual, philosophical approach—which to opponents sounded bombastic and sanctimonious—turned many people away.

Al Gore and John Kerry, legitimately bright individuals with Ivy League backgrounds, suffered the same fate. Where an average critic of the Bush administration could attack its foreign policy for *"going it alone,"* John Kerry felt the need to offer *"a bold, progressive internationalism that stands in stark contrast to the too often belligerent and myopic unilateralism of the Bush Administration."*[2] Huh?

Similarly, Al Gore told audiences that he longed for the days when *"vividness and clarity used to be more common in the way we talk with one another,"* but then went on to attack the *"abhorrent, medieval behavior"* of the Bush administration—in the very same speech.[3] Neither Gore nor Kerry understood that the ideas you might hear in a Harvard seminar will simply not ring true with the stay-at-home mom in Kansas or the department store salesman in Cincinnati.

In fact, using a long word when a short one would suffice tends to raise suspicions: "What is this guy trying to sell me? Does he have an ulterior motive?" The most effective language clarifies rather than obscures. It makes ideas clear rather than clouding them. The more simply and plainly an idea is presented, the more understandable it is—and therefore the more credible it will be.

The same principle holds true in the corporate sphere. From Campbell's Soup's *"M'm! M'm! Good!"* to the *"Snap! Crackle! Pop!"* of Kellogg's

*According to the 2005 census, 45% of adult Americans over age 25 have attended some form of college, but only 27% are college graduates. According to a study conducted for the Association of American Universities, as recently as 1970, only 53% of adult Americans had even graduated from high school.

Rice Krispies, product taglines that are so simple and uncomplicated that even kids can remember them are the ones that prove most memorable to their parents as well. It is no accident that the most unforgettable catchphrases of the past fifty years contain only single- or at most two-syllable words. And when they initially haven't been so simple, someone inevitably has stepped in to shorten them. Just ask the makers of the Macintosh (*"Mac"*) computer. And when's the last time you used the words *"International Business Machines"* rather than *"IBM"*? Federal Express is now officially *"FedEx,"* Kentucky Fried Chicken is now *"KFC,"* Oil of Olay is just *"Olay,"* and Dairy Queen now refers to itself as *"DQ."*

This public preference for simple words and acronyms is also reflected in pop culture. For example, take a look at the movie titles at your local multiplex. All the way back in 1991, the movie *Terminator 2* started a trend of truncation when its title was cut down to *T2*—from five syllables down to two. In the years that followed, *Independence Day* was abbreviated to *ID4* and *Mission: Impossible III* became *M:i:III*, just to cite two prominent examples. Many movies have begun dropping the word *the* from their titles, as well. The 1976 movie *The Bad News Bears* was remade in 2005 as simply *Bad News Bears*, and *The Wedding Crashers* became just *Wedding Crashers*.

Even our day-to-day behavior itself has been simplified. We now live in a text messaging world. Teenagers "text" (a newly coined verb for SMS communication) each other all day long, and the twenty-first-century businessman is attached to his BlackBerry like the farmer of the eighteenth century was attached to his plow. Tapping away with one finger on a miniature keyboard to create a message on a tiny screen isn't exactly conducive to multisyllabic SAT words.

Neither is e-mail, for that matter. We process so much more visual and audible information than ever before, that it's no surprise many of us don't have the patience (not to mention the education) to tease out the fine nuances and connotations of a lot of ten-dollar words. At work and at home, in business and in our personal lives, we're actually writing more than ever before—but what we're writing looks less like an old-fashioned letter and more like what you'd see on a vanity license plate.

These changes didn't come about by accident. Good things really do come in small packages—and from small words.

Rule Two
Brevity: Use Short Sentences

"I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead."
—Mark Twain

Be as brief as possible. Never use a sentence when a phrase will do, and never use four words when three can say just as much. When asked how long a man's legs ought to be, Abraham Lincoln said, "Long enough to reach the ground." The best ad-makers and creative artists understand this notion of appropriateness, and they wisely avoid going overboard. Like Goldilocks in the story of the three bears, they look for the phrases that aren't too big or too small, but "just right." This is less about self-restraint than it is a matter of finding exactly the right piece of the language jigsaw puzzle to fit the precise space you're trying to fill.

The most memorable political language is rarely longer than a sentence. *"I like Ike"* was hardly a reason to vote for the man, but the simplicity of the slogan matched the candidate and the campaign. Not many people considered Calvin Coolidge a great president, but to this day we still remember *"Silent Cal"* for his brevity. When Coolidge's dinner guest bet him that she could make him say more than three words, he responded, "You lose"—still considered one of the best political jokes in presidential history. When the prolific British writer G. K. Chesterton was asked for an essay on the topic "What's Wrong with the World?" he wrote: "Dear Sirs: I am. Sincerely yours, G.K. Chesterton."[4] And we've all heard the story about the college philosophy student given the exam question "Why?" who simply responded, "Why not?" Each of these short answers said far more than a thousand-word essay or Castro-like speechathon would have.

Similarly, they say a picture is worth a thousand words . . . or is that ten thousand words? Researchers have traced the origin of that phrase to Fred Barnard, an advertising manager in the 1920s. When selling ad space on the sides of streetcars, he used the words *"One look is worth a thousand words"* to suggest that images are more potent than text in advertisements. At first Barnard claimed the saying came from a Japanese proverb, but shortly thereafter he changed it a bit, to *"One picture is worth ten thousand words,"* and instead credited a Chinese proverb.[5] Some quotation dictionaries now accept Barnard's claim of Chinese origin, and over time this

saying has often been credited to Confucius.[6] The origin really doesn't matter, but the rule certainly does. If one visual can say more than a thousand or ten thousand words, use it.

Sometimes two or three words are worth more than a thousand. The most memorable taglines in product advertising are usually not much more than fragments. From the day in 1914 when Thomas Watson joined IBM, then known as the Computer-Tabulating-Recording Company, and coined the phrase *"think"* to communicate the value of the company, some of the most powerful and provocative messages have come in very small packages. *"Easy as Dell"* effectively communicated the ready-to-use functionality of one of the world's most successful personal computer companies. *"The UnCola"* memorably declared to consumers exactly what 7-Up was . . . and was not. If you ask anyone from age five to 65 what cereal is sold based on the slogan *"They're grrreat!"* they'll tell you Frosted Flakes. *"Got Milk?"* has been wickedly parodied by every late-night talk-show host, but it helped make the product cool again. And at three words, three syllables, and eight letters, Nike's *"Just do it"* packed more power, word for word, than any footwear ad ever—and helped cement a global sporting goods empire.

So when it comes to effective communication, small beats large, short beats long, and plain beats complex. And sometimes a visual beats them all.

