War of words

By Mike Freedman

15 Oct 2008

The global financial meltdown is becoming trapped in clichés - as the first four words of my introduction typify. Every time there is a crisis, whenever change occurs, clichés proliferate and, if the clever writer isn't cautious, they soon start choking communication.

There is not a good writer in South Africa that will use the word "empower" nor "grassroots"; "previously disadvantaged" is a term that belongs to yesterday, even if the poor linger with us still. It's considered insensitive to console the bereaved or traumatised with the clichés, "time heals." The use of words has never been as carefully analysed.

After 9/11, President George W Bush and his advisers had to make a decision that advertising copywriters know well - how to describe a big thing in a few telling words.

Profound effects

Audi has *Vorsprung durch Technik*, Avis says *We Try Harder*. These commercial brands had months, if not years, to come up with solutions. The president's men had hours to encapsulate the magnitude, horror and terror of 9/11. Significantly, they chose - *war on terrorism*. Those three words had profound effects on the world and brand America.

Bush declared *war on terrorism* and that is the US 9/11 baseline, strategy and tactics. Because of this self-declared *war on terrorism*, nations have been smashed by the American military-industrial complex. In his book *The Bubble of American Supremacy*, George Soros advocates a different baseline for 9/11 - *crime against humanity*.

War on terrorism invokes battles, weapons, increasing violence, occupation and subjugation. War is a blunt instrument, writing off civilian casualties as *collateral damage.*

Far different response

A *crime against humanity* invokes a far different response. It focuses on the horror of the deed, not the magnitude of the response. *Crime against humanity* isolates criminals instead of recruiting armies. It is a moral high ground, calling for detectives to solve the crime and bring the guilty to justice.

Two wars later, bin Laden is as elusive as ever, terror spreads, no mass weapons of destruction are found and occupation armies - supposed harbingers of a better world - daily abuse local communities - spreading new plagues.

War on terror eats away at brand America.

Nancy Reagan declared a war on drugs but apart from some Hollywood movies, there were no victors and many victims. In South Africa we began a war on poverty - what did it mean? A scholarly colleague tells me you can never make war on a lower-case noun.

Yet warfare is a respected teacher. My essential marketing library includes Ries & Trout *Marketing Warfare*, and *The Art of War*, written 3000 years ago by Sun Tzu, the imperial general of the Chinese Armies.

According to Sun Tzu, the ideal general is one who never has to fight a battle. Through intelligence, preparedness and a ring of alliances, a nation becomes too powerful to be embroiled in unwinnable wars.

Turn back the clock

If President Bush could turn the clock back and choose again, would we be fighting a *war on terrorism*, or solving a *crime against humanity*? Perhaps the clock has to be turned further back than the Bush presidency. He perhaps acted in the way he did because previous administrations had not heeded Sun Tzu's words, intelligence was lacking and the ring of alliances has been rubbed thin by the Gordian knot of Middle East passion and politics.

The words *war on terrorism* were probably coined long before that fateful autumn morning in New York and Washington, and awaited the opportunity to be let out of Pandora's box.

Whether it's 9/11, a motor car, Johannesburg or South Africa, three words define large and complex organisms. Half a century ago, Jaguar distilled its essence into *Grace, Space, Pace*; now BMW promises *Sheer Driving Pleasure*. The vision for Johannesburg is an *World-Class African City* and South Africa tells the world we're *Alive with Possibilities*.

Snap! Crackle! Pop! has described Kellogg's Rice Krispies since 1932 and Kentucky Fried Chicken has been *finger lickin' good* for over half a century.

Computers are based on binary coding; humans are tertiary animals. We learn the *ABC* and count 1,2,3. Knowing the *AB* is as alien as counting 1,2,3,4. There is the Father, Son and Holy Ghost; thesis, antithesis and synthesis; yin and yang creating ch'i - life-giving energy.

Dreams and destinies need to be encapsulated in a few words. Choose the wrong words and it doesn't matter how stunning the logo graphics, or how large the budget, you are on the road to failure.

Because of a few words

Brand America is under siege and while battles are won with military might, because of a few words, the war was lost before the first shot was fired.

A Turkish proverb cautions us - and they are words every journalist, media consultant and copywriter should bear in mind (and what a great world it would be if politicians learnt them too): *No matter how far you've gone down a wrong road, turn back.*

ABOUT MIKE FREEDMAN

Mike Freedman, a doyen of the advertising and branding community, is founder of Freedthinkers (www.freedthinkers.com}) which has offices in Johannesburg (at Turbine Hall in Newtown) and Cape Town. He was a prominent copywriter at some of the big ad agencies in London and here before helping form ad agency Freedman and Rossi, and then Freedthinkers. They helped Johannesburg create its branding "A World Class African City" and the energies and strategies that flowed from that including the development of Newtown, Constitutional Hill, etc... Other major clients include Discovery, healthbridge, POCit, Absa, MultiChoice, Coca-Cola and Nando's. Contact Mike at mike@freedthinkers.com

- Purpose must come before profit... and before anything else too - 19 Sep 2017
- [2013 trends] Growing power, vulnerability of the corporate brand - 17 Jan 2013
- [2012 trends] Sustainability and beyond - 24 Jan 2012
- Divisions and dependencies - 10 Oct 2011
- The power of design - 12 Sep 2011

View my profile and articles...

For more, visit: https://www.bizcommunity.com