MINDINGTHE GAPS IN B2B

"Led Astray" - Is *Lead* the Most Dangerous Word in B2B Vocabulary?

The phrase "use your words" has become a humorous interjection. People use it to lighten up those situations when they get wrapped around their thoughts, unable to express themselves clearly. In a world full of words, people simultaneously appear to pay less attention to meaning and context while also kidnapping words intended for other purposes. It's a symptom of the epidemic of *cleverness*.. The next time you're on a group video call, be aware that some of the team are probably playing "Lingo-Bingo," eagerly waiting for words like "pivot," "juxtaposed," "robust," and "family."

The words we use in B2B sales and marketing have an outsized impact on expectation setting. A great example is the word "lead" (as in sales lead, or marketing lead or marketing qualified lead – "an individual or organization with interest in what you are selling.") This is connected with the word "lead" (pronounced 'led" - as in "a soft, heavy, metallic element with atomic number 82.") The point being that when used carelessly, the weight of confusion leads (there's that word again!) to unrealistic expectations that you will never be able to re-set.

LEADS, LEADS, IT'S RAINING LEADS

It seems like the overwhelming idea in sales and marketing over the last 30 years revolves around "leads." For example, we're all constantly inundated with promises of LinkedIn sales leads by LinkedIn sales leads companies. They'll either do it for you or train you how to do it. I started a company in 1993 that provided "lead' generation services to technology companies, so I accept my culpability as part of the "lead movement," so to speak. In the years following that business has exploded. Despite the growth of that business and the inevitable use of the word "lead," there's one person who might have popularized the word more than anyone else, but who goes unnoticed in this context. They did it to a different end. I'm talking about the founder of Salesforce.com, Marc Benioff.

We're not going to re-tell Salesforce or Marc Benioff's history, but you can read the official version here. I'm sure there's no shortage of other sources packed full of both facts and alternative facts, so cruise around the internet and knock yourself out, should you be so inspired. There's probably a book out as well which I'm sure presents it all as deliberate and visionary, rather than the improvisation, luck, and roller coaster that real startups experience. Salesforce's slow and intentional (and not so meteoric) rise is usually attributed to two things:

1 The rising need for technology to underpin an increasingly scientific approach to selling.

2 The software model employed by Salesforce encapsulated by the "No Software" slogan.

Salesforce was a SaaS for the cloud before anyone knew what SaaS and the cloud meant. What went unnoticed was Benioff's use of terminology and words and the impact they had. Benioff referred to Salesforce.com as a CRM – Customer Relationship Management - system. Everyone else in the space, referred to their systems as SFA – Sales Force Automation or Contact Management.

That brings us to the "killer blow" (or word in this context). Some companies in the space still oriented around the word "Contact" and even labeled their systems as "Contact Management Systems." Their systems managed "Contacts" whereas Marc Benioff's system managed "Leads." Which one do you think has more value?

THE GREAT UNDOING
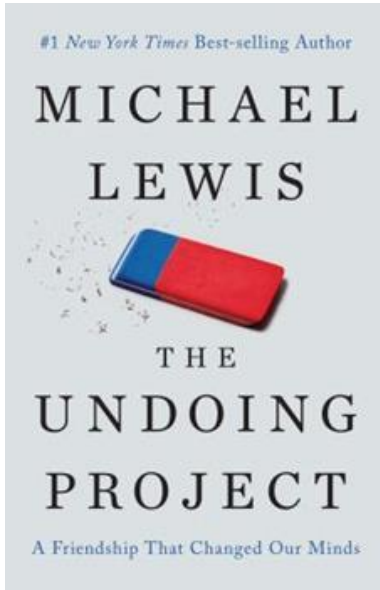
The Undoing Project is Michael Lewis's 2016 non-fiction work that tells the story of two Israeli psychologists, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, and the groundbreaking work they did to help us better understand how humans make decisions. During their journey, they popularized the psychology of "Prospect Theory" and became more generally known as Loss Aversion. Loss Aversion is a model of "probabilistic thinking and decision-making under conditions of risk and uncertainty." It is the idea that humans fear losses more than they desire wins. Kahneman and Tversky postulated that it took two to four more "wins" to make up for the emotional damage of experiencing one loss.

Before you jump in and quite rightly ask me to better define losses and wins and qualify these statements with the "well it depends what kind of loss or win you're talking about" type phrases, I encourage you to read the book and find out more about "loss aversion." In his book: "Black and White Thinking" Kevin Dutton explains the "burden of our binary brains in a complex world." He uses the most famous and topical example of Kahneman and Tversky's thinking to illustrate the idea of "framing" and the use of language (or semantic framing). In other words, it's not what we say but how we say it.

