

Flak vs. Flack: That Is the Question

PERHAPS I AM FROM THE OLD school; I was taught that calling a public relations practitioner a “flack” was downright nasty and pejorative.

More often than not, it was associated with press agency, which invokes a short history lesson to introduce Gene Flack, a well-known publicist — not press agent or PR counselor, mind you — from the 1930s, after whom the term was developed eponymously. As a noun, it can refer both to the press agent/publicist and the publicity itself.

But today a PR practitioner can be both flack and flak.

Well, what about flak? The word is easily defined; it stands for criticism as in, “My boss gave me flak about my chronic complaining.”

The history books suggest that flak originated as an shortened version of the German compound word “fliegerabwehrkanone” — anti-aircraft gun. Since the Second World War, however, flak has shifted meaning, first to refer to anti-aircraft fire (“boy, did we sure get a lot of flak out there”) and then again to refer figuratively to criticism or abuse (“don’t give me any flak”).

A Different Meaning

Now the term flak as an adjective also refers to a person generally employed in the political or business sphere, as opposed to the entertainment industry, where assumedly

press agents and flacks proliferate, but to deflect adverse publicity — a job that transgresses mere public relations.

This sense of flak evolved after the establishment of and confusion with the other “flack,” a shortening of “flak-catcher,” which the author Tom Wolfe invented in his 1970 book of essays, *Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak-Catchers*.

There is a subtle difference between what a flack does and what a flak does.

The New York Times’ Literary Supplement joined the fray in 1986 by defining the job of a flack thusly: “The tone is world-weary, that of the flak-catcher for whom life has become an arduous process of warding off, outmaneuvering, beating down.”

Yet there is a subtle difference between what a flack does and what a flak does.

A flack (publicist) creates flack (publicity) for his or her employer. The corporate or political flack, conversely, works more like a flak-catcher — rather than creating flak, he catches it and turns it into something else, presumably by putting a positive spin on it. And if one becomes good enough at deflecting flak before it hits the newspapers,

one may reach the rarified realm of the spin doctor.

Today, the distinction between the two words has almost disappeared, owing to their almost similar spelling and pronunciation and is used interchangeably.

So why introduce this history lesson in the first place?

Case In Point

A few months back we arranged an interview with a corporate client and the business columnist of *The Citizen*, the leading — actually the only — daily newspaper in the Florida Keys. It was not an easy task, since voice mail interfered, and it took a lot of doing to make the interview happen. Thank goodness for e-mail and being a nudge (aka persistent).

The story appeared — the entire column, mind you — and it was terrific. It starts out thusly:

“I haven’t done a book report since high school. But a persistent public relations flak and his impressive client led me to read ...”

My first reaction was to contact the writer to (i) say thank you for the very positive column, since it was just that and (ii) to complain in a nice way that I did not like being called a “flak.” Mind you, I had not researched the dual history before reading the article, but I felt the word had negative connotations.

The columnist was taken aback. She had used it in a positive way to affirm

that I did my job and persevered so that there was a happy ending.

Still...

Should we get started on the growing debate between flack versus hack? We may be better served to hold it for another column.

Be Sure To Label Properly

But there is an issue out there involving our friends at the United States Postal Service. It concerns the use of labels that you put on large envelopes or packages.

I've learned the hard way that you had better have your return address at the top — not the bottom — of the label, or else what you send has a good chance of coming right back to you.

Turns out the human eye no longer looks at your labels — only machines. And the machines only pick up what's on the bottom of the label and not ON THE LABEL.

Is this progress? Stupidity? Sanity or what?

It is the policy of our post office system, so beware. No wonder the USPS has engaged FedEx to deliver overnight. ■

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