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## **(Viable) Lessons From Ed Newman**

By Benjamin G. Shatz

Remember Edwin Newman? He was an NBC News journalist from the 1950s through the 1970s. His work brought him into frequent contact with politicians, press secretaries, sportscasters, academics, entertainment figures, fellow reporters, and others who misused language either unintentionally or, more often, intentionally to obfuscate or conceal. Those interactions turned him into something of a curmudgeon. He hated imprecise communication and despised all forms of linguistic abuse. His avowed enemies included oxymorons, euphemisms, redundancies, malapropisms, corporate gobbledegook, political doublespeak, mindless advertising jingles, verbal tics, clichés, and slang. In *"Strictly Speaking: Will America be the Death of English?"* (1974) he lamented that "language is in decline," simple, direct speech - let alone eloquence - has departed, leaving pomposity and banality in ascendance. This bedeviled him because he believed that careful use of language makes for more critical and less gullible minds, and that when words lose value, ideas lose value.

Newman also, however, displayed a highly developed sense of humor, recognizing that a world without mistakes would be less fun. Accordingly, although his bestsellers - *"Strictly Speaking"* and its sequel, *"A Civil Tongue"* (1976) - relentlessly attack stiff and bloated language, foibles, and other forms of verbal vandalism, they do so enjoyably in the style of a wit and raconteur, rather than as a school marm. His lessons on using language with exactness and grace should have particular resonance with lawyers, who, after all, must strive to speak and write clearly, concisely, and correctly. Put differently, lawyers - who make their living through arranging words - are particularly susceptible to the misuses Newman worked so hard to expose and eradicate.

As Newman saw it, the language of public discourse too often concealed more than it told; or too often concealed that there was little or nothing worth telling. He concluded that we ought to demand "that our leaders speak better English, so that we know what they are talking about and, incidentally, so that *they* do." Along these same lines he commented that America was the most wasteful country in the world, and its use of words was equally extravagant. The belief that repetition and 10-cent words makes for stronger communication remains sadly entrenched to this day, especially among lawyers: Unfortunately, most lawyers would not blink at the humorous oxymoron "a lengthy brief."

Words frequently misused by lawyers and the public in general are legion. Newman vigorously joined the raging grammar wars in battles against the incorrect use of "me," "hopefully" and "parameter" - the latter of which remains a favorite with the practicing bar. There is also the alarm about the improper shunning of the word "me" - which commonly and distressingly is being replaced by either "I" or the reflexive "myself." Similarly, in an attempt at hyper-correction, many educated people who should know better have taken to saying "I feel badly," when they mean to say "I feel bad." (Feeling

badly is a neurological disorder; feeling bad is a sorrowful emotional state.) All those law students and lawyers who have uncracked copies of *"Black's Law Dictionary"* on their shelves should consider trading them in for another Bryan Garner opus, his *"Garner's Modern American Usage."*

But back to Newman. Here is a prime example of Newman's sarcasm, with a lesson for lawyers: "AP story from October 5, 1973: 'Buenos Aires, Argentina - A high-ranking police officer was shot to death in front of his home Thursday night in the fourth political murder since Juan D. Peron was elected President less than two weeks ago.' Juan D. Peron. The D. is there is keep you from confusing Juan D. Peron with the Juan Q. Peron also elected president of Argentina two weeks earlier." Newman's point is that although middle initials are thought to add authenticity and the ring of history, they most often are painfully unnecessary. Lawyers are guilty of this too, typically using middle initials (and other superfluous detail) to lend an air of exactness, when in nearly all cases such extra information is entirely useless. Unless you happen to be litigating the case of John A. Smith versus John B. Smith, there is little need to belabor the parties' middle initials.

Newman expressed particular antipathy for social science jargon and police-speak - modes of expression similar to legalese. In his view, academics, police and politicians were in the habit of "taking clear ideas and making them opaque," especially through attempts to make their words sound weighty and important. But the importance of an idea should shine through its content, not its expression; and overblown expression weakens its impact. Newman demonstrated this by rephrasing Lincoln's famous remark about the poor (i.e., that God must love them because he made so many of them), as "God must have loved the people of the lower and middle socio-economic status, because he made such a multiplicity of them."

Also on the somewhat lighter side, Newman was not above deriving chuckles from menu-English at foreign restaurants. And he delighted in exploring the considerable destructive effects of sports broadcasting on ordinary American English. Naturally he singled out Howard Cosell's oddly erudite pet phrases - so memorably lambasted on Saturday Night Live - terms like "relative paucity" and "veritable plethora." Athletes too were his targets for their aid in degrading - or is it really enhancing? - English. Muhammad Ali contributed portmanteau words in expressions like "I'm not flustrated" (why say "I'm neither flustered nor frustrated," when one new word will do?). Celebrity word-coining continues unabated, with Sarah Palin's creation of "refudiate" (a useful combination of refute and repudiate). Lewis Carroll - and Ed Newman - are beaming.

Newman's role as a stickler for good grammar and correct usage won him fame and acclaim - and helped land him bit parts in movies and television shows including *The Pelican Brief*, *Stripes*, *Spies Like Us*, *Golden Girls*, *Newhart*, *Murphy Brown* and *Saturday Night Live*. Ed Newman died in August. In a final act of class, public notice of his death issued a month later, allowing time for his family to grieve. Those who share his vision should continue to oppose verbiage and strive for direct, specific, concrete, colorful, subtle, imaginative writing. Newman's lessons live on; his advice remains

sound. Although several of his linguistic causes have been lost, *hopefully* he can forgive us.

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