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Our Language Impediment

Thank you Lynne Anne. I very much appreciate this opportunity to meet with you all. I want to share some ideas about our changing communications landscape.

There is no doubt new communications technologies are creating a smaller world. A world more transparent, interconnected and more interdependent.

With 7 billion people on the planet, and 5 billion now connected by mobile phone (50% of whom can connect to the web without a land line, desktop or laptop), the first media is now people.

(Slide: Fishbowl)

On the issue of who discovered the water, we are pretty sure it was not the fish. I believe this discovery was made by a PR person. Public Relations, exists in the idea exchange between people.

The head of the US Air Force Command for Asia Pacific recently said that every 60 days, the world encounters some form of natural disaster or tragedy. Every 60 days. It seems sooner, more like every four days. He said that today a country's might, is being judged by their military's rate of responsiveness to calamity.

It took China 18 days to react to the Tsunami disaster in SE Asia in 2004. More recently, with the earthquake in Haiti, it took China only 6 hours to send in aid, right behind the US.

When I was in elementary school my teacher asked us "If a tree falls in the woods, but nobody is there to hear it, does it make a sound?" The answer was no. The thing is in today's interconnected world, it is more likely that when a tree falls it will be heard. And, it is more likely a PR person is listening.

The dynamics of our changed communications landscape are having huge effects. Some people wonder if this is good or bad:

(Show: AOL Bad/Good)

There has never been a better time to be in the communications business, particularly public relations. Public Relations is a great marketing discipline to learn, because it not only focuses on message creation, it must be listening to the stream of messages created by individuals.

When students ask me for advice about entering our industry I tell them PR is the best place to start. In PR they will learn how to think about how ideas propagate, because PR is so context sensitive.

Bill Bernbach said: "All of us who professionally use the mass media are the shapers of society. We can vulgarize that society. We can brutalize it. Or we can help lift it onto a higher level." As people engage with advances in communications technology PR has increased value, but also increased accountability.

(Slide: Digital)

The changeover from analog to digital information presents the PR professional with great challenges and a tailor-made opportunity. Digital gets a lot of attention at this conference.

Digital is not a channel or a medium. *(Slide: Air We Breathe)* It is simply the air we breathe in communicating. Fleishman Hillard gets it. I know FH is at the forefront of digital integration.

However, this morning I want to focus on an even more powerful and persuasive technology than digital.

(Slide: Next Generation)

This technology touches more lives and has more impact on our socio-economic future than any other, bar none. What is this powerful force? It's our oldest communication technology---Language. It is a good time to take a fresh look at how this technology advances and inhibits humans from understanding each other.

I can think of no better place than the APIMA region, to examine language. This region has more than 1,000 discrete languages and upwards of 2,000 dialects. This region provides a perfect platform to look at communication in a diverse, interconnected marketplace. For example, China has 17 languages and 400 dialects. India has over 30 languages and 200 dialects.

Advances in neuroscience are enabling us to look at the language of communications through a sort of rearview mirror. We've been moving so fast, with technological advances coming so quickly, it is hard to examine prevailing communication tools, as we whiz past them.

We have UNDERESTIMATED the impact language has in creating MISUNDERSTANDING among different people and cultures.

How can that be? We all know language differences are an impediment to understanding between people. It is obvious.

So, why I am saying is we have actually underestimated language's impact as a source of misunderstanding?

Because, we have allowed our ability to learn alternative languages, to rely translators and get used to reading digital type (often in English) to mitigate the gap in understanding that comes from basic differences in the language people think in.

We have allowed ourselves to focus more on the electronic technology of communication rather than the human technology of how people think.

Recently, I was a delegate on a business mission to India hosted by the US Ambassador to Singapore. We asked India's Secretary of Science and Technology:

(Slide: Is Language..) "Is language a technology?"

He replied: ***(Slide: Ramasami)*** "Of course it is! That's why we are supporting a cognition initiative [that is based on neurological research] at the Department of Science and Technology of India."

