

Weasel Words: The Art of Saying Nothing at All

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William Lutz was born in 1940 in Racine, Wisconsin. A professor of English at Rutgers University at Camden, Lutz holds a Ph.D. in Victorian literature, linguistics and rhetoric, and a law degree from the Rutgers School of Law. Lutz is the author or coauthor of numerous books having to do with language, including *Webster's New World Thesaurus* (1985) and *The Cambridge Thesaurus of American English* (1994). Considered an expert on language, Lutz has worked with many corporations and government agencies to promote clear, "plain" English. A member of the Pennsylvania bar, he was awarded the Pennsylvania Bar Association Clarity Award for the Promotion of Plain English in Legal Writing in 2001.

Lutz is best known for his series of books on "doublespeak": *Doublespeak: From Revenue Enhancement to Terminal Living* (1989), *The New Doublespeak: Why No One Knows What Anyone's Saying Anymore* (1996), and *Doublespeak Defined: Cut Through the Bull**** and Get to the Point* (1999). Lutz edited the *Quarterly Review of Doublespeak* from 1980 to 1994.

The term *doublespeak* comes from the Newspeak vocabulary of George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It refers to speech or writing that presents two or more contradictory ideas in such a way that an unsuspecting audience is not consciously aware of the contradiction and is likely to be deceived. As chair of the National Council of Teachers of English's Committee on Public Doublespeak, Lutz has been a watchdog of public officials and business leaders who use language to "mislead, distort, deceive, inflate, circumvent, and obfuscate." Each year the committee presents the Orwell Awards, recognizing the most outrageous uses of public doublespeak in government and business.

In the following excerpt from his book *Doublespeak*, Lutz reveals some of the ways that advertisers use language to imply great things about products and services without promising anything at all. With considerable skill, advertisers can produce ads that make us believe a certain product is better than it is without actually lying about it. Lutz's word-by-word analysis of advertising claims reveals how misleading—and ridiculous—these slogans and claims can be.

WRITING TO DISCOVER: *Imagine what it would be like if you were suddenly transported to a world in which there were no advertisements and no one trying to sell you a product. Write about how you would decide what to buy. How would you learn about new products? Would you prefer to live in such a world? Why or why not?*

WEASEL WORDS

One problem advertisers have when they try to convince you that the product they are pushing is really different from other, similar products is that their claims are subject to some laws. Not a lot of laws, but there are some designed to prevent fraudulent or untruthful claims in advertising. Even during the happy years of nonregulation under President Ronald Reagan, the FTC did crack down on the more blatant abuses in advertising claims. Generally speaking, advertisers have to be careful in what they say in their ads, in the claims they make for the products they advertise. Parity claims are safe because they are legal and supported by a number of court decisions. But beyond parity claims there are weasel words. equality of states

Advertisers use weasel words to appear to be making a claim for a product when in fact they are making no claim at all. Weasel words get their name from the way weasels eat the eggs they find in the nests of other animals. A weasel will make a small hole in the egg, suck out the insides, then place the egg back in the nest. Only when the egg is examined closely is it found to be hollow. That's the way it is with weasel words in advertising: Examine weasel words closely and you'll find that they're as hollow as any egg sucked by a weasel. Weasel words appear to say one thing when in fact they say the opposite, or nothing at all.

"Help"—The Number One Weasel Word

The biggest weasel word used in advertising doublespeak is "help." Now "help" only means to aid or assist, nothing more. It does not mean to conquer, stop, eliminate, end, solve, heal, cure, or anything else. But once the ad says "help," it can say just about anything after that because "help" qualifies everything coming after it. The trick is that the claim that comes after the weasel word is usually so strong and so dramatic that you forget the word "help" and concentrate only on the dramatic claim. You read into the ad a message that the ad does not contain. More importantly, the advertiser is not responsible for the claim that you read into the ad, even though the advertiser wrote the ad so you would read that claim into it.

