




## FIGURES OF SPEECH IN MARKETING ENGLISH

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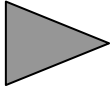


### Preliminary considerations

It is my prerequisite that the marketing vocabulary is part of the general English vocabulary and consequently the laws governing the formation of vocabulary in English are common to both General English and English for Marketing. However, certain types of word combinations and their use are more frequent and typical of the language of marketing.

The aim of this article is to examine the meanings of some **figures of speech** frequently used in the language of marketing in English.

Defined as "forms of expression deviating from the normal order of use of words, used to give variety or force" (The Oxford Illustrated Dictionary, 1978: 309), **figures of speech**, although properly belonging to the field of stylistics, are also studied by lexicology, as they are frequently apt to enrich the vocabulary of a language with new meanings - a process which is based on man's power of association, which determines numerous changes of meanings in different words.



## Frequently used figures of speech in the language of marketing

### ➤ Metaphors

This figure of speech usually compares two essentially dissimilar things, identifying them. By a metaphor, we carry over a word into another semantic field. For instance, the dichotomy **hot** ≠ **cold** is transferred from the field of temperature into the field of marketing. We can speak of a product being **hot** - meaning highly fashionable, or a very successful advertising agency as a '**hot** advertising agency'. A '**hotline**' is a telephone line giving after sales assistance. '**Cold** calling' refers to a method of selling a product to people who have not previously shown any interest in that product. '**Price freeze**' refers to the fixing of prices at their existing level for a specified period.

Many of the verbs, nouns and adjectives used in the language of marketing are, in fact, metaphors, as illustrated by the following examples:

- a product can be **launched** like a ship, or it can **die** like a person;
- if a product dies, a **postmortem** is performed on it to identify the causes of its failure;
- products can be copied or imitated by competitors and the word **clone** or **copycat** are used for these copied products;
- a customer who goes from one store into another, buying only loss leaders ('a product or service offered for sale by an organization at a loss in order to attract customers') is called a **cherry picker**.

Theoretically, metaphors can be **standardised** or **lexical** if they have already been accepted by the speakers of the language, and **non-standardised** if they are specific to the style of a writer or journalist and not yet accepted by the linguistic community.

According to Leon Levičchi (1970: 81), metaphors can be classified into three distinct categories:

- *live metaphor* - 'when it is felt to be new and fresh'
- *fading metaphors* - 'that have already become trite'
- *dead metaphors* - 'that have lost every metaphorical connotation'

Teodora Cristea (2000: 52-56) identified two distinct functions performed by metaphors in English for Specific Purposes (ESP):

- at the lexical level the metaphor plays a denomination function being a useful tool for terminology;
- at the level of the text it always designates, it plays a euristic role, doubling the power of arguments; it helps the understanding of the concepts.

Lots of standardised metaphors are used in the language of marketing. I shall attempt below to present the main categories of such metaphors without claiming to be exhaustive.

- I have already mentioned some examples of *personifying metaphors* that assign human qualities to marketing phenomena and concepts. Here are some more examples:

A product has a **life cycle** like a human being: it passes through several stages: **birth, launch, growth, maturity, and decline/demise/death**. If the product is a flop/failure it has to undergo a **postmortem**.

We can also speak of **cannibalism** with reference to a product that reduces the sales (eats into the market share) of another one produced by the same company. Marketers want to develop brand **loyalty**.

A **face-lift** refers to an improvement in the look of a product or company, whereas a **shelf-talker** is not a talking person, but 'a strip of paper along the front edge of a store's display shelf'. Likewise, a **teaser** is no longer an annoying person, but a brief advertisement meant to stir the customers' curiosity.

- Another category, closely connected with the previous one is that of *health metaphors*. The examples below are quite telling:

“The housing market is showing new signs of **vitality** although it seemed at one stage that it would never **recover**.”

“The **ailing** manufacturer is reported to conduct talks with a Japanese company, which will give it an **injection** of cash.”

“The market seems to be completely **paralysed**.”

“The advertising agency needs **drastic surgery**.”

**Viral marketing** has nothing to do with any traditional viruses. It is called so because of the pattern of rapid adoption through word-of-mouth networkers.

- Another group is represented by *liquid metaphors*. We can mention such words as: **drip, leak, flood, saturation, shrink**, etc.

“The market was **flooded** with cheap products.” “Unfortunately, there was a **leak** of information about the pricing strategy.”

“The market for these consumer goods is **saturated**.”

A **drip** advertising campaign is a campaign in which the advertisements are broadcast at rare intervals over a long period of time. It is the opposite of a **burst** advertising campaign.

- *Sports metaphors*. Various terms have been transferred from the field of sports:

For instance, a company that takes second place in a competition may be referred to as a **runner up**. The **key players** are the most important companies in a market.

A **market challenger** is a company that ranks second to the **market leader**: it can attempt either to attack the leader or to attack the **market followers**.

