

# Please, please, please can we ban the C-word?



Words really matter and the fate of brands can be decided by them, believes  
**Julian Saunders**

**WORDS GET** stripped of their meaning if used too often. This is called semantic satiation: words progressively lose their potency through over-repetition. Our business overflows with words such as 'brand', 'engagement', 'target audience', 'core values' and, my particular bugbear, 'content'. Content is very hot now, turbocharged by all manner of 'brand engagement'.

So does the overuse of certain words matter?

The danger is that we stop thinking about what words mean. They cease to have a personal impact and become important-sounding buzzwords that we intone in the sure knowledge that we will not be challenged to say exactly what we mean.

Words become something we hide behind or just a way for people to signal that they belong to the same professional tribe.

Flatulent language leads to sloppy thinking. At the risk of farting in church (to use an Australian phrase), here are some suggestions for alternatives to our most overused words.

Can we ban the 'brand' word?

Probably not – brands are written into the valuation of too many companies. Yet brands are owned by companies with famous logos that people can hide behind.

What if we used the word 'reputation' more?

Reputation is personal – it is a precious thing and can be won or lost depending on how you behave. 'Your reputation is at stake' is something you should worry about.

Can we ban the 'values' word?

It is a very high-flown word for a down-to-earth activity. Going on about brand values is credible for John Lewis or Apple, but most companies do not have clear brand values that staff can understand and live up to.

What if we used two old-fashioned words such as 'civility' and 'decency'?

"Decency", as Orwell said, is that "intuitive sense of morality that exists among common people". It is what we hope for from each other and is, therefore, a guide to behaviour that anyone can understand.

'Engagement' used to be a lovely word (as in 'engaged to be married') but now it is frequently used by agencies to mean 'soft selling'.

People can spot the difference between pretend engagement to make a sale and the real thing. Real engagement starts with listening or empathy because you cannot engage without understanding. This may lead you to offer advice that is objective, timely and helpful. Or it may lead you to give pleasure and entertainment as a release from the grind of daily life, or to an act of generosity

with no immediate expectation of a return. Real engagement starts with viewing consumers not as 'target audiences' but as people just like you and me.

All of which brings me to my pet hate: the C-word. Content.

It has never been a good word. It suggests yet more digital detritus being pumped out to an indifferent world.

Would you like more branded content, madam? And would you like two pounds of spuds with that? No thanks.

What I really want is something that interests me or is relevant to me – such as entertainment, rewards, advice, ideas, pleasure, excitement, things worth sharing and participating in, the inside track.

But please not more 'branded content'. It is not easy to replace the C-word: it is a portmanteau term without a ready synonym. But it is both bland and flatulent. My modest proposal is that we ban it.

Some phases do not need to be banned. They quietly deflate like a balloon full of hot air – such as the Big Society. Perhaps 'big data' and 'hard-working families' will go the same way.

Yet the right words are vital to the successful launch of a new idea. Deng Xiaoping kicked off the modernisation of China. His joyful metaphors are partly responsible for transforming our world.

Here is Deng's take on free enterprise: "It doesn't matter if a cat is black or white as long as it catches mice." And here he is on the pace of change: "We will cross the river slowly feeling the stones beneath our toes."

David Cameron might have been more successful with the Big Society if he had rescued his grand project from the sterile language of policy wonks who have a fine command of abstract nouns but, unlike the Chinese, no pictures in their heads.

So this short piece is not just an academic exercise. Words really matter, and the fate of ideas, politicians and brands can be decided by them.

How can we improve the language of marketing? My modest suggestion for marketers is to read Orwell's essays, Churchill's speeches, Seamus Heaney's poetry and spend time in Australia, which is always a good antidote to pomposity.

If you still have any spare time left, learn Mandarin. Prime your brains with language that is both vivid and precise.

Then, and only then, sit down in a quiet room with a view to composing your brand values. ■

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