

Business Monday

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BUSINESS BOOKS

Words as links to culture and commerce

Two books examine the way language affects business and vice versa.

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Since popular culture is inextricably linked to business, understanding the jargon, slang, catchphrases and neologisms of each field is of vital importance. Here are two recent books examining the causes and effects of the often-evanescent language of culture and commerce.

Slam Dunks and No-Brainers: Language in Your Life, the Media, Business, Politics, and, Like, Whatever. Leslie Savan. Knopf. 352 pages. \$23.95.

Leslie Savan is a lover of words and an observer of people, and her super-smart explanation of modern pop vocabulary is studded with observational gems and conversational jams. She's closely attuned to the verbal rhythms of our language, citing everyone from Dubya to Aldous Huxley as she explores the origins and usages of contemporary blather.

But first, she defines her terms, writing: "What makes a word a pop word? First of all, we're not talking mere clichés. Most pop phrases are indeed clichés -- that is, hackneyed or trite. But a pop phrase packs more rhetorical oomph and social punch than a conventional cliché. Here's my definition: Pop language is, most obviously, verbal expression that is widely popular and is part of popular culture. Beyond that, it's language that pops out of its surroundings; conveys more attitude than literal meaning; pulses with a sense of an invisible chorus speaking it, too; and, when properly inflected, pulls attention, and probably consensus, its way."

Much of what Savan writes about we rarely think about, so ingrained are such words in the entertainment and commercial intercourse of our civilization. From the witty fellow who pops up from his cubicle saying "Wassup?" years after the beer commercial stopped running, to the teenager who embraced text-messaging shorthand the first time her father handed her a cellphone, the words and attitudes are everywhere.

Their ready adaptation, according to Savan, is second nature and permeates every aspect of business, politics and other interactions.

Though Savan is witty and knowledgeable, her relentless cleverness is, at times, overwhelming and fatiguing. But in measured doses, her sharp ear, stylish prose and acute insights are useful and provocative.

Green Weenies and Due Diligence: Insider Business Jargon -- Raw, Serious and Sometimes Funny. Ron Sturgeon. Illustrated by Gahan Wilson. Mike French & Co. 336 pages. \$28.95.

If you enjoy playing buzzword bingo at meetings, if you savor evocative terms like "Lipstick on a pig," "Herding cats," "shake and bake," "kiss your sister" and other expressive business lingo, here's the book for you. Ron Sturgeon does a terrific job of compiling and explaining scores of colorful and euphemistic expressions. The fact that the book is illustrated by the great Gahan Wilson is a bonus.

A green weenie, by the way, as defined by Sturgeon is: "an unpleasant surprise discovered belatedly as part of a transaction or deal. If you discover at the end of your negotiations with a distributor that your would-be supplier was in bankruptcy a year ago, that's a green weenie."