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Perception is Everything

**Valerie J. Gross**

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TRANSFORMING OUR Image
THROUGH WORDS THAT WORK
PERCEPTION IS EVERYTHING

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Like many of you, I represent my library system out in the community. As part of the board of directors for Leadership Howard County (Md.), I attended a retreat last fall where we were asked to introduce the person sitting next to us, and include something about their work. When Jody, my assigned instructor, asked me, “What does your organization do?” I said, “We deliver equal opportunity in education—for everyone in Howard County.” Impressed, Jody spoke slowly, “Wow . . . I thought you were going to say you loan books.”

Seizing the opportunity, I continued, “Yes, we loan books! That’s the Self-Directed Education pillar of our educational mission. The second pillar is Research Assistance and Instruction—for individuals and groups, the third being Instructive and Enlightening Experiences—the community and cultural concepts.”

Jody’s respect for public libraries increased on the spot. When she introduced me, she repeated my exact words, flooring the twenty-five movers and shakers who, like Jody, had never thought that everything public libraries do is what the world values most.

Now this group holds us in a much higher regard, although they may not know why—but we do! It’s a direct result of the perception created through carefully selected terms—words that work.

Perceived Value
While there’s no question that our first-rate collections, e-resources, welcoming facilities, state-of-the-art technology, and outstanding customer service shape our customers’ experiences, words that work engage like nothing else. It’s what causes people—even if they never set foot in the library—to assign our true value to our jobs, work, and profession.

At Howard County Library (HCL), we began experimenting with the philosophy in 2001. We were ecstatic to then discover Words that Work: It’s Not What You Say, It’s What People Hear by Frank Luntz, a book that explained the reasons for our—many surprising—successes (read on), and coined the phrase, “words that work.” Luntz’s book also infused us with additional ideas.
**Full Credit For What We Do**

Many of you have already achieved great success in conveying your value to the community. Regardless of how successful you have been, if I owned an island in Tahiti, I would gladly wager that your library system would experience greater perceived value and an enhanced image by employing the words that work philosophy summarized below after just six months.

I’d bet my island because the concept is incredibly effective. It’s also simple and costs nothing to implement.

In a nutshell, we have immense power over our image and perceived value merely by choosing smart terminology that people understand and value—words that shape the perception we desire for our customers.

By replacing typical library terms and jargon with bold, value-enhancing words and phrases, we have the capacity to transform our image, receiving full credit for what we already do.

**What is Valued Gets Funded**

Receiving full credit for what we do is imperative because our funders—public entities and donors—invest mostly in what they perceive to be valuable.

To illustrate the concept, consider Evian bottled water. If you have ever purchased Evian, you likely know that a bottle costs three times as much as generic brands.

Why does Evian command a premium price? The reason has little to do with taste. Customers pay more for Evian because they assign greater value to it. They perceive it as higher quality.

If it’s not taste, how does the company accomplish this feat? By shaping its image with words, such as *from the French Alps, detox with Evian, rejuvenation,* and *purity.* Desiring to detox and rejuvenate, customers invest.

What can libraries learn from Evian? That:

- Through the language we use, we have the power—without changing anything we do—to transform our image, receiving full credit for our work, which means greater respect, enhanced value, and, above all, increased funding.
- The secret to becoming the Evian of public libraries is as simple as recognizing that it’s not only what we do and how we do it, but how we talk about what we do that commands the value we deserve.

**The Power of Words**

Note your response if I say to you, “I’m going to give you a nutritious snack.” Now consider your response if I say, “I’m going to give you a delicious snack.”

You likely wrinkled your nose at nutritious while delicious beckoned you to come and get it—two different responses to the very same snack.²

Similarly, gauge your responses to these two questions:

- Which do you value more? A used car or a certified, pre-owned vehicle?³
- Which do you support more? Drilling for oil or careful exploration of energy?⁴

These examples show that the words we choose can elicit differing responses to the same thing.

So the point is, let’s use terminology that shapes the views we want in our customers!

**Words that Completely Changed an Industry’s Image**

Before we consider powerful terminology for libraries, let’s analyze two final Luntz examples of industries that transformed their images with single words:

1. **Liquors to Spirits.** To move away from an image of fortified wine, drunks, and alcoholism, the liquor industry transformed itself by replacing the word *liquor* with *spirits.* The result?