Rule Three
Credibility Is As Important As Philosophy

People have to believe it to buy it. As Lincoln once said, you can't fool all of the people all of the time. If your words lack sincerity, if they contradict accepted facts, circumstances, or perceptions, they will lack impact.

You will read this lesson several times in this book because it really is that important. The words you use become you—and you become the words you use. The political graveyards are full of politicians who learned this lesson the hard way. One recent example was especially memorable. "I actually did vote for the 87 billion dollars [for the Iraq war] before I voted against it" turned out to be the fifteen most damaging words John Kerry spoke during his long and otherwise successful political career. The fact that he himself was appearing to acknowledge a flip-flop on an issue of such importance turned him into a bonafide flip-flopper and undermined everything else he would say and do for the

rest of the campaign. Similarly, Al Gore's assertion during the 2000 campaign that he "invented" the Internet and that he and his wife, Tipper, inspired the book *Love Story* had absolutely no credibility and became the source of ongoing late night humor, significantly damaging his electoral hopes.

Companies often commit the same mistake. They launch *"new and improved"* items every day in an effort to get their products noticed and to appeal to a wider consumer base. Yet more often than not, these efforts fail simply because the item in question isn't really new and isn't much improved. Would-be customers don't see enough of a difference and stick with their current brand; current customers are unimpressed and disappointed—and the product loses credibility as a result. Few things are more valuable than reputation—the integrity of a company's brand—and articulating overblown promises as a result of undisciplined language can be an incredibly dangerous game to play.

The most famous "new and improved" flop was New Coke, a sweeter and some say tastier version of traditional Coca-Cola. It was released in 1985 and marketed as a superior version of the popular soft drink with the slogan *"The best just got better."* It was a spectacular failure and a boon for Pepsi. Just three months after New Coke's launch, the company announced it was returning its original formula, "Classic Coke" (they had to rename the traditional brand to give it clarity) as "New Coke" sales dwindled. Sure, consumers in blind taste tests actually preferred the New Coke formula, but New Coke failed anyway because of a deep emotional allegiance to the original brand and a strong sense that *"new and improved"* was a marketing ploy. If they had slowly and secretly changed the formula and left off the *"new and improved"* language, New Coke probably would have succeeded.

In fact, a *"new and improved"* product whose changes are merely cosmetic—the same old same old in different packaging—is a recipe for customer resentment. It's an issue of expectations. If the sales pitch is too over-the-top, even a reasonably good experience with the product is likely to seem underwhelming to the customer. Look at the recent Coors Light can liner campaign. They started marketing a "frost brew liner" that will keep canned beer colder longer. They touted it as a "breakthrough," but the marketplace didn't respond. A customer is going to be a lot more annoyed than she otherwise would have been when she finds out that what's purportedly the greatest thing since sliced bread is actually just "old and unimproved" draped in a lot of new marketing dollars.

Of course, sometimes a product really will live up to the hype that precedes it. When BMW came out with its *"ultimate driving machine"* tagline—a surprisingly cocky assertion—those who test-drove the car agreed with the premise. The boast was perfectly in line with reality. And the rest is history.

The same packaging effort takes place in the political world. Before a debate or primary election, you'll often hear the pundits talk about a campaign "lowering expectations" for its candidate or trying to "raise the bar" for the other guy. The rationale may not be readily apparent, but it's quite smart. If expectations are set low enough, it's often possible for a loser to come out smelling like a winner (think of Bill Clinton's second-place finish in the 1992 New Hampshire primary—thanks to that clever "Comeback Kid" moniker, he was universally declared a winner—all because he trounced the low expectations for his performance).

On the other hand, if you set expectations too high for a candidate or campaign—a statistical win can be seen as a disappointment or, worse yet, a loss. The most famous example was Senator Ed Muskie's first-place finish in New Hampshire in 1972 that still doomed his campaign because he failed to get 50 percent of the vote. He ceased to be a credible candidate simply because he did not win the expected number of votes.

Sometimes just the *expectations* of expectations can destroy a candidacy. In the 1992 New Hampshire Republican presidential primary, early primary day exit polls available to the media had long-shot populist agitator Pat Buchanan within four points of George H. W. Bush—a shocking result for reporters covering the campaign. Even before the real polls closed, the media echo chamber was in full force with the story of the Buchanan surprise and the Bush failure. As the night wore on, Bush's lead began to grow, and yet the media spin did not change. Buchanan's emotional declaration of *"victory,"* delivered live during the 11:00 p.m. newscasts and just as the front pages of the newspapers were being put to bed, ignored the fact that he had dropped to 42 percent in the actual vote count. Now, this was before Al Gore "invented" the Internet, so the news on the front page *was* the news the next morning—even though breakfast television the next day had the accurate returns.

In fact, when all the votes were counted, Bush had achieved a respectable 63% and Buchanan a lackluster 37%—yet to this day there are still people who think Bush lost New Hampshire. But the Bush margin of victory would have been much larger if it wasn't for the damage done

by a six-word sentence that brought Republicans to their feet at the 1988 Republican National Convention and had turned them cranky four years later: *"Read my lips: no new taxes."* The combination of broken promises and blown expectations is always a fatal concoction.

Credibility is established very simply. Tell people who you are or what you do. Then be that person and do what you have said you would do. And finally, remind people that you are what in fact you say you are. In a simple sentence: *Say what you mean and mean what you say.*

Rule Four
Consistency Matters

Repetition. Repetition. Repetition. Good language is like the Energizer Bunny. It keeps going . . . and going . . . and going.

Too many politicians insist on new talking points on a daily basis, and companies are running too many different ad executions. By the time we begin to recognize and remember a particular message, it has already been changed.

"It's the real thing," the most memorable Coke tagline, was actually created back in 1943, and it is amazing that it got any traction at all, considering that the company launched three other taglines that same year, including the FDR-esque and immediately forgettable: *"The only thing like Coca-Cola is Coca-Cola itself."* Since then, Coke has tried dozens of communication iterations and variations, none of them as simple and effective. While the company refers to itself on its Web site as "the world's most inclusive brand," the constant tinkering with taglines and the inability to stick to a single message have been major factors contributing to its image erosion. On the other hand, the *"We try harder"* Avis campaign was launched in 1962—and Avis has stuck with it for more than four decades, helping to cement the company as the second biggest automobile rental company in the world.

Some slogans that still seem fresh and original today were actually created generations ago, even before the advent of television, and meant as much to your grandparents as they do to you. *"The breakfast of champions"* tagline for Wheaties was first launched back in 1935 and is still going strong today. The *"M'm! M'm! Good!"* campaign for Campbell's Soup was introduced that same year. Hallmark's *"When you care enough to send the very best"* debuted in 1934, and *"Say it with flowers"* for FTD dates all the way back to 1917.

