



Dear Reader,

Welcome back to **EC Buzz** after the long summer break (a bit longer than expected!).

This issue examines “weasel words”, those deliberately imprecise and manipulative words loved by advertisers and politicians. Weasel words appear to support impressive, even outrageous, claims – but actually weasel out of clearly stating the truth.

Happy fall!



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Weasel Words

This term was popularized in speeches by Theodore Roosevelt as a US Presidential candidate, but is attributed to Stewart Chaplin, an American political commentator. Chaplin’s short story *Stained Glass Political Platform* from 1900 contains this line: “Why, weasel words are words that suck the life out of the words next to them, just as a weasel sucks the egg and leaves the shell.”

Here are some weasel words frequently seen in advertising. Although they may not be strictly untrue, their function is to draw attention away from some aspect the advertiser wants to understate.

1. **Up to**, as in “Gain up to 50 pounds of muscle!” (The professional model in the photo had an army of researchers, personal trainers and dieticians to help. You don’t.)
2. **Cheaper**, as in “Now 25% cheaper!” (Cheaper than what? The old price? The competition? Maybe there’s now less in the packet.)
3. **Real taste** or **flavour**, as in “Real vanilla taste!” (It may taste like vanilla, but it’s made with real industrial chemicals and genuine artificial flavouring.)
4. **Clinically tested**, as in “Clinically tested formula!” (It may have been tested, but how thoroughly and what were the results? Did it even work?)
5. **Helps** or **supports**, as in “Supports weight loss!” (It may help a tiny bit, but not nearly as much as healthy eating and exercising would.)
6. **Fights**, as in “Fights tooth decay!” (It may try hard – or perhaps not very hard – but it certainly won’t win.)
7. **Virtually**, as in “Leaves dishes virtually spotless!” (The dishes will be mostly, but not entirely, spotless – in fact, they may still be slightly dirty.)
8. **Unique**, as in “Unique roll-on applicator!” (But is it any better than all those other non-unique applicators? Maybe there’s a good reason no one else uses that design.)
9. **Best**, as in “The best mouthwash on the market!” (According to what – and whose – criteria? Presumably the competition wouldn’t agree.)
10. **Like**, as in “Tastes like a delicious chocolate milkshake!” (It may have a similar flavour, but opinions will certainly differ on how delicious, chocolatey, milky, or shake-like it really is.)

Buzz Off : *New and improved*

Admittedly, weasel words and puffery may be a necessary evil in advertising, but at least let’s see something imaginative so that we can all enjoy the audacity. *New and improved* is overused to the point of cliché – any manufacturer who adopts this phrase definitely needs a new and improved advertising agency.

But if you must use the words “new” and “improved”, why not be more specific, as in “New engine design gives improved fuel performance” or “New glue formula gives improved adhesion”?

Which buzzword is your pet peeve? Send your suggestion to writer@ecwriting.com, then look for your buzzword and name in an upcoming issue.

Parting Words

“I can suck melancholy out of a song as a weasel sucks eggs.”

– William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene 5