Dutton uses Kahneman and Tversky's research around a hypothetical scenario called the Asian Disease problem (how topical). "The dilemma offers participants a choice between two public health programs proposed by the authorities to deal with an epidemic purportedly originated in Asia that is threatening the lives of 600 people." Subjects are presented with two alternative public health strategies with their associated outcomes.

Choose Treatment A and save 200 lives	Choose Treatment B and have a 1/3 chance of saving all 600 people and a 2/3 chance of saving no one

In this example, the vast majority of people who are surveyed favor Treatment A, which guarantees to save 200 lives.

In their next version of the research, the Israeli psychologists changed the wording of Treatment A from saving 200 lives to stating that 400 would die.

| Choose Treatment A and 400 people would die | Choose Treatment B and have a 1/3 chance of saving all 600 people and a 2/3 chance of saving no one |

To quote Dutton's telling of Prospect theory – "in this iteration exactly as Prospect Theory predicted Kahneman and Tversky's analysis revealed a completely different pattern of results. When presented with this new pair of alternatives [the second example above], barely 20% of the participants went for Treatment A in spite of the observation that out of a cohort of 600 patients, the prognosis 200 lives saved and 400 lives lost amount to precisely the same outcome." You'll see that in both examples, Treatment B does not change, and Treatment A only changes in the way it is described (save 200 lives or 400 people die).

As Dutton describes, when the outcome is framed in terms of a "loss" (400 people dying), it weighs more heavily on us than the prospect of saving 200 lives. Dutton refers to these as *cognitive frames*, and this cognitive frame supports the idea that humans fear losses more than they crave gains. To put it in "journalistic" terms, "if it bleeds, it leads." In other words, threats that drive fear get our attention, more than promises of happiness. This is why so much marketing, selling, and advertising is framed with the threat of adverse outcomes that are almost guaranteed if you "don't" act now. B2B sales, particularly technology, borrowed a term to convey this from the insurance world. They were describing the dangers of "not" going with us or buying our solution as well as laying out some of the consequences of "no decision" or the *wrong* decision. This became known as "the backing the hearse up to the door and letting them smell the roses" routine. This was obviously a simile from the life insurance world, conjuring up an image of a flower-laden casket, accompanied by a distraught and now destitute widow…because she made a "bad" decision by "not" buying the life insurance.

MISLEAD

So let's go back to Marc Benioff for a while so we can fully appreciate the impact of the use of different words here. Everything in the Salesforce systems was elevated in value by using the word "lead." This simple use of different terminology affected how people thought of that system.

Simple contact information, like a business card you collected from an attendee at a trade show, was entered into the system (probably by you), and hey presto – you had a lead. The fact that all it was, was a "digital business card" was no, never mind. We'll come to the nightmare of definition around "leads" soon enough, but all we really had here was a "contact" with some "contact information." Call me old-fashioned if you want, but a "lead" needed (and needs) to be more than that. How much more is the crux of the matter.

All the other CRM/SFA systems that would have been interpreted as competition for Salesforce mainly positioned themselves as "Contact Management." In other words, they were digital Rolodexes. Well, Rolodexes were (are) one of the most boring things on the planet. They conjure up this type of image and are frankly about as exciting as a dial tone. That is anything but inspirational.

Leads, on the other hand, are full of promise and possibility. Leads conjure up images of people shaking hands, signing contracts, doing deals, being hoisted on the shoulders of the adoring peer-group at sales kick-off, and paraded like a conquering hero before flying off to faraway, exotic locations on achiever's club trips. Mention the word "lead" to a sales professional, and the response is Pavlovian. Benioff reframed his solution by using the word "lead," and in so doing, he increased the perceived value of his system exponentially.

CLEVERNESS Vs WISDOM

We live in possibly the cleverest period in our history. Having said that, don't confuse cleverness and wisdom. Wisdom deserves much more ink than I'm giving it here, but that's what we need when considering the words we use, how we use them, and our expectations of the effects they have. David Goodhart provides a good perspective in the conclusion of his book "Head, Hand, Heart."

He quotes US-based Indian psychiatrist Dilip Jeste who argues that "[wisdom] is a distinct and measurable human quality that has remained surprisingly constant across regions and civilizations."