But there are two products that rise above the rest for brand language consistency—and probably 90 percent of you know the taglines to these products even before you read them.

Maxwell House was a well-known hotel in Nashville, Tennessee, that brewed a coffee so rich in flavor that people would stay there just to enjoy the coffee. Around the turn of the century, they began to market their secret brew to nearby establishments, and it became as popular and talked about in the region as Starbucks is today. According to the company, it was President Teddy Roosevelt who coined the phrase *"good to the last drop"* after drinking a cup of Maxwell House coffee in 1907 while visiting the historic estate of Andrew Jackson. That line became the official slogan of the company in 1915 and it still features prominently in the company's advertising and branding efforts almost one hundred years later. And today, Maxwell House is still one of America's best selling in-home coffee brands.

But the all-time most consistent product slogan belongs to a bar of soap that was first launched back in 1879 for ten cents. James Gamble, of Procter & Gamble fame, developed a soap that was so "pure" that it could be used both for the bath and for the laundry. It was to be called P&G White Soap, but Harley Procter (yes, the Procter of Procter & Gamble) insisted on something more creative and memorable. Attending church one Sunday, he heard a reading of Psalm 45:8 that references ivory palaces—and Ivory Soap was born. Three years later, Proctor coined the phrase *"99 and 44/100% pure"* to describe the scientific tests conducted on the soap by college chemistry professors and independent laboratories. The rest, as they say, is history. The slogan, and the additional tag line *"it floats,"* created in 1891, gave Ivory Soap a visual and linguistic hook that has stood the test of time. While P&G goes to great pains to hide the fact that Ivory is no longer a big seller, the product is still among the most beloved in American consumer history. These companies learned an important rule of successful brands: Message consistency builds customer loyalty.

Finding a good message and then sticking with it takes extraordinary discipline, but it pays off tenfold in the end. Remember, you may be making yourself sick by saying the same exact same thing for the umpteenth time, but many in your audience will be hearing it for the first time. The overwhelming majority of your customers or constituents aren't paying as much attention as you are. They didn't read about your tagline in *Adweek* or hear your slogan on C-SPAN's *Road to the White House*. They haven't seen the volumes of internal memos that you've seen or the

pages and pages of talking points that have been developed on your behalf. It needs to sound as fresh and vital to your audiences as it did to your own ears the first time you said it.

When it comes to repetition, politicians are seemingly addicted to communication variation. Ronald Reagan was the only politician I ever saw who seemed to enjoy saying the same words over and over again as though it was the first time he had ever spoken them. His message never wavered, and that was a major reason he sustained personal credibility even though a majority of Americans opposed many of his policies during his administration.

The success of President George W. Bush in the 2004 election despite deteriorating conditions in Iraq, high unemployment numbers in key states, and the perception that the economy was sinking was due in part to consistency of his message. He didn't need speech text or a teleprompter in many of his later campaign appearances because the message was always the same and articulated in almost identical language. But what was seen as consistent in 2004 came to be viewed as inflexible and dogmatic during Bush's second term because of an unwillingness to consider alternative ideas, messages, and approaches to governing.

And that leads to rule number five . . .

Rule Five
Novelty: Offer Something New

In plain English, words that work often involve a new definition of an old idea.

NOVELTY IN ACTION: CHRISTIAN BRANDO & THE CREATION OF THE *"ACCIDENTAL MANSLAUGHTER"* PLEA

Attorney Robert Shapiro is more than just a lawyer to the rich and famous. He is best known for putting together the defense "dream team" that kept O. J. Simpson on the golf course rather than in jail, and his creative application of English is acknowledged in the legal profession. Shapiro's considerable linguistic skills were put to the test when he was called upon by actor

Marlon Brando in 1990 to defend his son Christian, who had admitted shooting his sister's fiancé at point-blank range—a potential first-degree murder case punishable by death. Shapiro explains:

> After talking with Christian and talking with Marlon and talking to the sister, it became clear to me that it was something more than just a direct and deliberate first-degree murder. When I got into the case it became clear to me that there was a legal theory, but that it would be very, very difficult to explain to laypeople, especially in a twenty-second sound bite on television or newspaper article.
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> So rather than explain the different degrees of manslaughter that we have in California that would allow for a mitigation of this type of sentence, I wanted to come up with something that would clearly and unequivocally point to what our defense was.
>
> Our defense was twofold:
>
> First, that there was no intent by Christian Brando to commit a crime, so therefore it was accidental.
>
> And second, that the intent that's required is not a specific intent but rather a general intent, and so that would fall under the guise of involuntary manslaughter.
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> So I coined the phrase "an accidental manslaughter." And each and every time somebody asked me to comment on the case, I said "We will show clearly this was an accidental manslaughter." And that's what the newspapers printed. And to this day, when people talk about it, Christian Brando pled guilty to accidental manslaughter.
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> The phrase does not exist in law. It came out of my mouth and I repeated it hundreds of times over the course of three months. And it stuck. One-time use. One-time need."

[The phrase *"accidental manslaughter"* was never used before and has not been used since. Christian Brando did plead guilty and spent six years in prison.]

Americans are easily bored. If something doesn't shock or surprise us, we move on to something else. We are always in search of the next big thing, whether it be the next American Idol, a new television "reality" show, a new gee-whiz techno-gizmo, the latest Madonna makeover, or

something else that we haven't seen or heard of before. Our tastes change as quickly as the seasons, and we expect the rest of society to keep up.

As individuals, while we appreciate the predictability of friends and family, we also cherish those things that surprise and shock us—provided that the outcome is pleasant rather than painful. It's the reason why many of us, in our free time, prefer to try different vacation destinations, different hotels, different restaurants, and different experiences rather than the tried and true. There is something deep in our character that embraces the pioneering spirit, going where no one has ever gone before, doing what no one has ever done before. If an opportunity is truly new and different, it will attract our attention, our interest, and our participation.

So from a business perspective, you should tell consumers something that gives them a brand-new take on an old idea (and then, in accordance with rule number four, tell them again and again). The combination of surprise and intrigue creates a compelling message. Although often executed with humor, what matters most is that the message brings a sense of discovery, a sort of "Wow, I never thought about it that way" reaction. For example, people knew that Alka-Seltzer was taken for an upset stomach, but market research showed that nobody knew how many they should be taking—so most people were just taking one. But when viewers saw the infamous *"Plop, plop, fizz, fizz, oh what a relief it is"* ads, purchases of Alka-Seltzer nearly doubled almost overnight. The tagline that sold the product became indivisible from the product's *function* because it told consumers something they did not know.

