

Doublespeak / In the wacky world of words, nothing is quite what it seems

By CLIFFORD PUGH
Staff

Overheard recently at a downtown Starbucks: "Here's your tall latte, sir."

The man in a business suit took a look at the cup and replied: "What's so tall about it?"

Obviously, he doesn't understand "Starbucks-speak."

At the popular coffee shops, a "tall" is a small, a "grande" is a medium, and a "venti" is a large. You can also order a "short" that's smaller than a "tall" but still packs a caffeine punch.

Confused?

Welcome to today's world of words, where small is "tall," used cars are "pre-owned," the president takes a "working vacation," and everything, like in Alice in Wonderland, gets curiouser and curiouser.

Starbucks isn't the only purveyor of such "doublespeak." There are lots of examples.

At Target, employees are "team members" and customers are "guests."

The description leads one customer to wonder, "If I'm their guest, why do I have to pay for anything?"

"You're still buying things," a humorless spokesperson for the Minnesota-based chain responded. "We look upon it as a more positive term than customers."

Whole Foods Market and 24-Hour Fitness also call their employees "team members" while Disney and the W hotel chain call employees "cast members."

Betsy Gelb, professor of marketing and entrepreneurship at the University of Houston, believes such terms are used to instill feelings of loyalty and camaraderie.

"It's pretty hard these days to hire people to work in retail stores. So it's not just your customers that you're trying to communicate to. It's your employees and potential employees," she says.

In the marketing world, words can be used as image builders, Gelb says. Companies such as Starbucks are selling more than a product. They're selling an experience.

"Now, coffee isn't just coffee. Coffee is relaxing. Coffee is socializing. Coffee is showing that you deserve something special. How do I convey that? Not with small, medium and large," she says.

A Starbucks spokesman says the names for drink sizes were taken from Italian words, grande and venti ("twenty," as in 20 ounces). Short and tall were "inspired" by their Italian equivalents.

At the gym, it's no longer weight training. Now those working out are doing "strength training," which sounds both more powerful and less threatening, particularly to women. Instead of aerobics, exercisers are now doing "cardio." Just the word gets the heart rate up.

Used cars are "pre-owned vehicles" that have undergone "performance reviews." Undertakers are "funeral directors." A power failure is an "outage." Metro calls a shuttle service for public housing residents a "circulator."

There's an infomercial for a super-duper knife that can slice bread and also a shoe. But it's never called a knife. Rather it's a "complete slicing system," which is a term that borders on misleading, Gelb believes.

But a phrase like "relaxed-fit jeans" has charm.

"That one is a work of art. It fits the product. You know exactly what they mean," she says. "I can remember when there were labels in suits (that said) 'partly short.' Now, who wants to be a 'partly short'?"

The medical world is also rife with "doublespeak." Nowadays an operation is a "procedure," and researchers are pursuing "therapeutic cloning" instead of "human cloning" for couples with infertility problems.

In the season-ending episode of *Sex and the City*, Charlotte, who is having trouble conceiving, laments that she is "reproductively challenged."

"I'm waiting for somebody to figure out a new phrase for 'stem cell research,'" communications specialist Tony Shelton says.

Among phone users, "doublespeak" is also rampant.

Almost nightly, phone solicitors dial up unsuspecting residents and say, "This is a courtesy call." Most on the receiving end would agree it would be a courtesy if telemarketers didn't call.

Businesses often put callers on hold, with a recorded message that says, "Your call is important to us. Please hang on." Well, if it's that important, why can't a real person take your call immediately?

The travel business is also a fertile area for "doublespeak." Hotels frequently tout a "mini-suite," which is one large room. Many hotels offer a "corporate rate" that is available to anyone and usually is not that good, *Chronicle* travel editor Harry Shattuck says.

You would think "all-inclusive" would cover everything. Not necessarily so. One ad for a trip offered the following disclaimer: "This is an all-inclusive vacation; air and gratuities are additional."

And in what may be the most unusual use of words, you can earn "frequent flyer" miles at some supermarkets. Better fasten your safety belt as you roam the frozen food aisle.

Politicians, who have long been accused of speaking out of both sides of their mouths, seem to have become even more sophisticated in the art of "doublespeak."

President Bush is on a "working vacation" at the "Western White House," which provides a subliminal link with the California ranch where Ronald Reagan vacationed during his presidency. Never mind that a more accurate term would be "Southwestern White House."

Supporters of the move to abolish the estate tax found success when they adopted the phrase "death tax." It emphasized two things everyone hates: death and taxes.

Tax increases are "revenue enhancements"; the recent tax cut was reframed as "tax relief"; and a "sin tax" is regularly levied on cigarettes and alcohol. Some politicians refer to vouchers allowing taxpayer money for private schools by the more benign-sounding term: "school choice."

Framing the debate with a "catch phrase" has become more important in the age of polling, says Shelton, president of Shelton & Caudle, the crisis communication and training division of Vollmer Public Relations.

"Politicians pay attention to polls, and in order to get those poll numbers up, things have to be explained in very simple terms," he says. "So if you can give it a catchy name that people are going to react to one way or the other . . . they'll remember that."

Although there may seem to be a lot more examples nowadays, "doublespeak" is nothing new, says Nancy Niedzielski, assistant professor of linguistics at Rice University.

"It's been around as long as people have been speaking," she says. "It's just a really common practice to use these kinds of things to soften a blow or make something better or worse than it is."

She points out that people use the words "bathroom," "restroom" or "little boy's or girl's room" to refer to a toilet. Houstonians "glow" instead of

perspire or sweat. And people "pass away" or "join the silent choir" instead of die.

"The main things these (phrases) do is point where society has the greatest amounts of discomfort," Niedzielski says.

Workplace changes are one area of discomfort. Instead of layoffs, an employee is a victim of "streamlining," "downsizing" or, in a prime case of Orwellian doublespeak, "rightsizing." A fired executive is often said to have left "to pursue other opportunities" or "been made available to the industry."

Race and disability are also areas where people are often unsure about what terms to use. One Houstonian was recently admonished for using "Oriental" to refer to someone of Asian origin. "Oriental is a carpet," he was told.

Niedzielski says in such areas, the right thing to say is not always clear-cut. For instance, she has a blind friend who hates to be referred to as "visually impaired."

"People have different political takes, and you have to see where they stand," she says. "You can't march up to a linguist and say, 'What should we say?' You can't give a right answer. Language is always changing."