

Every Word Counts

by Robyn Tolhurst, FSC Director of Communication

Words count. They really do.

And given the plethora of social media messaging platforms which have replaced face-to-face contact, often words and emoticons are the only medium we have to send, receive, interpret and respond to messages.

Other communication cues which are critical to enabling messages to be understood and responded to appropriately are defunct in the social world. In the absence of voice intonation and body language, the intent and the understanding of messages can be lost in translation. I mean really lost, and, without the facility to immediately correct or qualify a statement if a message has been misinterpreted.

For example, a phone conversation would have been much clearer and easier than this message exchange:

DAD: "Your mum's back in hospital LOL."
DAUGHTER: "Why is that funny?"
DAD: "It's not."
DAUGHTER: "But you just said Laugh out Loud!"
DAD: "Oh, I thought that meant Lots of Love."

Technology and social media have brought a language of their own into the modern era. There are countless new words, abbreviations, text speak and geekisms – the prodigies of technology and social media which now officially grace our dictionaries. Macquarie Dictionary even engaged a cast of linguists and English language experts to create a new word for the launch of its seventh edition – 'Phubbing' – a word coined to describe the uniquely 21st Century phenomenon: "The act of snubbing someone in a social setting by looking at your phone instead of paying attention."

Add to that, emoticons – the new age of hieroglyphics – the smiley faces, winks and nods that attempt to add further meaning or emotion to a message. //0-0\\ for example, is code for John Lennon and @>-->-- represent a rose – try to create those in a nanosecond. Australia's Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, showed her mastery in the use of emoticons when she signed-off from Parliament last year using a tweet in emojii language. This prompted a response from one concerned tweeter that Bishop's account had been hacked by a teenager.

It is clear that the language of messaging via social devices is now well-entrenched in our society. And shorter attention spans are a product of this new form of communication.

According to Professor Erik Qualman, global social media entrepreneur and founder of the Socialnomics movement: "the average person has a :07 second attention span – and the average goldfish has :08." So next time you eyeball a cute little Goldie, spare some empathy, because that creature is probably more focused on you than your best mate.

We all know that goldfish can't talk, but we may as well think about messaging as if we're talking to a goldfish to ensure we are getting the message right in the space of a few characters, and without the risk of it being misunderstood. It's a significant challenge. But in today's world, the importance of what we say and how we say it via messaging is imperative.

Make every word count.