A more humorous example featured the inclusion of religion into advertising to help sell a food product. Not surprisingly, half of the senior executives at Hebrew National, the hot dog company, were Jewish, and their *"We answer to a higher authority"* campaign, suggesting that their hot dogs were made from better ingredients than what the USDA required (personified by a very tall Uncle Sam character), sparked dozens of amusing parodies and millions of sales. The success of the Volkswagen *"Think Small"* campaign in the late 1950s was another example of shifting the thought process in a novel way. At a time when cars and the promotion of them were ever expanding in size, VW took exactly the opposite approach in design and in message. It worked because it made people think about the product in a fresh way.

There's a simple test to determine whether or not your message has met this rule. If it generates an "I didn't know that" response, you have succeeded.

BAD ENGLISH = A GOOD OUTCOME: THE O. J. SIMPSON TRIAL

A simple but effective mangling of the English language played a major role in the Trial of the Century. Lead defense team lawyer Robert Shapiro desperately needed to find a forensic pathologist to discredit the DNA of Nicole Simpson that was found on the clothing of her estranged husband O. J. Simpson. So he hired Dr. Henry Lee, a chief medical examiner from Connecticut, and a first-generation Asian-American. Shapiro describes the power of words better than I could so I'll let him do the talking:

> It was probably the most dramatic use of language that I've ever seen in a courtroom. When the DNA swabs were being analyzed, the DNA is collected, the blood samples are put in paper and they are folded. The folds should be in a certain way where the blood does not go to the other side, it just stays dry. Otherwise, there is a chance of what they call "cross-contamination."
>
> In this case, somebody made a mistake and had the DNA collected while it was still wet, and folded it. And Dr. Henry Lee, using broken English, which he is more than capable of not using, made a statement that I think will never be forgotten. When the prosecution asked, "What do you conclude from this evidence, Dr. Lee?" he said "Something wrong." I don't know if he thought about it, if he didn't think about it, if it was just spontaneous, but he was asked a question and that was his answer. "How do you account for it?" "Something wrong." Those two words rang loud and true with the jury, and that was the end of that evidence. Two simple words. I wish I was that smart."

Rule Six
Sound and Texture Matter

The sounds and texture of language should be just as memorable as the words themselves. A string of words that have the same first letter, the same sound, or the same syllabic cadence is more memorable than a random collection of sounds. The first five rules in this chapter do just that: *simplicity*, *brevity*, *credibility*, *consistency*, and *novelty* stand out because they all end with the same sound.

The phrase *"Snap, Crackle, and Pop"* immediately conjures up images not just of Kellogg's Rice Krispies but of the actual sound of the cereal itself. Some of the most identifiable branding doesn't even involve words. For more than a half century, first on radio and then on television, NBC announced its network programming with three distinctive notes: G-E-C (the initials of parent company General Electric). *"Intel Inside"* is as memorable for its four notes as for the slogan itself.

The sound of music has magical powers that transcend the language it is meant to augment. But while most television writers first craft their words and then add the music, Aaron Sorkin approaches it differently: "There'll be actual music that I'll hear while I'm driving in my car, and I'll think right there, 'I want to write to a place where that piece of music can come in,' or 'that piece of music needs to be under what we're doing.'"

The rhythm of the language is in itself musical—even when there is no tune.*

Besides appealing to people's sense of novelty, Alka-Seltzer's *"Plop, plop, fizz, fizz, oh what a relief it is"* is another good illustration. The rhyme still sticks in people's heads even though the ad has not run for a quarter of a century. Bounty's *"quicker picker upper"* campaign from the 1970s may have mangled the English language, but those three words sounded good together. Likewise, the alliteration at the beginning of the M&M's slogan, *"Melts in your mouth . . ."* helps the tagline stick in the memory.

Another approach is to butcher the English language. The Mac slogan that appeared on billboards and in print ads with pictures of Albert Einstein and other icons, *"Think Different,"* was a grammatical travesty (it should have been *"Think Differently"*), but the company wisely went with the shorter, snappier sounding slogan—and the rules of grammar be damned. Similarly, the latest McDonald's slogan *"i'm lovin' it"* features eye-catching lowercase letters, even when they begin a sentence, and no matter how hard you look, there is no such word as *lovin'* in any English dictionary. But the slogan speaks directly to how customers feel about the experience, and the catchy wordplay has been an important factor in the rise in revenue for the company after a couple years of sales

*Says Sorkin: "The greatest speech of all time is 'I Have a Dream.' You read the speech and it's perfect. Listen to the speech, it gets more perfect. The way as the speech moved on, the phrase 'I have a dream' stopped being the beginning of each stanza and began being the end, 'That one day, we will be judged not by the color of our skin, by the content of our character, I have a dream.' That's what jazz musicians do. They take a phrase and they move it. It was phenomenal delivery."

stagnation. Burger King may have it your way, but McDonald's says it their way.

Rule Seven
Speak Aspirationally

Messages need to say what people *want* to hear. This is the one area where politicians often have the edge over the corporate community. It's very difficult to craft advertising language that touches people at the most fundamental, primal level, by speaking to their deepest hopes, fears, and dreams. Not many products or services have an impact as serious and significant as abortion, affirmative action, immigration, taxation, and the other topics most often addressed by political figures.

The key to successful aspirational language for products or politics is to personalize and humanize the message to trigger an emotional remembrance. As Warren Beatty, perhaps the best student of the human condition in Hollywood, once told me, people will forget what you say, but they will never forget how you made them feel. If the listener can apply the language to a general situation or human condition, you have achieved *humanization*. But if the listener can relate that language to his or her own life experiences, that's *personalization*. The most memorable example comes from the political world. When Martin Luther King, Jr., uttered the words *"I have a dream,"* the single greatest aspirational speech of the modern era, he was speaking to the individual hopes and dreams of all Americans—the desire to be accepted because of who we are rather than what we look like. Product advertising has a higher hurdle to clear. Consumers have to see themselves in the ad and perceive a genuine benefit and value to themselves from using the product. They have to identify personally with the people in the ads in a profound way, the way you might identify with a special teacher or colleague at work.

Aspirational advertising language doesn't sell the product as a mere tool or as an item that serves a specific, limited purpose. Instead it sells the *you*—the you that you will be when you use the product . . . a smarter, sexier, sunnier you. It's not about creating false expectations, for that would diminish credibility. It's about encouraging the message recipient to want something better—and then delivering it. For example, the current Olay slogan *"Love the skin you're in"* is all about improving self-worth—an aspirational quality for most women. Instead of trying to cover up their natural looks with mounds of cosmetics, this campaign

tells women to respect who they already are and embrace what they already look like . . . with the help of Olay. Similarly, L'Oréal's *"because you're worth it"* campaign seeks to empower and embolden women to invest in themselves. By strategically placing beautiful but more natural-looking women in their television commercials and magazine ads, consumers see themselves—not some unattainable model—looking attractive and feeling confident.

