



# How to Avoid Elderspeak at Work

By Dr. Kathleen Begley, Book Author and Professional Speaker

**Note to Readers:** Here's another offbeat blogletter on business communication and current events from Write Company Plus, a corporate communications training firm located outside Philadelphia. In respect for your busy schedule, writers and editors have arranged seven at-a-glance ideas at the end of this article. Skip directly there if you lack the time to read the entire document.

There I was, innocently pushing my cart out of a supermarket near my home, when a young man wearing a shirt emblazoned with a bank logo started chatting about a flyer I had picked up to check out the graphics. Charmed by his eager pitter patter, I became more talkative than usual, especially considering that I had several quickly perishable dairy products in my bags. Before I knew what was happening, I had entered the bank's small office and agreed to open a checking account that I most definitely don't need. In other words, the man had done a fabulous soft sell.

But then he almost lost me.

How? As I was sitting down to sign up as a bank customer, he addressed me as "dear." So what's wrong with that, you may be wondering – especially if you fit into a demographic other than mine, which is a baby-boom era woman increasingly sensitive to the frenetic passage of time. Let me explain.

To a female aspiring to age gracefully or disgracefully, whatever her preference, the word "dear" is akin to being told that you are heading quickly to the trash heap of life. It irritates me even more than being called "chick" earlier in life. And that burned my butt, too. You think I make a mountain out of a molehill? Well consider this. Using hot-button words when addressing older people has become one of the fastest growing topics in geriatric research.

It even has an official term: elderspeak.

And here's the real eye opener. According to a recent study by Dr. Becca Levy at Yale University, using condescending terms with nursing home residents actually affects their health. "Elderspeak sends a message that the patient is incompetent and begins a negative downward spiral for older persons, who react with decreased self-esteem, depression, withdrawal, and assumption of dependent behaviors," Levy writes.

Who would have thunk – particularly if you're 25 years old and sincerely wish to show caring and respect for people several decades older? Way back when, I certainly was oblivious to this kind of thing. But my recent "dear" experience started me thinking about other communications issues between younger and older people paired in business transactions. Here are some suggestions on making a positive impression on the aging crowd who may work by you or buy your work:

**Accept the situation.** For whatever reason, many older individuals interpret certain messages as being told they are frail and useless. To be sure, much of the problem comes not from the speaker's choice of words but from the listener's fear of aging – and eventual death. But there it is.

**Focus on the benefits.** You may be thinking that the very notion of elderspeak is just one more crazy addition to a national obsession with political correctness. And that may be true. But, trust me, avoiding condescending words and actions is going to make you much more successful in



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selling your products, services, and ideas to people admittedly old enough to be your parents or grandparents.

**Purge old habits.** Over the years, I've noticed a tendency of ex-military people to call everyone "sir" and "ma'm." In the civilian world, this habit makes many baby boomers feel as if they're one step from the funeral home.

**Stop being so helpful.** You may consider offering to assist a senior carry a package or open a door to be common courtesy. And it is. But be forewarned: many older people see such offers as implying that they're losing muscle strength, skeletal flexibility, and overall sex appeal.

**Speak at a normal volume.** Most older people hear perfectly well. Generally, shouting makes them want to get away from the noise rather than buy your products in a store or help you at the office.

**Listen to your elders.** Whenever you have the opportunity, key in on conversations between people in their 50's, 60's and beyond. I predict you'll never hear them calling each other "sweetie" or "honeypie."

**Learn from the experts.** Thousands of marketing studies have shown that baby boomers still see themselves as attractive hotties. To be persuasive, you may as well follow the lead of big league advertisers who cater shamelessly to this perception. Why do you think Just for Men never describes its prospects as "old geezers who should be glad they still have hair" and Revlon never gears its anti-aging line to "silly biddies who should buy bathtub grout if they really expect to cover their crow's feet." Let's face facts. One of the most wonderful parts of the aging psyche is the ability to achieve and remain in a state of complete and blissful denial.

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