The next time you see an ad for a cold medicine that promises that it "helps relieve cold symptoms fast," don't rush out to buy it. Ask yourself what this claim is really saying. Remember, "help" means only that the medicine will aid or assist. What will it aid or assist in doing? Why, "relieve" your cold "symptoms." "Relieve" only means to ease, alleviate, or mitigate, not to stop, end, or cure. Nor does the claim say how much relieving this medicine will do. Nowhere does this ad claim it will cure anything. In fact, the ad doesn't even claim it will *do* anything at all. The ad only claims that it will aid in relieving (not curing) your cold symptoms, which are probably a runny nose, watery eyes, and a headache. In other words, this medicine probably contains a standard decongestant and some aspirin. By the way, "help" relieve

what does “fast” mean? Ten minutes, one hour, one day? What is fast to one person can be very slow to another. Fast is another weasel word.

Ad claims using “help” are among the most popular ads. One says, “Helps keep you young looking,” but then a lot of things will help keep you young looking, including exercise, rest, good nutrition, and a facelift. More importantly, this ad doesn’t say the product will keep you young, only “young looking.” Someone may look young to one person and old to another.

A toothpaste ad says, “Helps prevent cavities,” but it doesn’t say it will actually prevent cavities. Brushing your teeth regularly, avoiding sugars in food, and flossing daily will also help prevent cavities. A liquid cleaner ad says, “Helps keep your home germ free,” but it doesn’t say it actually kills germs, nor does it even specify which germs it might kill.

“Help” is such a useful weasel word that it is often combined with other action-verb weasel words such as “fight” and “control.” Consider the claim, “Helps control dandruff symptoms with regular use.” What does it really say? It will assist in controlling (not eliminating, stopping, ending, or curing) the *symptoms* of dandruff, not the cause of dandruff nor the dandruff itself. What are the symptoms of dandruff? The ad deliberately leaves that undefined, but assume that the symptoms referred to in the ad are the flaking and itching commonly associated with dandruff. But just shampooing with *any* shampoo will temporarily eliminate these symptoms, so this shampoo isn’t any different from any other. Finally, in order to benefit from this product, you must use it regularly. What is “regular use”—daily, weekly, hourly? Using another shampoo “regularly” will have the same effect. Nowhere does this advertising claim say this particular shampoo stops, eliminates, or cures dandruff. In fact, this claim says nothing at all, thanks to all the weasel words.

Look at ads in magazines and newspapers, listen to ads on radio and television, and you’ll find the word “help” in ads for all kinds of products. How often do you read or hear such phrases as “helps stop . . .,” “helps overcome . . .,” “helps eliminate . . .,” “helps you feel . . .,” or “helps you look . . .”? If you start looking for this weasel word in advertising, you’ll be amazed at how often it occurs. Analyze the claims in the ads using “help,” and you will discover that these ads are really saying nothing.

There are plenty of other weasel words used in advertising. In fact, there are so many that to list them all would fill the rest of this book. But, in order to identify the doublespeak of advertising and understand the real meaning of an ad, you have to be aware of the most popular weasel words in advertising today.

Virtually Spotless

One of the most powerful weasel words is “virtually,” a word so innocent that most people don’t pay any attention to it when it is used in an advertising claim. But watch out. “Virtually” is used in advertising claims that appear to make specific, definite promises when there is no

promise. After all, what does “virtually” mean? It means “in essence or effect, although not in fact.” Look at that definition again. “Virtually” means *not in fact*. It does *not* mean “almost” or “just about the same as,” or anything else. And before you dismiss all this concern over such a small word, remember that small words can have big consequences.

In 1971 a federal court rendered its decision on a case brought by a woman who became pregnant while taking birth control pills. She sued the manufacturer, Eli Lilly and Company, for breach of warranty. The woman lost her case. Basing its ruling on a statement in the pamphlet accompanying the pills, which stated that, “When taken as directed, the tablets offer virtually 100 percent protection,” the court ruled that there was no warranty, expressed or implied, that the pills were absolutely effective. In its ruling, the court pointed out that, according to *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, “virtually” means “almost entirely” and clearly does not mean “absolute” (*Whittington v. Eli Lilly and Company*, 333 F. Supp. 98). In other words, the Eli Lilly company was really saying that its birth control pill, even when taken as directed, *did not in fact* provide 100 percent protection against pregnancy. But Eli Lilly didn’t want to put it that way because then many women might not have bought Lilly’s birth control pills.

