



**UHH...**

**LIKE...**

**UM...**

# **DON'T FILL UP ON FILLER WORDS**

## **HOW TO CUT THEM OUT OF YOUR COMMUNICATION DIET**

There are a lot of diets out there – some that work and many that don't. If you're looking to whittle down your waistline, you won't find the latest tips and tricks here. However, there is another kind of diet you definitely need to be aware of: your communication diet.

Like sugars and fats that can often fill you up with a whole lot of nothing, filler words do the very same to your communication. When you start paying attention, you realize donuts, packaged snacks, and filler words are EVERYWHERE. You hear them every second of the day. They're sort of ... like ... totally ... sort of, I mean ... Um, uh ... ya know ... the wishy-washy kinds of words that people unconsciously use to punctuate their speech, both at work and in social situations.

Good speakers avoid filler words like the plague, knowing that they instantly and irrevocably erode away one's credibility. Filler words are not definitive - they're weak. They completely diminish the power of the ideas you are trying to impart to your audience.

# UH, UM, YOU KNOW...NO ACTUALLY, WE DON'T

Take the example of now, US Ambassador to Japan, Caroline Kennedy. Back in 2008, Kennedy was running for New York's junior senator position. In a slew of interviews given by Kennedy to media outlets, it became very clear and not so clear at the same time, that Kennedy's strength wasn't in speaking with reporters about why she was the best choice.

A number of news groups began to share and compare the transcripts of their interviews with Kennedy along with the tallies of how many "ums", "you knows" and "uhs" were used – some reporting over 100 up to nearly 200 times. The following is from a transcript provided by The New York Times of their interview with Kennedy. This excerpt represents the first question given by the reporters and the subsequent response given by Kennedy:

*Nicholas Confessore: Let's talk a little bit about some of the other candidates who are interested in this job... Tell me why the governor should pick you over Andrew Cuomo.*

*Caroline Kennedy: I'm, you know, actually, Andrew Cuomo is someone I've known for many, many years and we've talked, you know, throughout this process, so, you know, we have a really good relationship and I admire the work he's doing now and what he's done, so I'm not really going to kind of criticize any of these other candidates, because I think there are a lot of people with great experience, and, you know, any one of which the governor could easily pick and they'd do a good job.*

In that one answer alone, you can see how distracting filler words are – leaving everyone confused about what was said. She didn't answer the question, and if you continue read the script you'll see the same pattern throughout the entire interview, with the reporters desperately trying to understand why she felt she deserved the position.

Kennedy was accomplished and came from an accomplished family – she went on to do more notable things; however, these speaking engagements with several outlets (along with other factors) no doubt had an effect on her eventual decision to withdraw from that race.

The use of filler words leaves your audience wondering if you know what you're talking about - the result being a decrease in their confidence in you and your message.

In a study done with college students, participants were first asked to describe how they perceive people who frequently say "um" and "uh." Not surprisingly, the students rated "um-ers" as:

- uncomfortable
- inarticulate
- uninteresting
- ill-prepared
- nervous
- monotonous
- unsophisticated
- lacking in confidence

## SAY IT LIKE YOU MEAN IT

In addition to filler words, another communication diet killer is the use of weak words. Just as empty as filler words, they tease your audience into thinking you're saying something when instead, the lack of conviction leaves the listener uncertain of your commitment to the message you're delivering.

Here's a perfect example of how using timid and weak-sounding words can hurt you. It's the story of a recent college graduate named John, who'd been hired by a colleague of mine to integrate data from various departments and create aggregated reports for management.

In John's first week on the job, his boss asked him if his report would be ready by 5 p.m. John's response was, "It should be ready by 5." His boss, quietly stewing, said to John, "You know what? Let's hang up the phone. Call me back in a few seconds, and tell me that the report **WILL** be ready by 5 p.m."

Think about the difference between these two responses. How much confidence did the word **SHOULD** convey in this two-way communication? In my colleague's company, there is simply no room for uncertainty when it comes to its reports. It's either on time or it's not. The report had to be ready at 5 p.m.

That exchange proved to be a learning moment for John. Now, as a matter of practice, he delivers his reports a few hours early each week and is never, ever heard saying words like "should" or "could." He has gained his manager's confidence, knowing that John says what he means and means what he says. It's my contention that the best speakers communicate the very same confidence and conviction every time they deliver their message.

## BE THE PERSON THEY'D FOLLOW UP A MOUNTAIN

Think about how you talk in everyday conversation (and subsequently in your presentations). Most of us use filler and empty words without even realizing it, and yet we are very aware and judgmental of others who are mired down with these communication flaws. Ultimately, the standard you place on others applies to you as well: why would anyone follow you up a mountain, onto the playing field, or into the line of fire if you use weak words? Why would people buy what you are selling? In order to become a leader and inspire action, you need to project strength and confidence.

This strength has to be communicated, first and foremost by the words you use. Just like our body's health and strength is not built on sugary treats – our communication diet cannot be fueled with empty, weak, filler words – that is, if you want to be effective.

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