(Slide: Have Underestimated)

Our insights about people are limited by our own assumptions about how thought-processes work, from the bias of our own language. The first language a person learns hard-wires their mind. It is critically important to know what language a person first learns and which language they process information in, to truly understand each other.

And, with all the diversity of digital information so readily available, how do you sort out who is telling the truth?

(Show: Truth Video)

(Slide: NY Times)

A recent study of the impact of language by the New York Times suggests that language has a marked impact on our beliefs, values and ideologies." ***(Slide: NY Times 2)*** The conclusion from this was that "we can do far better than pretending we all think the same." What language did you first learn?

Cambridge Research shows ***(Slide: Cambridge Research)***

Only smart people can read this.

I don't believe that I could actually understand what I was reading. The phonemic power of the human mind, according to a research at Cambridge University, it doesn't matter in what order the letters in a word are, the only important thing is that the first and last letter be in the right place. The rest can be a total mess and you can still read it without a problem. This is because the human mind does not read every letter by itself, but the word as a whole. Am I right huh?

(Slide: Map Man) By better appreciating our oldest technology in the context of new communication formats, we have the opportunity to better understand and serve each other.

What language do you think in?

What language does the person next to you think in?

Stanford University professor Gary Zaltman concludes that over 95% of human thought processing takes place below our threshold of consciousness. So, the question about what language a person thinks in, is hugely important in building relationships with people.

If we embrace the concept that language is a technology, we have a chance to understand each other better than at any time in history. And if we understand each other better, there will be less misunderstanding, less fear, perhaps even a more peaceful and secure world.

(Slide: Brain Illustration) Neuroscience is teaching us some very interesting things about how we think.

(Slide: Motor Words)

Like action words activate motor and premotor areas differently.

(Slide: Color) There is a difference in how Color versus Form words register in our brains.

(Slide: Processing)

And, processing idiomatic versus literate descriptions translates differently. Sentences containing arm words or leg words perceive differently. Like "Grasp the idea?"

(Slide: What Language/Direction)

What language do you think in? In what direction do you read?

if our brains are hard-wired by the language we first learn as small children; and if our first imprinting is to read left to right, like English, we have a potential disconnect with people who are oriented towards reading down, right, to left like those who read Mandarin. We English speakers have a disconnect if we are looking for the verb in the middle of the sentence structure when our relationship person has been programmed to see the verb at the beginning of the sentence like readers of many Latin languages—or, at the end of a sentence, as is the case with Japanese. (Hold up a pen.) In English this is an it. But, for some other languages one has to first decide if it is a male or female, before cognition is achieved.

Language is a technology, our first and most personal technology. And what we know is that once technology is mastered, it becomes invisible to us. Remember setting up your first BBerry or VCR? At first the technology was very visible, difficult even. But, as you became more familiar in using it, it became invisible.

If Language has that much impact between people, how about symbols, body gestures...Or, the technology of sign language? I wondered, is sign language universally compatible?

Sign language is a more universal form of communication than verbal language, but it's not universal. Sign language differs between

cultures and, typically, similarities come from the more obvious gestures in the respective dialect. What better way to capture this idea than this video from our DDB/Mudra partners in India:

(Show: Silent National Anthem)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kk02qPlnS2E>

In the stream of communications technology which is ever flowing, all information flows into and out from individuals, with an undertow of misinformation that has never been stronger. And, we all come to the stream with a language impediment.

I have no doubt that Fleishman Hillard's success in the future will be depend on its ability to better understand how people connect with each other, how attentive you listen and observe people and most of all deeply understand how people think.

(Slide: Clients Asking for Purpose)

Many of our clients today are asking us to help them with their Purpose. It used to be mission or vision. Now with the transparency present, brand social responsibility and commercial responsibility are not mutually exclusive. This is why "purpose" really is a different stage in brand relationship-building.

I thought, if we are to help clients with their purpose, what might we say about our own purpose? I would like to show you a Purpose Video for Omnicom Group. It's an internal video to help us consider the importance of our work and to better differentiate what makes Omnicom such a special organization.

(Show: Omnicom Video)

Thank you

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