The next time you see the ad that says that this dishwasher detergent “leaves dishes virtually spotless,” just remember how advertisers twist the meaning of the weasel word “virtually.” You can have lots of spots on your dishes after using this detergent and the ad claim will still be true, because what this claim really means is that this detergent does not *in fact* leave your dishes spotless. Whenever you see or hear an ad claim that uses the word “virtually,” just translate that claim into its real meaning. So the television set that is “virtually trouble free” becomes the television set that is not in fact trouble free, the “virtually foolproof operation” of any appliance becomes an operation that is in fact not foolproof, and the product that “virtually never needs service” becomes the product that is not in fact service free.

New and Improved

If “new” is the most frequently used word on a product package, “improved” is the second most frequent. In fact, the two words are almost always used together. It seems just about everything sold these days is “new and improved.” The next time you’re in the supermarket, try counting the number of times you see these words on products. But you’d better do it while you’re walking down just one aisle, otherwise you’ll need a calculator to keep track of your counting.

Just what do these words mean? The use of the word “new” is restricted by regulations, so an advertiser can’t just use the word on a product or in an ad without meeting certain requirements. For example, a product is considered new for about six months during a national advertising campaign. If the product is being advertised only in a limited test market

area, the word can be used longer, and in some instances has been used for as long as two years.

What makes a product “new”? Some products have been around for a long time, yet every once in a while you discover that they are being advertised as “new.” Well, an advertiser can call a product new if there has been “a material functional change” in the product. What is “a material functional change,” you ask? Good question. In fact it’s such a good question it’s being asked all the time. It’s up to the manufacturer to prove that the product has undergone such a change. And if the manufacturer isn’t challenged on the claim, then there’s no one to stop it. Moreover, the change does not have to be an improvement in the product. One manufacturer added an artificial lemon scent to a cleaning product and called it “new and improved,” even though the product did not clean any better than without the lemon scent. The manufacturer defended the use of the word “new” on the grounds that the artificial scent changed the chemical formula of the product and therefore constituted “a material functional change.”

Which brings up the word “improved.” When used in advertising, “improved” does not mean “made better.” It only means “changed” or “different from before.” So, if the detergent maker puts a plastic pour spout on the box of detergent, the product has been “improved,” and away we go with a whole new advertising campaign. Or, if the cereal maker adds more fruit or a different kind of fruit to the cereal, there’s an improved product. Now you know why manufacturers are constantly making little changes in their products. Whole new advertising campaigns, designed to convince you that the product has been changed for the better, are based on small changes in superficial aspects of a product. The next time you see an ad for an “improved” product, ask yourself what was wrong with the old one. Ask yourself just how “improved” the product is. Finally, you might check to see whether the “improved” version costs more than the unimproved one. After all, someone has to pay for the millions of dollars spent advertising the improved product.

Of course, advertisers really like to run ads that claim a product is “new and improved.” While what constitutes a “new” product may be subject to some regulation, “improved” is a subjective judgment. A manufacturer changes the shape of its stick deodorant, but the shape doesn’t improve the function of the deodorant. That is, changing the shape doesn’t affect the deodorizing ability of the deodorant, so the manufacturer calls it “improved.” Another manufacturer adds ammonia to its liquid cleaner and calls it “new and improved.” Since adding ammonia does affect the cleaning ability of the product, there has been a “material functional change” in the product, and the manufacturer can now call its cleaner “new,” and “improved” as well. Now the weasel words “new and improved” are plastered all over the package and are the basis for a multimillion-dollar ad campaign. But after six months the word “new” will have to go, until someone can dream up another change in the product. Perhaps it will be

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adding color to the liquid, or changing the shape of the package, or maybe adding a new dripless pour spout, or perhaps a _____. The “improvements” are endless, and so are the new advertising claims and campaigns.