A recent De Beers campaign uses the slogan *"A diamond is forever."* But instead of using the traditional message of love and commitment, De Beers has taken it one step farther: eternity. No longer is a diamond a valued and expensive piece of jewelry. Now it offers immortality—both the diamond and the relationship it symbolizes—and that's about as aspirational as you can get.

Experiences can also be aspirational. When JFK challenged America's youth to join the Peace Corps, his message didn't hinge on the actual practicalities of the job—digging wells, distributing medicines, or even teaching living skills. His message was larger than that; it was about what the Peace Corps symbolized . . . and what it meant about *you* as a person when you joined it. In the same way, aspirational advertising language taps into people's idealized self-image, showing them a picture of the other, better life that they wish they had, the life that feels like it's just out of reach right now . . . but that your product may finally help them grasp.

Since women determine the largest percentage of consumer purchases, most successful aspirational language is targeted at them. The *"Look ma, no cavities"* campaign for Crest toothpaste was every mother's dream . . . as was the *"Calgon, take me away"* message, which may seem dated today, but which struck an aspirational nerve when it first aired.

Perhaps the most memorable and effective examples of aspirational language in politics are FDR's assertion that *"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself"* and President Kennedy's *"Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."* Both make appeals to Americans' most idealistic conceptions of themselves. But even more important is that both statements are essentially *reminders*. Each president was reminding Americans of what Lincoln called "the better angels" of their nature. They were expressing confidence in Americans' bravery (FDR) and their self-sacrifice and patriotism (JFK) and then exhorting them to do even more. Psychologically, these phrases are akin to the parent who tells his child, "You can do it, I have faith in you." FDR and JFK

were simultaneously flattering us—by letting us know their confidence in our potential—and challenging us to rise to the occasion and be our better selves. And good advertisements, in a much more minor way, accomplish much the same thing. They make idealists of us all.

Rule Eight
Visualize

Paint a vivid picture. From M&M's *"Melts in your mouth not in your hand"* to Morton Salt's *"When it rains, it pours,"* to NBC's *"Must See TV,"* the slogans we remember for a lifetime almost always have a strong visual component, something we can see and almost feel. Allstate's *"You're in good hands,"* first created in 1956, went so far as to include the cupped hands visual in its logo to remind people of its peace-of-mind guarantee.

Recently, more companies are turning to slogans that rely heavily on visuals in order to sell their products. One such product, General Mills' Cinnamon Toast Crunch, has the *"taste you can see."* While the slogan alludes to the very real crystals of sugar and cinnamon visible on the toasted squares, it implies that the taste of the cereal is so incredible that you can actually do the impossible and see it.

Another company that uses visual slogans is Dodge. While we may not all associate grasping onto the head of a ram with driving a truck, the visual that *"Grab life by the horns"* implies says that if you're driving a Dodge Ram, you're doing something active, exciting, and powerful. And that's exactly what truck owners want and expect from their vehicles.*

Ineffective visualization can torpedo even the most potentially popular product. Just ask the makers of Infiniti, arguably the best new car of the past twenty years, who decided, incorrectly, that they should launch their new vehicles invisibly—literally—at exactly the same time that Lexus was using exactly the opposite and much more successful visual approach.

Lexus came out of the gate first with a traditional ad campaign featuring their new car navigating a typical winding road and packaged around the tagline *"The relentless pursuit of perfection."* Solid, but not spectacular. In response, Infiniti refused to use a tagline *or* show their

*Most Dodge cars and trucks featured a charging ram on their hoods from 1932 to 1954. They came back to the image of ram tough in the 1980s when sales of their trucks began to lag.

car. Rather, Nissan, the makers of the Infiniti, created a series of nine commercials intended to illustrate the fantasies of potential drivers.

The "fantasy" campaign was a distinct departure from typical car ads because it was based on a Japanese interpretation of luxury that is almost spiritual in its approach rather than the more literal American interpretation, undermining both credibility and relevance. While Lexus packed their ads with facts about their *"European luxury car tradition,"* and beautiful visuals of their car, Infiniti ads were deliberately vague, featuring clear skies, trees, and water shots . . . but never a clear picture of the automobile. None.

So instead of generating winning sales numbers for a great new car, Nissan generated a communication equation for failure: a wholly unrecognizable automotive design + a poorly executed ad design = no visualization. Over the subsequent months, Nissan spent more time defending their ad campaign than pitching their cars, and Infiniti was outsold four-to-one in its first year by Lexus—an automobile that was, from an engineering perspective, an almost identical car.[7] Infiniti simply didn't understand that people will not buy a car if they cannot see themselves in it.

But visualizing has as much to do with words as it does with pictures, and there is one word in the English language that automatically triggers the process of visualization by its mere mention, simply because it has 300 million unique, individual, personal manifestations to match the 300 million Americans. That word: *imagine.* Whether it's the car of your dreams or the candidate of your choice, the word *imagine* is perhaps the single most powerful communication tool because it allows individuals to picture whatever personal vision is in their hearts and minds.

Let me provide one example of the powerful impact of *imagine,* with which I had tangential involvement. Harold Ford, Jr., a centrist member of Congress from Tennessee who was blessed with a velvety smooth style and an intellect beyond that of most politicians, was given the honor of delivering the keynote address at the 2000 Democratic National Convention that nominated Al Gore. At thirty, Ford was one of the youngest keynoters ever, and so the Gore campaign assigned one of its speechwriters, Kenny Baer, to draft the speech to ensure that Ford delivered the "correct" message. The congressman, Kenny, and I all had one thing in common: We all were at the University of Pennsylvania at the same time—the other two as students and me as an adjunct professor. I had known both of them personally for almost a decade, so this should have been a positive experience for all of us.

I had bumped into Ford and one of his aides in a hotel lobby just forty-eight hours before his national debut. They asked me to take a quick look at the speech the Gore campaign had drafted for him because they felt it had not been written in his voice, and the Gore campaign was ignoring their attempts to make fundamental changes to the draft. While Ford went on to shake hands and work the lobby, I went upstairs to his suite to take a look.

What I saw appalled me. It was so partisan, so political, so negative, and so *not* Harold Ford. Class warfare. Rich versus poor. Haves versus have-nots. Greed versus virtue. Good (Democrats) versus evil (Republicans). It painted a picture of a simplistic, black-and-white world. Had Ford delivered that speech as written, he would have come off like every other partisan hack: all politics, no vision.

When Ford returned, I told him I hated the speech because it did not reflect who he was or what he was about. It would sound foreign coming out of his mouth. He needed to talk about something positive and uplifting. And so I recommended that he create a riff on the word *imagine*. Funny that the first time I ever suggested using that word in politics—which I have since advised dozens of politicians to do—it was for a Democrat.

