



## **Are You Guilty?** **The Unconscious Goof that Can Hurt Your Credibility** *by Patricia Fripp, CSP, CPAE*

Fifteen times in a thirteen-minute period. That's how often Steve Forbes, President and CEO of Forbes Inc. and Editor-in-Chief of Forbes magazine, did it during an otherwise brilliant presentation at the National Speakers Association convention in New York, August 2008.

President Obama did it twice while he was on *The Tonight Show* talking to Jay Leno.

Russell Crowe did it multiple times speaking to David Letterman about promoting his latest movie.

My high-level corporate clients do it—including Presidents, Chief Financial Officers, and Sales Vice Presidents of America's greatest companies.

Celebrity speakers, best-selling authors, and top consultants do it before I work with them.

Each time they do, I reach over and give their hands a quick slap. When they ask, "How can I kick the habit? Nobody ever told me I did it so much." I tell them, "You must give your spouse and subordinates permission to tell you when it happens. First, notice when you do it. Second, recognize the negative impact. Third, replace this blunder with something more appropriate."

You may not have noticed this verbal affliction yet, but once you do, you'll have fun spotting examples everywhere. Some of your friends and associates are guilty. The blight has invaded television in the news and commercials, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet. It crosses all professions and levels of education. Recently, I counted dozens of examples at a four-day meeting with some of the most brilliant and successful professional speakers and consultants in the U.S. Even you may be doing it!

### **What is this Crime against Credibility?**

It's a single, suddenly-popular buzzword that makes me feel like fingernails screeching on a blackboard every time I hear it. It's "stuff."

Even communication experts are guilty. I maintain that professional speakers, coaches, and consultants are paid for their lifetime knowledge, innovative ideas, leading-edge strategies, and, most important of all, their eloquence in putting their

ideas across to their audiences. Yet, I overhear these communicators saying to each other, “The group loved my stuff” or “I gave them my best stuff.”

At a dramatic time in our nation’s history when precise and powerful communication is most needed, employees and sales teams, many who have English as a second or third language, are hearing this vague, imprecise language from their corporate leaders. Sales professionals in my sales presentation skills training are talking about their products and high-ticket technology in the same non-specific, low-value way.

Even worse than “stuff” is “and stuff.” Some individuals don’t seem to know that a period at the end of a sentence is a great way to stop. I’ve heard:

“This will decrease absenteeism and stuff...”

and

“We had a great conversation and stuff...”

In Shakespeare’s time, “stuff” meant woven cloth—“such stuff as dreams are made on.” It has come to mean “miscellaneous” and even acquired the negative connotation of junk, debris, or rubbish. Surely you don’t want to clutter your speaking, leadership messages, and sales presentations with rubbish?

The worst thing about “stuff” is that it is not specific! As my associate David Palmer, PhD has programmed me to think, “Specificity builds credibility.”

Each time one of my speaking clients says “stuff,” I ask what exactly they mean to say. Some are amazed at how often they use the word, even people with graduate degrees. Yet, their education isn’t obvious in their language because of that one useless and irritating word.

If you’re asking yourself what difference it could make, I’ll tell you. A huge one! You are hired because what you say sounds like it is worth paying for. Language that is fuzzy, clumsy, and unclear destroys your credibility and your claim to professionalism. You might as well be delivering your message in Valley-Girl speak, grinding your toe in the rug and murmuring, “Whatever—”

Your audience of one or a thousand deserves clear, forceful, and specific language. Toss out all that meaningless “stuff” and show them what a leader you are.

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