

Commentary **Mark Richardson**

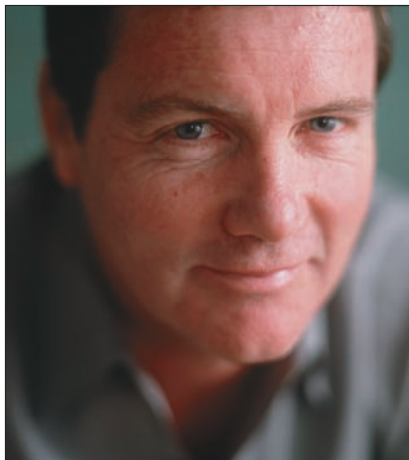
Language Matters

The words you use in a presentation can make all the difference.

I think we all agree that some sales presentations are more effective than others. Many factors account for this difference, but one that is easily overlooked is the language used. Words that have similar meanings or that are often used interchangeably can have very different effects on the listener. The words you use in a presentation can mean the difference between a client's signing your contract or putting the project on hold. Here are some examples of words and phrases that I think you should be careful with.

INVEST (NOT "SPEND")

Rather than asking "How much would you like to spend on your kitchen?" try "Have you thought about the level of investment you would like to make in your new kitchen?" Although the difference is subtle, it can be important. One term suggests a financial return, the other does not.



CONSULTANT (NOT "SALESMAN")

Clients can perceive you either as someone who wants to sell them something, or as someone serving as a trusted advisor.

Homeowners also take their cues from how we perceive ourselves. If we think of ourselves as peddlers looking for the next mark, that's how we will be perceived. I've heard remodelers joke about serving as remodeling "doctors" or "therapists," but both of those characterizations are much more effective because they suggest helping homeowners find solutions.

FORECAST (NOT "SCHEDULE")

Most production teams are fearful of committing themselves to specific dates — and for good reason. If the word "schedule" feels too confining, try substituting "forecast." When an economic or a weather forecast is off the mark, people are more understanding, partly because the term "forecast" sets up a

softer expectation. Simply changing your language won't solve all your timing problems. But providing a project forecast not only paints a more accurate picture for the client, it also gives your production staff some wiggle room.

ADDENDUM (NOT "CHANGE ORDER")

This is a big one. We all need a way to formally communicate and document the inevitable midstream course adjustments that crop up in remodeling projects. Calling it a "change order," however, conjures up images of more cost or inconvenience. I have seen strong involuntary physical reactions in clients merely upon hearing the word. By contrast, "addendum" is not so scary. It suggests a simple amendment, a footnote.

CLIENT (NOT "CUSTOMER")

A customer is someone who walks into a shoe store; a client makes an appointment for a professional service. A customer makes a transaction; a client enters into a relationship. When you refer to homeowners as "clients," you not only raise the image of your company in their eyes, you make them feel better about the work they're about to undertake and the investment they're about to make.

Some other words to consider: Retainer (not "fee") suggests a relationship, not merely a transaction. Master plan (not "solution") implies something comprehensive, long-term, and ongoing rather than limited and final.

Also be careful about using construction terms that clients may be unfamiliar with. Common terms such as "shower pan" or "return air" make sense to you, but not to many homeowners. Few will admit their ignorance, but they will be confused and probably will not perceive the value that you are trying to communicate. Find more common terminology or take the time to explain what the technical terms mean.

I can't guarantee that an increased awareness of language will make an average salesperson into a great salesperson. I do know, though, that the careful use of language will improve your craft and help you become more masterful. —*Mark Richardson is president of Case Design/Remodeling and Case Handyman Services, Bethesda, Md., and author of 30-Day Remodeling Fitness Program. 301.229.4600; mrichardson@casedesign.com.*