Baer and the Gore people hated Ford's revised speech because it didn't blast a hole in the Republicans. Instead, it was positive and affirming, inclusive and free of partisan sniping. It did not even mention George W. Bush by name. Fortunately, Ford insisted on doing it his way. Now you decide whether the words of Harold Ford are words that work:

> The choice before us is not what kind of America will we have in the next four years, but what kind of America will we have in the next forty?
>
> Imagine if you will for a moment, a debt-free economy strong enough that every American can share in the American dream.
>
> Imagine a health care system where every American receives the medicine he or she needs, and where no senior is forced to stay up late at night deciding whether to buy food or fill a prescription.
>
> Imagine a society that treats seniors with the respect and dignity they deserve.
>
> Imagine a nation of clean coastlines and safe drinking water.
>
> Imagine a world where we give all children a first-class education.
>
> Well, America, it's time to stop imagining. Tonight, I call on all of my reform-minded Republican and Independent friends to join us in our crusade, to join us in making this bold imagination a reality.[8]

The reviews of Ford's keynote address were solid. Fred Barnes and Mort Kondracke, Fox News commentators, both picked Ford as that convention's "rising star," even suggesting that the thirty-year-old would someday grace a national Democrat ticket.[9] Conservative commentator Sean Hannity applauded the speech, as did Michael Barone, writing for *U.S. News & World Report*, and even GOP leader David Dreier gave it favorable marks.[10] Everyone had high praise—except for the Gore campaign. As Ryan Lizza wrote in *The New Republic*: "As usual, the media wrote laudatory profiles about the 30-year-old, black, Southern New Democrat who represented the future of the party. Behind the scenes, however, Gore's aides were not as praiseworthy."[11] Nope, the people in partisan overdrive were not happy, but everyone else was. By imagining a better America, Harold Ford helped everyone *except* the partisan politicos see a better America.

Rule Nine
Ask a Question

"Is it live, or is it Memorex?" "Where do you want to go today?" (Microsoft) *"Can you hear me now?"* (Verizon Wireless)

"Got Milk?" may be the most memorable print ad campaign of the past decade. The creator realized, whether intentionally or not, that it's sometimes not what you say but what you ask that really matters. A statement, when put in the form of a rhetorical question, can have much greater impact than a plain assertion. If unemployment and inflation are up and confidence in the future is down, telling voters that life has gotten worse, while clearly factual, is less effective than asking voters *"Are you better off today than you were four years ago?"* Ronald Reagan asked Jimmy Carter and the tens of millions of debate listeners this devastating political question in their only face-to-face campaign encounter in 1980. No litany of economic data or political accusation could carry the power of a simple rhetorical question that for most Americans had an equally simple answer. *"Are you better off"* framed not just the debate, held only five days before the election, but the entire campaign, and it propelled Reagan from dead even to a nine-point victory over the incumbent Carter.

An even simpler question was posed hypothetically by former House Speaker Newt Gingrich in the months leading up to the 2006 midterm elections. When asked what he would tell Democrats to say in their campaign against the House Republicans he once led, Newt's response encapsulated several communication "rules." It was just two words, three syllables, and nine letters: *"Had enough?"* It needs no explanation. It needs no clarification. It simply rings true. Apparently, much of America agreed.

The question-rule has day-to-day implications as well. A customer complaining to the store manager that her meat has too much fat in it is less effective than if she asked: *"Does this look lean to you?"* Similarly, asking *"What would you do if you were in my shoes?"* puts direct pressure on the recipient of your complaint to see things your way.

The reason for the effectiveness of questions in communication is quite obvious. When you assert, whether in politics, business, or day-to-day life, the reaction of the listener depends to some degree on his or her opinion of the speaker. But making the same statement in the form of a rhetorical question makes the reaction personal—and personalized communication is the best communication.

This rule comes straight from famed Democratic media consultant Tony Schwartz, and he called it the "responsive chord theory" of communication. Schwartz was best known for creating the advertising campaign for Lyndon Johnson in 1964 that included the "Daisy" ad, the single most devastating political spot of all time, because of its juxtaposition of a little girl counting up the petals on a daisy with a chilling, echoed countdown of a nuclear missile launch. In his work, Schwartz found that people reacted best to language and messages that were participatory—allowing the receiver to interact with the message and the messenger. Rhetorical questions require responses, and responses by definition are interactive.

No profession depends more on the strategic use of the rhetorical question than criminal lawyers (also known as *"attorneys"* by those who actually like what they do and how they do it). The best lawyers use the rhetorical method to remove their clients from the proceedings and in essence put themselves on trial instead. Robert Shapiro explains why:

> My client comes into the courtroom with baggage because we do not have the presumption of innocence in America. Truth is, we have the assumption of guilt, and it starts the minute somebody is arrested. Nobody says "an innocent person was arrested today on suspicion of murder." What happens is the Chief of Police, the District Attorney, and everybody else who is looking to get on television has a press conference and says "We have solved a crime. We have arrested and have in custody the person who did it. He will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law." And then a lawyer comes along at some point and either says "no comment" or "my client's not guilty," but nobody believes. So my job as a lawyer is to try to level the playing field.

Shapiro explains and demonstrates the process with a series of questions in his communications tool kit for picking juries. Some of them are designed to raise legitimate doubts, while others are asked merely for emotional impact:

> I look right at the jury and I ask each one of them, "Why do you think the person next to me is sitting here? What did he do?" Sometimes I will stand there for 30 seconds in silence—and that's a long time to be silent. I'll wait until they start to get a little bit nervous and a little uneasy. Then I explain to them he's there because a prosecutor has looked at some evidence and decided to issue a charge. Nothing more, nothing less. No trials were heard, no testimony was taken under oath. And then I'll ask, "Do you believe this man did anything?" It's obviously a question that is designed not to have an answer, because they can't answer it. Again silence. And then I say, "Well, this is a demonstration of what the presumption of innocence is. Do you really believe that?" And I stare them straight in the eye.

Shapiro and other successful criminal lawyers use the rhetorical question method to set the context even before the trial begins so that each juror will have an absolute understanding of what the law requires. And the impact on each juror? Says Shapiro: "When I'm done, they believe that the person sitting next to me is no more guilty of any crime than the person sitting next to them in the jury box."

Still, one should think through the consequences of asking a rhetorical question. The *"Does she or doesn't she?"* rhetorical campaign for

Clairol in the 1960s played on the notion that the product was so good that no one could tell the difference between dyed hair and natural color ("Only her hairdresser knows for sure"). The irony was that it also sent a not-so-subtle message that women shouldn't admit that they colored their hair—that this was the kind of thing that ought to be kept hidden in the medicine cabinet. The ad campaign, seemingly simple and straightforward, ended up discouraging satisfied customers from spreading the word about the product.

Nevertheless, the rhetorical question remains one of the most powerful but underutilized communication tools.