   Customers now associate the industry with sophistication, where champagne and wine glasses are raised to celebrate in style.⁵

2. **Gambling to Gaming.** What brilliant ploy did the gaming industry employ to achieve its revolutionary image transformation? Gone are the *gambling* days that brought to mind pawn shops, addiction, and destroyed families. The industry moved to the term *gaming,* which conveys fun, choice, and family vacations! Only the term changed—nothing else: the same cards, the same dice, the same casino advantage. The transformation occurs as the result of “one single, solitary word.”⁶

**The Strongest Word That Works: Education**

Like the spirits and gaming industries, we have the capacity to completely transform our image with a single word that is universally valued: *education.*
While recent discussions in our profession suggest public libraries play an educational role, the transformation opportunity described herein involves positioning all that we do under education. Our business is education—equal opportunity in education for everyone.

In 2001, HCL embarked on a vision to align all program components with education. We began by connecting the library with the commonly understood definition of education by launching A+ Partners in Education, a comprehensive partnership with our schools, built on a vision of providing students with the best possible chance of overall academic success.

Key partnership components include:

- HCL assigning a designated library branch and liaison to each and every school;
- all new students receiving library cards through school registration;
- HCL instructors teaching curriculum enhancement classes at the schools and in the branches;
- teachers submitting assignment alerts to HCL staff; and
- kindergarten field trips to HCL incorporated into the school’s curriculum.

To keep the partnership visible, we hold an annual A+ Celebration, which draws a standing-room-only crowd, to highlight the past year’s successes and future goals, and distribute an A+ Annual Report.

Many library systems across the country work closely with schools, so as a profession, we have progressed in linking public libraries to the commonly understood definition of education, which serves as the launching point to now connect all we do with education.

The Three Pillars

Our educational role is best illustrated by the image of an educational canopy, supported by three pillars that comprise our overall educational mission (see figure 1):

1. **Self-Directed Education** through our collection—from board books to large-print titles—available in print and online.
2. **Research Assistance and Instruction** for individuals and groups. This pillar includes classes, seminars, and workshops taught by library instructors.
3. **Instructive and Enlightening Experiences** through cultural and community center concepts, events, and partnerships.

Lifelong Learning versus Lifelong Education

While *lifelong learning* does not conjure up a bad image, consider replacing the commonly heard phrase with a stronger version: *lifelong education*.

Consider that one does not hear governors say, “I’m cutting everything except learning.” What one does hear from nearly every elected official is, “My highest priority is education.”

Similarly, although terms such as *knowledge* and *community center* are strong, they are even stronger when connected in the same sentence with education, as one of the educational pillars.

Yes, but what about fiction?

Workshop participants in San Bernardino wondered whether fiction books and “entertainment” DVDs fall under the category of education; they quickly reached a consensus that fiction, in and of itself, is educational. *(Editor’s note: The author presents workshops on the topic of “words that work” at library events across the country, however they are not professionally affiliated with Luntz.)*

Further, the borrowing of books and DVDs for school assignments is clearly education, such as when high school students read Isaac Asimov’s book *I, Robot*, watch the movie, then compare the two. Following this reasoning, an adult’s reading or viewing of *I, Robot* with no required school assignment is also education. Each of these functions falls under clauses two through five of the definition of education as previously noted, and in the first and third pillars of the “Public Libraries = Education” concept.

As a side note, at HCL, we call our entertainment DVDs *fiction* DVDs, as we do fiction books. Why? Applying the words that work principle, we believe...
that elected officials looking for budget areas to cut will be more likely to cut entertainment DVDs from the library’s collection, as opposed to cutting materials from our self-directed education pillar that includes “fiction and nonfiction materials in all formats.” It’s a matter of perception.

**Aligning Ourselves with Education—Suggested Phrases**

Transforming our image by aligning all that we do with education requires that we modify the manner in which we speak about ourselves. Consider using the following phrases to describe your public library (substitute your state, county, or city):

- We are a major component of Maryland’s strong educational system.
- We are a pillar of education.
- We are educators.
- We are partners in education.
- We provide equal access to quality education, regardless of age, background, or means.
- We deliver equal opportunity in education—for literally everyone.

These phrases convey what we do in terms our customers value.

**Why Education?**

The main benefit of aligning ourselves with education is perceived value. Contrast the views of these two elected officials:

- Bridgeport (Conn.) Mayor Bill Finch: “We are getting back to basics: police, fire, and education. We will not try to be all things to all people. Libraries are not essential services.”¹⁰
- Howard County Executive Ken Ulman: “We are continuing our dedication to quality education. Education is the engine which drives our quality of life. We are fortunate to have a public school system, library system, and community college which are all nationally recognized, but these institutions cannot continue to thrive without strong support from the county . . . I am proud that my budget reflects the high priority I place on education.”¹¹

Ulman has been hearing and reading that HCL is education for eight years—first as a county council member and currently as county executive. He now speaks in these terms, regularly crediting us as a major contributor to education, the driving force of the county’s award-winning quality of life (Money magazine ranks Howard County as one of the top ten most desirable places to live in America¹²).

