

It's never "just words"

Those of us who work in communications appreciate the power of choosing words well. We sweat it out over how to phrase a headline or a tagline because we know words matter. Different words carry different meanings, connotations, appeal and can sway your audience one way or another.

In the aftermath of the Arizona shooting of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords and the murder of six people by a deranged Jared Lee Loughner there has been A LOT of discussion over whether political discourse contributed to this heinous act. In truth, the only person who can answer if there is a direct correlation is Loughner, but I doubt we will be getting a sane answer from him. And many people on both sides of the political spectrum are pointing fingers at each other, at the heated rhetoric, etc. In my opinion, words do matter. They may not have been the cause in this particular instance, but when you are continually demonizing the other by labeling (job-killing, un-American, etc.) you create chasm and you create distrust. You create or stoke hatred. You reinforce the idea that those you attack are different than you, that they cannot be trusted, that they are out to get you.

So, although Sarah Palin's rhetoric and demagoguery are not what made Loughner go into a store to buy a gun and then shoot innocent people, and she is right to claim she is being wrong accused, that does not make it right for her to accuse the media of a "blood libel." First, because Palin (and her communications crew) clearly do not understand the meaning of phrase and second, as my friend Daria Steigman pointed out, using the word "blood" in the aftermath of a bloody tragedy is just plain poor choice of words.

Here are a few articles to read about Palin's word choice:

David Frum on what she should have said.

New York Times' The Caucus

Palin seems to be a master manipulator of words, and making herself the victim of a conspiracy against her (which is what I believe she meant to say with blood libel) is no error. She should be taken to task. I will be waiting to see what she says next now that the criticism is mounting.

The bottom line is that what we say and how we say it does matter and it does influence perception. Advertising and public relations people know this better than most.