A **knocking copy** is an advertisement meant to destroy competitors.

“Company X has been **shown the red card**” meaning that the respective company has been “disqualified” for misconduct of some sort.

- Another class of metaphors is represented by those taken from the military field. We use a lot of *military metaphors* to describe the day-to-day operations of a business.

Examples:

**aim, aggressor, arsenal, attack, battle, battlefield, blitz, bombarding, campaign, capture, defence, deter, (sales) force(s), fight, counter offensive, mission, mobilize, guerrilla, invade, inroads, raid, raiders, retaliate, tactics, target, territory, troops, war, warrior, weapons, etc.**

- A further category is that of *growth metaphors*, as illustrated by the phrases highlighted in the following examples:

“The tobacco company has decided to **branch out** into the leisure industry.”

'We expect to **reap** very substantial rewards within a maximum of five years' - refers to the fact that profits are expected within five years.

'To **harvest** a product' means to reduce various costs (plant, equipment, maintenance, R&D, advertising, sales force) hoping that sales will hold up.

'To **prune** a product' refers to the elimination of a product from the product line when it no longer makes a profit.

- **Zoosemy** is generally thought to mean a type of metaphor that transfers animal attributes to human beings. We think that this type of metaphor can be extended to cover economic and marketing concepts and phenomena.

Examples:

A **baby shark** is a small shop that practices an aggressive sales technique.

A **butterfly customer** is a customer who shows no loyalty to any brand.

A **call bird** is a cheap product used to attract customers into a shop hoping that they will buy other more expensive products.

**Cash cows** are low growth, high-share products, which produce a lot of cash, whereas **dogs** are low growth, low-share products. **Dogs** may generate enough cash to maintain themselves but they are not large sources of cash.

**The year of the dog** is a bad year for business.

A **dog-eat-dog** competition is a very fierce kind of competition. Even tougher is a **rat-eat-rat** competition.

A **copycat** is a product that copies a competitor's idea for a product.

The phrase **empty nesters** refers to an old couple with no children at home (when considering the categories of consumers).

A **lame duck**, borrowed from the vocabulary of hunting, refers to a company that has national prestige but is unable to meet foreign competition and to survive without government support.

- Another class of metaphors is **that of colour metaphors**. Some of these, too, have been transferred to the business field. We can speak of **brown goods** referring to durables such as televisions, high-fi equipment etc. usually housed in wood or imitation wood cabinets; the metaphor **white goods** refers to a class of consumer durables that includes washing machines, dishwasher, refrigerators, deep-freezers and cookers; **yellow goods** refers to a class of consumer durables including both brown and white goods; **orange goods** refers mainly to clothing items that the consumers replace at a moderate rate.

The **grey market** is any market for goods that are in short supply; it differs from a **black market** in being legal, whereas a black market is not.

The expression **red goods** is synonymous to fast-moving consumer goods; it refers to products, e.g. foodstuffs, that are consumed and rapidly replaced.

The syntagm **green products** refers to ecological products and **green marketing** can be seen as a number of issues of social importance to business, such as social marketing, societal marketing and sustainable development.

**Yellow Pages** are trade directories issued for each business area; businesses are listed by trade.

- I have also come across metaphors that require different groups of classification; they are the so-called **technological metaphors**.

#### Examples:

A **flagship product** is a highly successful product meant to improve the image of the whole product portfolio.

A **trailer** is not a kind of van/lorry but a short film advertising a coming feature film.

**To skyrocket** refers to a quick rise in prices and **to plummet** to a quick and deep drop in prices.

There are also a lot of terms borrowed at present from the field of cybernetics and IT, such as: **cyber advertising, cyber-customer, cyber-mall**, etc.

#### ➤ **Hyperboles**

They are figures of speech based on an exaggeration used to highlight a product or a phenomenon.

Examples:

**to boom, to boost, to flood, to pour, to shower** etc.

A **burst advertising campaign** refers to an advertising campaign run on TV, concentrated over a brief period of time.

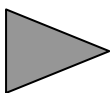
A **blurb** is an exaggerated advertisement.

#### ➤ **Metonymies**

They refer to the replacement of a name by one of its attributes, by one of its functions, by something it is associated with.

It is, in fact, every advertiser's ambition to persuade people to use his specific brandname, say **Kaba** or **Nescafé** for the article **cocoa** or **instant coffee**, or **Levi's** for **blue jeans**, **Kent** for the **American cigarette**. In this way, the general names are pushed into oblivion.

Similarly, **macintosh** was the specific brand name of a garment invented by Ch. McIntosh (1766-1843); today it denotes any waterproof overcoat.




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### Conclusion

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The specific figures of speech used in Marketing English make the language more graphical and more expressive. They are also a helpful instrument in the economy of language. On the other hand, the use of various types of metaphors and other figures of speech may raise special questions and problems for teachers and students, as well as for translators of such texts.

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