Another example of greater perceived value is a feature that appeared in the Baltimore-region publication, Corridor Inc. A writer for the magazine interviewed Ulman and three other newly elected county executives. One of the questions posed was, “What’s the number one attribute of your county?” While Ulman’s counterparts answered “its beauty” and “the whole community spirit,” what was the first thing Ulman mentioned? The library system¹³.

A final example: Ulman moved HCL from the community services section in the county’s operating and capital budgets to the education section, along with the school system and the community college. Why is this important? Above all, it is the symbolism. Education—viewed as vital and indispensable—drives economic development and quality of life, and the library is now visibly one of education’s three major components: the school system, the community college, and the public library.

In addition to aligning ourselves with education locally, we can use the same strategy to convey our true value at the state and national levels. In his inauguration speech, President Barack Obama said, “And we will transform our schools and colleges and universities to meet the demands of a new age.”

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**Figure 1.** Three pillars that comprise our overall educational mission.
public libraries be included next time? Yes, if we move from the nebulous we help people and we do good work to we deliver equal opportunity in education.

Other Words that Work for Libraries
What Does Storytime Mean?
Several years back, we came across a newspaper article describing a Kindermusik class developed for Howard Community College. Nearly identical to HCL’s Play Partners program for infants and toddlers, the class involved stories, music, rattles, and songs—and abundant social interaction.

What was the difference? There were three: (1) it was called a class (as opposed to our storytime), (2) it was taught by a teacher (compared to being presented by a programmer), and (3) It cost $225 for a fourteen-week session (whereas our admission is free).

Other terms in the article caught our eye, such as that the class teaches “cognitive, physical, social, musical, and language skills,” and “teaches them to be expressive and creative in the thought process.”

We began analyzing what storytime conveys to someone who has no idea what we do. When asked the question, workshop participants answered “play,” “babysitting,” and “recreation”—all misperceptions that trivialize the educational value and staff member expertise that is involved.

To receive full credit for what we do at HCL, we now say the following:

- **Preschool Classes.** The library’s preschool classes teach creative expression, social skills, listening comprehension, and the foundations of reading through letter and number recognition and vocabulary building.
- **K-5 Classes.** Kindergarten through fifth grade classes teach subjects—including math and science—through children’s literature and creative expression, as well as cognitive, social, and communication skills.

Although the majority of staff members immediately see the merits of migrating to the new terminology, others are a bit nostalgic. One workshop participant in San Jose lamented, “But I like storytime!”

There’s nothing wrong with saying storytime. Just know that, to the public, the term conveys less value than class.

Those who do not know what takes place in storytime will not assign the deserved value to the class, or to the talented instructors required to teach it. What it comes down to is the Evian strategy.

If you find yourself in the nostalgic camp, put yourself in the shoes of your county executive (or mayor, governor, or a taxpayer voting on a tax increase) then ask yourself which you would fund more generously—or cut less—storytime or children’s classes that teach the foundations of reading.

While old habits die hard, even the press and our customers are now beginning to call what we used to refer to as storytime children’s classes.

It is also important to note that, although we now say children’s classes, the class content, or curriculum, stayed exactly the same!

Beer Appreciation and Happy Hair
Likewise, what do the terms program, programmer, and programming mean to the non-library person?

Once again, we can learn from our community college colleagues in our quest for words that work in this area. Their lineup of non-credit classes includes “Beer Appreciation,” “English Afternoon Tea,” “Juggling,” “Creative Gift Wrapping,” and my personal favorite, “Happy Hair.”

The difference between these classes and what we offer the community? As with “storytimes,” it’s terminology and cost.

What they call classes taught by instructors who develop class curriculum, we refer to as programs presented by programmers who do programming. Also, they charge $65 per class and we don’t.

Titles That Work
Have you ever heard “I’d love to work in a library so I could read books all day!” We know this is far from reality, but that’s the perception for someone who is not a library connoisseur. We also know that our salaries typically do not reflect our value.

In his March 2007 Information Today column, K. Matthew Dames writes, “There are librarians doing library work, and they are compensated well,” emphasizing, “They just don’t call themselves librarians.” Dames suggests information architect and knowledge manager as possibilities for title replacements that command more respect, and therefore greater associated value.

Dames’ thoughts, combined with our words that work efforts, prompted title modifications at HCL. Desiring to address both misperception and inad-
equate value associated with our roles, we now call librarians and library associates information specialists and instructors.

