

FAUX TERMS OF ENDEARMENT: NAME-CALLING IN THE WORKPLACE

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Usually, when we hear the term "name-calling," we think of children and what they do to each other when they use hurtful language. We tell our own children not to name call, and when our children are called names, we tell them to ignore it.

We say, "Sticks and stones may break your bones, but names will never hurt you." Remember that? It sounded good when we were children, and it still sounds good. It just isn't true.

Words can and do hurt -- badly. And they can get in the way of building lasting customer relationships.

My focus here isn't on what children do with words. It's on what adults do with words in business settings.

Words can insult, diminish, marginalize and categorize.

People don't realize the effect certain terms can have on others, in particular their customers.

Their motives are usually benign. They believe they are communicating interest, support, understanding, even affection with "terms of endearment," but they ultimately fail at achieving those objectives because they don't consider the impact of what they say.

Here's a small sample of words that don't have any place in the business world: dear, sweetheart, honey, sport, girl, boy, guy, love.

There are many more, but these are sufficient to make the point about name-calling.

Again, a speaker usually intends those words to be positive and supportive, but in many instances the terms are interpreted as condescending and insulting.

Consider this interesting paradox. When those words are omitted from a sentence, the result is usually precisely what the speaker intended to accomplish in the first place.

Here are a few examples I've heard recently either directed at me or to someone standing close by. There is a distinct difference in the impression when the offending words (in italics) aren't included. Try this.

Read each sentence as printed, and then read it again without the offending word. I'm sure you'll detect the difference right away.

A checker in a supermarket said to a female senior citizen customer. "I understand why you're so confused by the policy, *Sweetheart*. Let me explain it to you."

The woman responded sharply, saying, "Don't call me '*Sweetheart*'!"

More tension than anyone wanted at the cash register.

A clerk in a hardware store to a middle-age man, "Look, *Honey*, this is how this meter works." The customer turned and walked out of the store.

A worker in a gas station to a young woman, "Well, *Dear*, let me give you some very simple directions."

"Why do you think I need '*simple*' directions?" the customer responded.

A 20-something server in a restaurant to newly arrived "senior citizen" dinner customers, "Would you *Guys* like to order any drinks before dinner?"

One of the female customers replied, "We are not 'guys,' and it's presumptuous for you to talk like that to us."

I'm certain you can add more examples as you think about some of your past experiences. In all of these instances, we must assume that the speaker's intentions were good. The tone and the interpretation, however, were not.

When such words don't help, don't risk using them.

Making the assumption that we can be familiar or casual with a customer, particularly a new customer, can be dangerous because those faux terms of endearment can build a wall of resentment rather than a positive and lasting connection.

In fact, in today's workplace environment, the use of those terms with our colleagues could result in a trip to the human resources department and being disciplined for harassment. Quite a price to pay for poorly executed good intentions

When such name-calling is prohibited in the workplace, how can we think the terms are acceptable to use with our customers?

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