"Again and again, modern scholarly definitions mentioned certain traits; compassion and pro-social attitudes that reflect concern for the common good; practical knowledge of life; the use of one's pragmatic knowledge to resolve personal and social problems; an ability to cope with ambiguity and uncertainty and to see multiple points of view; emotional stability and mastery of one's feelings, a capacity for reflection and for dispassionate self-understanding."

"He goes on that "raw intelligence and wisdom simply do not match to one another at least not reliably. In fact, on some dimensions, such as wise reasoning about inter-group conflicts., cognitive ability and wisdom seem to be negatively related. Wisdom expresses itself often in counterpoint to ideology. Whereas ideology pushes us to a certainty purity and adversarialism, wisdom prizes humility, multiplicity, and compromise."

THE WISDOM OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Wisdom is more potent than raw intelligence, and while we have been piling up intelligence, wisdom appears to be in short supply despite this epidemic of *cleverness.* If you spend any time on LinkedIn, you'll see, hear and read lots of "words of wisdom" and examples of cleverness. Recently I saw the sales guy that makes "informative" videos while walking around his neighborhood. You know; Brian Burns from the "The Brutal Truth about Sales and The Sales Leadership Show" (I think he added the word "brutal.") As with most of this stuff, some of it's good, some of it... not so much, but it's all presented as "best practice." Back to Brian Burns, on his morning walk. Brian doesn't have much truck with "modern" sales ideas and was suggesting a better opening line for people who are prospecting on the telephone. After dismissing a bunch of alternatives, his *killer* advice was to open your prospecting telephone call by telling the prospect, "I only have a few minutes..." His rationale was that this elevates you and your proposition's importance. I'm not looking to debate the effectiveness of various prospecting lines and scripts here (although this piece of advice seems pretty poor to me.) What's more interesting is the context of these words, their framing, and the impact that Brian believes they will have. In other words, Brian knows that "words" matter. Words are important.

A different example was one that took a few years for me to understand. I was meeting with a person in a related business. As we were getting to know one another, it became apparent that we had performed the same job for different companies "back in the day." He was a salesperson for IBM, and I was one for Data General. What was more interesting was the profoundly different way we described those jobs. Mine was simple "I used to sell computers for an American manufacturer called Data Genera." His was "I used to help CEOs run their companies better." My description was simple, to the point, unpretentious, and "framed" for someone who was in the same business; therefore, I didn't feel the need to dress it up. Not so with Mr. IBM. I dismissed him as pretentious, smug, and arrogant, which is all true. But our descriptions remain worlds apart. They serve as an example of many things, not least the importance of the use of certain words to project a particular image. This affects how others interpret us and our jobs, but more importantly, how we interpret ourselves, our jobs, and our place in the world.

THE VERDICT

So, what's the Verto Verdict on all this talk about "words" and specifically that word "lead." This is the part where we pass judgment! We're using the word "lead" as the example, but what we're talking about here is that "words" matter. Use them thoughtlessly at your peril.

- In the modern era, people want answers, and they want guarantees. In short, they want...well short cuts. They want the best words that will guarantee success.
- To return to Kahneman & Tversky quickly, this seemingly modern obsession with short cuts, cheats and hacks is also nothing new. We humans have been looking for "shortcuts" for millions of years. We do it subconsciously and the shortcuts we use in thinking are called "heuristics." The trap we fall into is that in our rush to find a short cut we forget about context.
- Words matter. How we say things matter; how we write things matter. How we present information and choices matters. Don't use the word "lead" when you really mean something else (like a contact or an inquiry.) Lead implies some further level of qualification implying at least "interest." Don't let yourself get bullied into using it, only to get hung with it later on.

As an example, some companies define their Marketing Qualified Lead (MQL) simply as someone who has all the contact information and is in their target market - they are "in-market." This is way too weak, but explains why their conversion rate from MQL is so low. Their MQL's are the equivalent of names on a list - nothing more. This is the result of excessively managing to numbers. They wanted to report a lot of MQL's to look good initially, but all they did was create a problem further down the line - the inevitably low conversion rate when you start with "names on a list." So "proceed with caution." "Lead" is an overused word whose importance is underestimated in modern B2B sales and marketing, so handle with care. We encourage you to not throw your words around carelessly, particularly that word "lead" lest it becomes that leaden, heavy millstone around your neck, that when used in the wrong circumstances, will sink you!

MINDING THE GAPS IN B2B SALES AND MARKETING INVOLVES FINDING THEM FIRST

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