Rule Ten
Provide Context and Explain Relevance

Context is so important that it serves not only as the last and most important rule of effective communication, but also as its own chapter. You have to give people the "why" of a message before you tell them the "therefore" and the "so that."

Some people call this *framing*. I prefer the word *context,* because it better explains why a particular message matters. Without context, you cannot establish a message's value, its impact, or most importantly, its relevance. *"Have it your way,"* the on-again, off-again Burger King slogan first launched in 1973, spoke to the frustration of fast-food consumers who didn't want their burgers like everyone else's. The line effectively set Burger King apart from the other fast-food chains. Without the underlying context of fast food being a mass-produced, assembly-line proposition, without the idea that all fast food was essentially the same, *"Have it your way"* wouldn't have resonated.

In corporate advertising, as in politics, the order in which you present information determines context, and it can be as important as the substance of the information itself. The "so that" of a message is your solution, but solutions are meaningless unless and until they are attached to an identifiable problem. Finding the right "why" to address is thus just as important as the "how" you offer. Products and services alike must all respond to a felt need on the part of the public.

This is particularly true in politics. From a *"return to normalcy"* in 1920 on behalf of Warren Harding to *"It's morning again in America"* for Ronald Reagan in 1984, campaigns have been using simple phrases to capture the

context of the times. Perhaps the best example of a political slogan where the context *is* the message was never really meant to be a political slogan at all. *"It's the economy, stupid"* wasn't created for public consumption. When Democratic strategist James Carville wrote it on a sign that hung on the wall of presidential candidate Bill Clinton's Little Rock campaign office in 1992, he did so to remind the campaign staff what was singularly important. But the phrase caught on—a hallmark of a good slogan—and has been part of our political lexicon ever since. The short and somewhat crude statement (based on the old "Keep it simple, stupid") perfectly encapsulated what the Democrats were trying to get across in 1992.

Context is only half of the framing effort. The other half—relevance—is focused on the individual and personal component of a communication effort. Put most simply, if it doesn't matter to the intended audience, it won't be heard. With so many messages and so many communication vehicles competing for our attention, the target audience must see *individual, personal* meaning and value in your words. The *"Don't leave home without it"* campaign by American Express beginning in the mid-1970s played on people's fears of losing their wallets away from home—a relevant concern for almost every road warrior at that time. Most everyone can relate to that feeling of momentary panic when you realize your wallet isn't in your pocket; we heard the American Express ad and immediately imagined a personal crisis prevented by American Express traveler's checks—and later the American Express card.*

Relevance is one reason market research is so crucial. Until you know what drives and determines a consumer's or a voter's decision-making process, any attempt to influence him or her is really just a shot in the dark. It's relying on luck to hit its target. But once market research has identified the key factors on which a decision turns, then your message can be tailored specifically to those relevant points.

Beyond market research, the most important factor in guaranteeing relevance is imagination. It's important to shed your own perspective and try to put yourself in your audience's position, seeing the world through their eyes. Politicians are notoriously inept at this, constantly mired in Beltway jargon that loses sight of where they came from and what the voters truly care about. A hint: It's not the prerogatives of the

*And now it's Visa that is making a case for relevancy, emphasizing all the events and places that do accept Visa cards but don't accept American Express.

Senate or the minutiae of the budget reconciliation process. It's safety, security, and peace of mind.

By the same token, most buyers of Hebrew National don't want to see how those hot dogs are made, and the average buyer of a home computer doesn't give much thought to how a semiconductor works. Don't get so caught up in your own insider's perspective that you lose sight of what the man or woman on the street really cares about. Hassle-free technology is a lot more important to a lot more people than the brand of chip in Dell's laptop computer.

These, then, are the ten rules of effective communication, all summarized in single words: simplicity, brevity, credibility, consistency, novelty, sound, aspiration, visualization, questioning, and context. If your tagline, slogan, or message meets most of these criteria, chances are it will meet with success. If it meets all ten, it has a shot at being a home run. But in the history of political verbiage and product marketing, less than one in one thousand hit it out of the park.

Words aren't everything, of course. If there were a rule eleven, it would address the importance of visual symbols.

It's hard not to acknowledge the staggering impact of visual imagery on modern life. We are all overstimulated—or is it narcotized or lobotomized—by film, television, billboards, and now, the Internet. The amount of information we consume grows ever greater, even as our collective attention span shrinks. To prove this to yourself, simply catch a TV Land rerun of an hour-long popular drama from the 1960s or 1970s. You'll be stunned by the slow, sluggish pacing, by how much it holds the audience's hand, and by dialogue and camera angles that seem to discourage action—and it will hit home how much things have changed. *Hawaii Five-0,* with its striking visuals and more graphic style, was almost revolutionary in its approach to verbal and visual action, and was the top police show in the 1970s, but current fans of Keifer Sutherland's *24* would find it slow and unmemorable today. Even the random flurry of images that appeared so revolutionary when MTV gave birth to the music video in the early 1980s have become antiquated and passé.

Political campaigns are generally very clever at capturing the power of the visual, whether it be standing on the steps of the U.S. Capitol or a multicultural crowd enjoying some random ethnic celebration. In 1984, Lesley Stahl of the *CBS Evening News* put together a lengthy report she

thought was highly critical of President Reagan. In Stahl's own words, "I was worried that my sources at the White House would be angry enough to freeze me out." But after the story aired, Deputy White House Chief of Staff Michael Deaver was anything but angry. "Way to go, Kiddo," he said to Stahl. "What a great piece. We loved it." Stahl replied, "Didn't you hear what I said?" Deaver replied, "Nobody heard what you said. . . . You guys in televisionland haven't figured it out yet, have you? When the pictures are powerful and emotional, they override if not completely drown out the sound. I mean it, Lesley. Nobody heard you."[12] The happy pictures of President Reagan—looking strong and amiable and, well, presidential—undermined the *context* for Stahl's harsh critique. Providing proper context is rule number one of communication, but visual impact can obliterate rule number one.

A visual context that supports and reinforces your language will provide a multiplier effect, making your message that much stronger. And, as the Stahl-Reagan anecdote illustrates, a striking visual context can overwhelm the intended verbal message entirely. It's no accident that contemporary politicians have learned to array American flags in the background of their press conferences or speak in front of themed backdrops, pronouncing the subject and message just in case the speech doesn't make it abundantly clear. It's politics for the simpleminded.

No one has done this more often and more effectively than Bush 43 and his White House communication and advance teams. Rarely does the President make official remarks without the topic of those remarks spelled out multiple times on the wall behind him. *"Strengthening Social Security"* or *"Winning the War on Terror"* repeated over and over and over for the television cameras to capture and viewers at home to read . . . and read . . . and read.* Of course this can backfire if the message proves to be false—such as the big *"Mission Accomplished"* sign Bush stood in front of on the U.S.S. *Lincoln* aircraft carrier when he announced the end of "major combat operations" in Iraq on May 1, 2003.