“New” is just too useful and powerful a word in advertising for advertisers to pass it up easily. So they use weasel words that say “new” without really saying it. One of their favorites is “introducing,” as in, “Introducing improved Tide,” or “Introducing the stain remover.” The first is simply saying, here’s our improved soap; the second, here’s our new advertising campaign for our detergent. Another favorite is “now,” as in, “Now there’s Sinex,” which simply means that Sinex is available. Then there are phrases like “Today’s Chevrolet,” “Presenting Dristan,” and “A fresh way to start the day.” The list is really endless because advertisers are always finding new ways to say “new” without really saying it. If there is a second edition of [my] book, I’ll just call it the “new and improved” edition. Wouldn’t you really rather have a “new and improved” edition of [my] book rather than a “second” edition?

Acts Fast

“Acts” and “works” are two popular weasel words in advertising because they bring action to the product and to the advertising claim. When you see the ad for the cough syrup that “Acts on the cough control center,” ask yourself what this cough syrup is claiming to do. Well, it’s just claiming to “act,” to do something, to perform an action. What is it that the cough syrup does? The ad doesn’t say. It only claims to perform an action or do something on your “cough control center.” By the way, what and where is your “cough control center”? I don’t remember learning about that part of the body in human biology class.

Ads that use such phrases as “acts fast,” “acts against,” “acts to prevent,” and the like are saying essentially nothing, because “act” is a word empty of any specific meaning. The ads are always careful not to specify exactly what “act” the product performs. Just because a brand of aspirin claims to “act fast” for headache relief doesn’t mean this aspirin is any better than any other aspirin. What is the “act” that this aspirin performs? You’re never told. Maybe it just dissolves quickly. Since aspirin is a parity product, all aspirin is the same and therefore functions the same.

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Works Like Anything Else

If you don’t find the word “acts” in an ad, you will probably find the weasel word “works.” In fact, the two words are almost interchangeable in advertising. Watch out for ads that say a product “works against,” “works like,” “works for,” or “works longer.” As with “acts,” “works” is the same meaningless verb used to make you think that this product really does something, and maybe even something special or unique. But “works,” like “acts,” is basically a word empty of any specific meaning.

Like Magic

Whenever advertisers want you to stop thinking about the product and to start thinking about something bigger, better, or more attractive than the product, they use that very popular weasel word "like." The word "like" is the advertiser's equivalent of a magician's use of misdirection. "Like" gets you to ignore the product and concentrate on the claim the advertiser is making about it. "For skin like peaches and cream" claims the ad for a skin cream. What is this ad really claiming? It doesn't say this cream will give you peaches-and-cream skin. There is no verb in this claim, so it doesn't even mention using the product. How is skin ever like "peaches and cream"? Remember, ads must be read literally and exactly, according to the dictionary definition of words. (Remember "virtually" in the Eli Lilly case.) The ad is making absolutely no promise or claim whatsoever for this skin cream. If you think this cream will give you soft, smooth, youthful-looking skin, you are the one who has read that meaning into the ad.

The wine that claims "It's like taking a trip to France" wants you to think about a romantic evening in Paris as you walk along the boulevard after a wonderful meal in an intimate little bistro. Of course, you don't really believe that a wine can take you to France, but the goal of the ad is to get you to think pleasant, romantic thoughts about France and not about how the wine tastes or how expensive it may be. That little word "like" has taken you away from crushed grapes into a world of your own imaginative making. Who knows, maybe the next time you buy wine, you'll think those pleasant thoughts when you see this brand of wine, and you'll buy it. Or, maybe you weren't even thinking about buying wine at all, but now you just might pick up a bottle the next time you're shopping. Ah, the power of "like" in advertising.

How about the most famous "like" claim of all, "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should"? Ignoring the grammatical error here, you might want to know what this claim is saying. Whether a cigarette tastes good or bad is a subjective judgment because what tastes good to one person may well taste horrible to another. Not everyone likes fried snails, even if they are called escargot. (*De gustibus non est disputandum*, which was probably the Roman rule for advertising as well as for defending the games in the Colosseum.) There are many people who say all cigarettes taste terrible, other people who say only some cigarettes taste all right, and still others who say all cigarettes taste good. Who's right? Everyone, because taste is a matter of personal judgment.