Instructor is immediately understood. Our instructors enjoy their new titles because people now understand and value what they do. No one asks anymore whether they read books all day.

For similar reasons, we now call circulation clerks customer service specialists who work in our customer service department. Circulation to most people relates to health matters. By contrast, everyone understands customer service.

As to my new title, which had been director, the HCL Board of Trustees changed it to CEO for two reasons. The first was that a modified title would enable me to then call the “head of” positions (e.g., head of human resources) what their counterparts are called in business and academic spheres: director of human resources, director of public relations, and so on.

The second was perception of what I do. Prior to the change, when I introduced myself as director, the conversation would continue: “Oh, which department?” While my response (“Oh, I dabble a bit in all of them.”) served to clarify, now my title is self-explanatory, highlighting the role’s business aspects.

Teacher with a Lowercase “t”

While instructor was readily embraced by workshop participants, teach and teacher generated greater discussion. While some noted that library staff members are not certified, and therefore not teachers, others countered that not only are we teachers with a lowercase “t,” but also that teachers in private schools and professors at colleges and universities are not necessarily certified. Like us, they are simply experts in their fields. In addition, many professions, such as personal trainers who teach exercise classes, are experts referred to as instructors and teachers.

At a Maryland Association of Public Library Administrators conference last year, one attendee commented that adjunct faculty members who teach non-credit community college classes hold no particular standardized credentials, with knowledge of the subject matter being the hiring requirement.

At HCL, we have experienced greater respect for our staff since we switched from programmer to instructor. One of our goals with A+ Partners in Education is that students in K–12 view HCL staff as adjunct faculty. We know we are beginning to reach our goal when children call us their library teachers and say the favorite part of their day is library school.

Educators

In addition to referring to our HCL staff as teachers and instructors, we are now working toward calling ourselves educators. We find that when we do so, the general public assigns greater value to all that we do (we even won Educator of the Year—read on).

Some of you are already calling yourselves educators. For instance, after confessing in his Information Today column that he gave away his secret on how to land the coveted first-in-line spot on Southwest Airlines flights, Steven M. Cohen added, “Of course, I told them how. After all, I’m an educator.”

How Much Do You Charge?

At HCL, we now say that our instructors develop curriculum and class content and teach classes, seminars, and workshops for children and adults on a wide variety of topics.

I described our classes, seminars, and workshops with this terminology for a Rotary Club presentation. The club members were mesmerized. At the end, a hand shot up with the question, “How much do you charge?” My answer? “No charge! Your taxes, well invested.”
A Good Start
Although most public libraries still call classes programs, the terms classes, seminars, and workshops are beginning to surface. For example, the Morris County (N.J.) Public Library and Chicago Public Library assign value-added terms to their initiatives for adults, such as classes, seminars, workshops, and events. Many more libraries do as well, and it is likely that some are beginning to substitute children's classes for storytime, and programs and instructors for programmers.

If you haven't already, consider taking the plunge. You'll be surprised at the added value that will immediately be assigned by the listener, just by changing some words.

Ten Rules
To improve the effectiveness of our communication, in addition to incorporating value-enhanced terminology, Luntz sets forth “The Ten Rules of Effective Communication.” If you incorporate even some of these concepts into a presentation or writing piece, your message will be more effective. The rules are:

1. Simplicity—use small words.
3. Credibility is as important as philosophy.
5. Offer something new.
7. Speak aspirationally.
8. Visualize.
10. Provide context and explain relevance.

Do consider reading Luntz’s explanation of all ten rules. We can benefit from them all—especially rule 7, “speak aspirationally,” as ours is a profession that tends to have a “woe is me” outlook. Because most people do not like negativity, we are, in essence, sealing our own fate. Let's reverse the trend!

Seven Phrases to Lose from Our Lexicon
Open almost any library journal and you'll see something relating to our being undervalued and underappreciated. Words that work, combined with speaking aspirationally is far more effective, as the tactic teaches our audience value in an optimistic fashion—and everyone loves optimism.

To copy late comedian George Carlin’s famous “seven words you can't say on TV,” let's agree as a profession to never again say the phrases:

- We must remain relevant.
- Our future is uncertain.
- Nobody values our jobs.
- No one knows what we do.
- People think the public library has no value.
- The library’s relevance is shrinking.
- We might be extinct in twenty years.

Let's strike negativity from our lexicon, replacing pessimism with positive, upbeat, and optimistic assertions.

The strong terminology included here, as well as the weak-versus-strong list that follows, can assist you with creating new, optimistic replacement statements. For instance, instead of saying, “We must remain relevant,” how about asserting, “As a major component of education, we continually aspire to reach new heights.”

