



# THE POWER TO UNDO

When you think about it, communication is the sum of many parts, which include: nonverbal movements, your appearance, the tone you speak with, etc. Ultimately however, it's the WORDS you choose that are delivered - amongst these other variables - that can make or break you.

It's one of the most elementary concepts that most of us learn at a young age: think before you speak. There's a reason we were taught that and teach it to our young; a popular quote seen on thousands of Pinterest boards best states it, "Be careful with your words. Once they are said, they can only be forgiven, not forgotten." It's true - what we say rarely goes completely unnoticed.

Imagine you say something, and immediately want to take it back. But it's too late. The damage has been done. This is any speaker's worst nightmare and can happen to even the most successful business people anytime, anywhere.

## DON'T DO A RATNER

In fact, the combination of a few spoken words can destroy an entire company in 10 seconds. Think I'm exaggerating? I'm not...and there's a term for it: The Ratner Effect. This unfortunate term is named after Gerald Ratner, formerly the CEO of a jewelry empire whose stores included Ratners, H. Samuel, Ernest Jones, Leslie Davis, Watches of Switzerland and over 1,000 shops in the U.S. known as Kay Jewelers. Although the chain was considered "tacky" by the press and other jewelers, their success turned Ratners into a billion-dollar business and became a household name throughout England in the 1980s.

However, on April 23, 1991, it all came crashing down in what seemed like an instant. On that fateful day, Gerald Ratner gave a speech to a group of high-powered businessmen and journalists on how he grew a small family-owned business into an empire in a few short years. The speaking engagement, which Ratner himself now refers to as "the speech," is considered one of the biggest blunders in the history of business.

During the speech, someone in the audience asked him how he was able to sell things so inexpensively. His response:

"... We also do cut-glass sherry decanters complete with six glasses on a silver-plated tray that your butler can serve you drinks on, all for £4.95. People say, 'How can you sell this for such a low price?' I say, because it's total crap." He continued speaking and said earrings sold by the Ratner Group were "cheaper than an M&S prawn sandwich but probably wouldn't last as long."

News spread on what he said about his product. The result? Hordes of previously loyal customers stopped coming almost immediately. The effect on the company's profits was catastrophic. Almost overnight, shares in the company dropped by a market value of around \$800 million. The company never recovered.

The phrase "doing a Ratner" entered the English lexicon as a term that refers to self-inflicted harm that ruins reputations, and in some cases, entire businesses. Anything that can go wrong with a given set of spoken words will often go wrong. You can bet on that. If you never want people to think your product is crap – don't say it's crap, even in jest...especially in a presentation!

Pick your words wisely. Remember when faced with the temptation of being clever or witty, that what you let out of your mouth will go on record – be sure you're comfortable with it being broadcast when and wherever.

## ARE YOU MAKING COMMUNICATION YOUR FRIEND OR FRENEMY?

Communication is a tool that has the power to be your best friend or worst enemy. So often we fail to really say what we mean to communicate. Poor word choices, spoken in the wrong order, with inappropriate contexts, can get us into trouble. We need to be careful when we choose our words but often we simply aren't.

A foundational concept in the study of communications explains how this happens. In the most basic of models there is the sender and the receiver. There is encoding of the message from the sender and the decoding of the receiver – with an inevitable amount of "noise" that occurs between the two entities. This noise can be caused by a number of reasons that

include literal, physiological or psychological factors which contribute to how someone understands and digests the message they hear.

I often introduce my students to an interesting set of precepts put forward by an influential Finnish communications theorist named Osmo Antero Wiio. He asserted that there are three central truths that we should all keep in mind when we communicate:

1. Communication usually fails, except by accident.
2. If a message can be interpreted in several ways, it will be interpreted in a manner that maximizes damage.
3. There is always someone who knows better than you what you meant by your message.

The main takeaways from Wiio's theories are incredibly insightful:

- The truth is communication usually fails. Even good communicators need a variety of factors to occur for the intended message to be perfectly absorbed by an audience.
- When you communicate an idea, particularly to a group of people, your audience is going to take the path of least resistance. People will interpret your words the way they want to interpret them.
- The power of a message is centralized in the listener, not the speaker – and if you fail to convey what you're actually trying to convey, then you weaken your call to action.

## PROCEED WITH CAUTION

Mr. Mark Twain once said, "the difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug." Our words hold a great deal of power – when we understand that, we can be much more careful in our use of them. The importance of a well-thought-out message is so important. The words you choose, the tone, inflection, etc are all considered a part of that communication package that is headed to the receiver. At the end of the day though, we're human, we'll make mistakes. So how do we avoid destroying a company in 10 seconds if we're prone to mistakes? Be prepared. When you are aware and conscientious of your audience, your topic, and your desired outcome BEFORE you speak, you will avoid a Ratner during your next presentation.

Being prepared takes time – but it's worth it. Before your next presentation think in detail about the individuals who will be there, reflect on the purpose of your presentation and what you hope to accomplish. Perhaps even consider ways of explaining potential difficult topics or questions so that you are prepared with words/language that you won't regret later.

When you think before you speak, you'll not only avoid a major undoing, you'll increase the effectiveness of your message.