*When I got involved in the Social Security messaging effort in the mid 1990s, the official Republican slogan was *"preserve and protect Social Security."* But in my research, I found seniors and pre-retirees much more favorable toward a more proactive and forward-looking approach to the program. While *"preserve and protect"* suggests keeping it just as it is, *"strengthening"* says making it better—and that's what seniors really wanted. Eventually the Republicans adopted the new language. I took a similar approach to Medicare reform. Far more popular than the official House Republican message of "preserving and protecting Medicare" was *"save, strengthen and simplify Medicare."* Dozens of Congressional Republicans agreed.

And of course, no public event in the twenty-first century is complete without the packed stage with the various shades of America huddled on top of each other—all smiling and nodding on cue.*

But deploy the wrong symbol in the wrong way and you're headed for big trouble. While studying at Oxford for my doctorate in the mid-1980s, I made a speech at the hallowed Oxford Union Society arguing that governments take too much money in taxes. I took a British one-pound note (they got rid of them a year later) and began to cut it up with a pair of scissors to illustrate my thesis and visually depict just how much of each pound went to the government in the form of taxes. I thought I was making shrewd use of symbolism, copying the methods used a couple of years earlier by President Reagan.

Now, let's catalogue my mistakes, shall we? There were three of them. (But don't call it a "hat trick"—a hockey symbol for some and a reference to either magic or clothing to others. A majority of women won't know what you're talking about. And if the TV ratings are any indication, many men won't know, either.)

1. At the time I had no idea that it was actually illegal to deface the British pound. Strike one. (See how these sports metaphors keep popping up? Suppress the urge. You are not Vin Scully, the "voice" of the Los Angeles Dodgers, and your audience didn't necessarily grow up at Dodger Stadium.)

2. I failed to realize that the British do not take kindly to a *foreigner* destroying one of their national symbols. It's not just the substance of the message that's significant, it's also who delivers it. We see this everywhere. David Letterman or Robin Williams can take the most wispy, meaningless nothing of an idea and spin it into comedy gold. Your cousin Lenny tries out the same material, and he comes off about as funny as a stubbed toe.

3. Finally, cutting the pound note with scissors was perceived as a violent attack. Before I could finish my speech, I was booed off the dispatch box. I returned to my seat and sunk faster than the exchange rate. The stunt would have worked in the United States, but in England it was too provocative, even sacrilegious. The experience

*The next time you see the President speaking, notice how quickly you stop watching him and scan the faces of the people behind him. They're all nobodies, and yet your eyes will spend as much time focused on their reaction as you do on what the President is saying. We can't help it. It's just the way we process information.

devastated me. I never spoke again at Oxford without a fully prepared text, and even after returning to the States, it took years to shake the embarrassment.

It's not what you say, it's what people hear . . . and see.

Words That Worked—Case Study: *"Talk to Me"*

In 1994, I gave 150 Nerf footballs emblazoned with the words *"Talk to Me"* on them to a roomful of anxious Republican members of Congress. The footballs were the antidote for what I thought was wrong with the Republican Party during the previous two-year period when the Democrats were in control of virtually every political level of power nationally.

I knew from my research in 1993 that Americans viewed the GOP as much too uptight and staid, and Republican candidates as too distant and humorless. As the 1994 election approached, Republicans finally began to secure a narrow but noticeable advantage on many of the key political issues facing the country, but Americans still saw them as too stuffy and buttoned-down. The Contract with America was exactly the right approach to demonstrate that this crop of candidates were different not only from the Democrats in charge, but also from the Republicans that had come before. But that wasn't necessarily enough. There had to be a stylistic difference to enhance the substance. They needed a personality transplant.

Enter the footballs—a technique to personalize the otherwise politicized town hall meeting concept. Now, looking at the House Republicans I was advising, I appreciated that they weren't a particularly athletic bunch, and I wasn't sure which they'd have more trouble with, throwing a football or catching one.* So I decided to go Nerf. On the footballs was printed an essential slogan that articulated everything the balls were meant to do: *"Talk to Me."*

The Democrats had controlled Congress for forty years—and over the course of four decades in power they had become distant, closed off, arrogant, and out of touch. *"Talk to Me"* was exactly what voters

*Steve Largent and J. C. Watts, elected in the class of 1994, were actual professional football stars in their own right. They were the exception.

wanted to do with their elected officials in 1994, and exactly what too many politicians were not letting them do. I had the balls made blue and white because I wanted them to look patriotic (I was too cheap to add a third color, red). Today, a prototype of those Nerf footballs sits in the Smithsonian Institution.

The words *"Talk to Me"* were important, but so, too, was the symbolism of a congressman playing catch with his or her constituents. The objective: Use the footballs in their town hall sessions to create a *connection* between them and their constituents. More precisely, it was about putting constituents at the center of the communication rather than being the target of it.* The structure of the town halls was supposed to go something like this:

Members would welcome people to their town halls and thank them for coming just as they always had done. But instead of launching into a fifteen- or thirty-minute speech or presentation, members would first ask the audience why they came to the event that day and what they hoped to learn. And the way people would be chosen to speak was by catching the football. The member of Congress would toss the ball to someone in the audience and invite that person to stand and speak. After each person had spoken, he or she would throw the football back to the member, who would then toss it back out to someone else. And this would go on for an hour or ninety minutes.

Everybody wanted to get his or her hands on the football because everyone wanted to be heard. And when somebody caught a pass from the representative, they all felt as if they'd *connected.* Even though the vast majority of attendees never got a chance to speak, everyone left the sessions with a personal sense of involvement. The footballs made what would otherwise have been dull political events into something participatory, interactive, and fun, like catching a foul ball at a baseball game or the bouquet at a wedding reception. By my best estimates, about fifty candidates used the footballs regularly in the 1994 campaign, and you can still see the footballs on display in some of their offices. And in November

*My greatest frustration with politicians and corporate leaders is that they talk about being constituent-centered but they don't actually communicate it. For example, instead of reading to children, they should encourage children to read to them. Instead of conducting shareholder meetings that allow limited or no voices from the floor, CEOs should conduct listening sessions where they ask the questions and shareholders do the responding. If a constituent or shareholder is asked a question by a senator or CEO and is given the chance to respond, the entire audience is empowered—and grateful.

1994, *not a single House Republican incumbent was defeated*—despite the anti-incumbent mood of the electorate.

Those three words embroidered on the footballs—*"Talk to Me"*—adhered to almost all of the ten rules of effective language. They were plain, simple, concise, powerful, and effective. Language like that is what this book is all about.