Moreover, note the use of the conditional, "should." The complete claim is, "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should taste." But should cigarettes taste good? Again, this is a matter of personal judgment and probably depends most on one's experiences with smoking. So, the Winston ad is simply saying that Winston cigarettes are just like any other cigarette: Some people like them and some people don't. On that statement R. J. Reynolds conducted a very successful multimillion-dollar advertising campaign that helped keep Winston the number-two-selling cigarette in the United States, close behind number one, Marlboro.

CAN IT BE UP TO THE CLAIM?

Analyzing ads for doublespeak requires that you pay attention to every word in the ad and determine what each word really means. Advertisers try to wrap their claims in language that sounds concrete, specific, and objective, when in fact the language of advertising is anything but. Your job is to read carefully and listen critically so that when the announcer says that "Crest can be of significant value . . ." you know immediately that this claim says absolutely nothing. Where is the doublespeak in this ad? Start with the second word.

Once again, you have to look at what words really mean, not what you think they mean or what the advertiser wants you to think they mean. The ad for Crest only says that using Crest "can be" of "significant value." What really throws you off in this ad is the brilliant use of "significant." It draws your attention to the word "value" and makes you forget that the ad only claims that Crest "can be." The ad doesn't say that Crest *is* of value, only that it is "able" or "possible" to be of value, because that's all that "can" means.

It's so easy to miss the importance of those little words, "can be." Almost as easy as missing the importance of the words "up to" in an ad. These words are very popular in sale ads. You know, the ones that say, "Up to 50% Off!" Now, what does that claim mean? Not much, because the store or manufacturer has to reduce the price of only a few items by 50 percent. Everything else can be reduced a lot less, or not even reduced. Moreover, don't you want to know 50 percent off of what? Is it 50 percent off the "manufacturer's suggested list price," which is the highest possible price? Was the price artificially inflated and then reduced? In other ads, "up to" expresses an ideal situation. The medicine that works "up to ten times faster," the battery that lasts "up to twice as long," and the soap that gets you "up to twice as clean" all are based on ideal situations for using those products, situations in which you can be sure you will never find yourself.

UNFINISHED WORDS

Unfinished words are a kind of "up to" claim in advertising. The claim that a battery lasts "up to twice as long" usually doesn't finish the comparison—twice as long as what? A birthday candle? A tank of gas? A cheap battery made in a country not noted for its technological achievements? The implication is that the battery lasts twice as long as batteries made by other battery makers, or twice as long as earlier model batteries made by the advertiser, but the ad doesn't really make these claims. You read these claims into the ad, aided by the visual images the advertiser so carefully provides.

Unfinished words depend on you to finish them, to provide the words the advertisers so thoughtfully left out of the ad. Pall Mall cigarettes were once advertised as "A longer finer and milder smoke." The question is, longer, finer, and milder than what? The aspirin that claims it contains "Twice as

much of the pain reliever doctors recommend most” doesn’t tell you what pain reliever it contains twice as much of. (By the way, it’s aspirin. That’s right; it just contains twice the amount of aspirin. And how much is twice the amount? Twice of what amount?) Panadol boasts that “nobody reduces fever faster,” but, since Panadol is a parity product, this claim simply means that Panadol isn’t any better than any other product in its parity class. “You can be sure if it’s Westinghouse,” you’re told, but just exactly what it is you can be sure of is never mentioned. “Magnavox gives you more” doesn’t tell you what you get more of. More value? More television? More than they gave you before? It sounds nice, but it means nothing, until you fill in the claim with your own words, the words the advertiser didn’t use. Since each of us fills in the claim differently, the ad and the product can become all things to all people, and not promise a single thing.