Focus on Results, Not Process
Luntz also describes the greater effectiveness of focusing on results, rather than process. For instance, in a survey he conducted, 51 percent of responses favored raising taxes for law enforcement compared to 68 percent in favor of higher taxes to halt the rising crime rate.

In the library world, we too can enhance value by focusing on results. To illustrate, many of us like to say that we promote the love of reading. While not a bad phrase, a stronger statement would combine the phrase with the results of increased reading, improved academic achievement, economic advancement, or enhanced quality of life.

The most effective elevator speeches focus on results. A succinct one you might consider using is: Who are we? We are partners in education. What do we do? We deliver equal access to quality education for all, regardless of age, background, or means. Why does it matter? Because education drives economic advancement, enhancing quality of life.

Strong, Intuitive Value-Enhanced Terminology
The typical library terms (see table 1) that tend to trivialize our value were transformed by workshop participants into stronger, value-enhanced, intuitive words and phrases, applying the words that work
philosophy. Substituting the stronger terms at every opportunity, combined with a strengthened alignment with education, will begin to shape in your customers the image that you desire.

A Work in Progress
At HCL, we continue to align ourselves with education. We also continue to look for opportunities to substitute stronger, smarter words wherever possible. The latest substitution occurred while reviewing a monthly statistics report. We considered the effect of substituting research assistance for the information question category. If you were a county executive, mayor, or governor, which would you be more likely to fund? We decided to make the edit.

Results
To give you a sense of the effectiveness of words that work, here are sample results at HCL (population 275,000) since we began our quest to transform our image and enhance our value in 2001. By positioning the library as a major component of Howard County’s strong educational system and by incorporating value-enhanced terminology that people understand:

- Visits have soared 189 percent (934,000 in FY01, compared to more than 2.7 million in FY09).
- Items borrowed have increased 83 percent (3.6 million in FY01, compared to more than 6.6 million in FY09).
- Operating budget increases have reached record levels (e.g., a 68 percent increase in seven years, with no new branches; in FY09 the increase bolstered salaries by 10.5 percent).
- Capital budget increases have surged as well (an additional planned 142,000 square feet of library building space where before it was zero).
- Friends of HCL budget has increased more than 500 percent.

Table 1. Value-Enhanced Terminology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Undervalued/Misunderstood</th>
<th>Stronger, Value-Enhanced, Intuitive</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>storytime, storytime room</td>
<td>children’s classes, children’s classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>program</td>
<td>class, seminar, workshop, event, initiative, project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>programmer, programming</td>
<td>instructor, teacher, facilitator, curriculum development, instruction</td>
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<tr>
<td>help, serve</td>
<td>enhance, improve, advance, increase, teach, tutor, instruct</td>
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<tr>
<td>outreach</td>
<td>community education, marketing</td>
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<tr>
<td>entertainment</td>
<td>life-enriching, fiction (as in “fiction DVDs”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recreation/leisure</td>
<td>life-enriching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cooperation</td>
<td>collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do, hold, offer</td>
<td>teach, instruct, lead, present</td>
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<tr>
<td>information (best sometimes)</td>
<td>education, research (stronger)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reference interview</td>
<td>research needs assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning</td>
<td>education</td>
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<td>encourage/promote reading</td>
<td>increase/improve reading, improving academic success/achievement</td>
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<tr>
<td>juvenile</td>
<td>children’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>circulation</td>
<td>customer service, borrowing, loan</td>
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<tr>
<td>“ready to learn” or “ready at five”</td>
<td>we teach the foundations of reading, social skills, and creative skills (some suggested “ready at three,” etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>emergent literacy</td>
<td>childhood education</td>
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<tr>
<td>circulation clerk</td>
<td>customer service specialist</td>
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<tr>
<td>librarian/library associate</td>
<td>information specialist and instructor, research specialist and instructor, educators</td>
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- Hours of operation expanded by thirty-seven hours a week, including year-round Sunday hours at our two largest branches.
- Awarded Howard County Educator of the Year (library educators included in the pool of candidates along with teachers, faculty members, and principals, a direct result of calling ourselves educators).
- Awarded Howard County Nonprofit Business of the Year.
- Moved from the community services section of the county’s budget into the education section.
- HCL ranks first in the nation among the great public library systems.²⁰

Conclusion
Through words that work, we have the power to transform our image and to command our full value. We are education. We are indispensable. We always have been. The difference is that we will now be perceived as such—and perception is everything. ²²

References
2. Ibid., 206.
3. Ibid., 259.
4. Ibid., 283.
5. Ibid., 131.
6. Ibid., 129.
15. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 47.