Unfinished words abound in advertising because they appear to promise so much. More importantly, they can be joined with powerful visual images on television to appear to be making significant promises about a product’s effectiveness without really making any promises. In a television ad, the aspirin product that claims fast relief can show a person with a headache taking the product and then, in what appears to be a matter of minutes, claiming complete relief. This visual image is far more powerful than any claim made in unfinished words. Indeed, the visual image completes the unfinished words for you, filling in with pictures what the words leave out. And you thought that ads didn’t affect you. What brand of aspirin do you use?

Some years ago, Ford’s advertisements proclaimed “Ford LTD—700 percent quieter.” Now, what do you think Ford was claiming with these unfinished words? What was the Ford LTD quieter than? A Cadillac? A Mercedes Benz? A BMW? Well, when the FTC asked Ford to substantiate this unfinished claim, Ford replied that it meant that the inside of the LTD was 700 percent quieter than the outside. How did you finish those unfinished words when you first read them? Did you even come close to Ford’s meaning?

COMBINING WEASEL WORDS

A lot of ads don’t fall neatly into one category or another because they use a variety of different devices and words. Different weasel words are often combined to make an ad claim. The claim, “Coffee-Mate gives coffee more body, more flavor,” uses unfinished words (“more” than what?) and also uses words that have no specific meaning (“body” and “flavor”). Along with “taste” (remember the Winston ad and its claim to taste good), “body” and “flavor” mean nothing because their meaning is entirely subjective. To you, “body” in coffee might mean thick, black, almost bitter coffee, while I might take it to mean a light brown, delicate coffee. Now, if you think you understood that last sentence, read it again, because it said nothing of objective value; it was filled with weasel words of no specific meaning: “thick,” “black,”

“bitter,” “light brown,” and “delicate.” Each of those words has no specific, objective meaning, because each of us can interpret them differently.

Try this slogan: “Looks, smells, tastes like ground-roast coffee.” So, are you now going to buy Taster’s Choice instant coffee because of this ad? “Looks,” “smells,” and “tastes” are all words with no specific meaning and depend on your interpretation of them for any meaning. Then there’s that great weasel word “like,” which simply suggests a comparison but does not make the actual connection between the product and the quality. Besides, do you know what “ground-roast” coffee is? I don’t, but it sure sounds good. So, out of seven words in this ad, four are definite weasel words, two are quite meaningless, and only one has clear meaning.

Remember the Anacin ad—“Twice as much of the pain reliever doctors recommend most”? There’s a whole lot of weaseling going on in this ad. First, what’s the pain reliever they’re talking about in this ad? Aspirin, of course. In fact, any time you see or hear an ad using those words “pain reliever,” you can automatically substitute the word “aspirin” for them. (Makers of acetaminophen and ibuprofen pain relievers are careful in their advertising to identify their products as nonaspirin products.) So, now we know that Anacin has aspirin in it. Moreover, we know that Anacin has twice as much aspirin in it, but we don’t know twice as much as what. Does it have twice as much aspirin as an ordinary aspirin tablet? If so, what is an ordinary aspirin tablet, and how much aspirin does it contain? Twice as much as Excedrin or Bufferin? Twice as much as a chocolate chip cookie? Remember those unfinished words and how they lead you on without saying anything.

Finally, what about those doctors who are doing all that recommending? Who are they? How many of them are there? What kind of doctors are they? What are their qualifications? Who asked them about recommending pain relievers? What other pain relievers did they recommend? And there are a whole lot more questions about this “poll” of doctors to which I’d like to know the answers, but you get the point. Sometimes, when I call my doctor, she tells me to take two aspirin and call her office in the morning. Is that where Anacin got this ad?

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT THE READING *Do NOT ANSWER THESE!*

1. What are weasel words? How, according to Lutz, did they get their name?
2. Lutz is careful to illustrate each of the various kinds of weasel words with examples of actual usage. (Glossary: *Examples*) What do these examples add to his essay? Which ones do you find most effective? Explain.
3. According to Lutz, why is *help* the biggest weasel word used by advertisers (3–8)? In what ways does it help them present their products without having to make promises about actual performance?
4. Why is *virtually* a particularly effective weasel word (10–12)? Why can advertisers get away with using words that literally mean the opposite of what they want to convey?