

THE BUZZ WORD TELEPHONE GAME

By Stephanie Maddocks

Communication is a skill that humans begin practicing at birth. In the beginning, it is the tone of our cry that causes parents and siblings to respond to and address our different needs. Then it evolves into words and sentences for self-expression, usually starting with “I want...” or “He did it, not me!” At some point, we are introduced to the “telephone game,” where one child starts with a phrase like “the sky is blue.” It is whispered from child to child around the group until the last child says something like “ice cream flies to you.” Everyone laughs at how silly the others are when they don’t understand what was said.

As adults, words and sentences are still useful tools to facilitate communication. However, the telephone game still demonstrates the folly of effective communication—everyone hears something different than what is said. This interpretative communication is at the heart of every workplace interaction and has evolved communication into an art. Add to that the separate language of the gaming industry, and we create even more translation challenges and opportunities to confuse the audience with misunderstood words.

The gaming industry dictionary is full of creative words, phrases and abbreviations. *One-armed bandit*, *TITO*, *SAS protocol*, *turnover*—the list is endless. Some of these buzz words become common-usage words even though they may not have a consensus definition—words like *real-time*, *user-friendly*, *bonusing* and *server-based*. These four words are perfect for charades or Pictionary, as I challenge anyone to act out or draw a picture to describe these in terms that the group would agree upon.

When I started in the gaming industry about a million gray hairs ago, the buzz word in gaming systems was real-time. Systems had to be real-time because it was better and new and improved and different and advanced and all the rest of those fancy advertising buzz words. Real-time became a differentiator between systems and even drove some purchase decisions. In retrospect, real-time was a subjective definition because who really knew how fast real-time was. I don’t recall any data races where we’d actually time a transaction from the slot machine to the computer screen to see if it was truly delivered in the blink of an eye. The American Heritage Dictionary defines real-time as “the time required for a computer to solve a problem, measured from the time data are fed in to the

time a solution is received.” Well, that certainly clears it up then. I wonder how many general managers know the real-timeliness of their transactions, or if they care. In the telephone game, real-time could easily evolve into on-time, in-time or about time and still mean just about the same thing... but would probably end up as reality or realty.

My next favorite buzz word is *user-friendly*. Under my definition, user-friendly is the toaster that turns off right before my Pop Tart turns into blackened bar of sugar, or a vacuum that takes itself out of the closet, sweeps the house and puts itself away (and if it chases the cats, well that’s just free entertainment). However, I have yet to find a system that is truly user friendly. Where are the systems that easily create reports I want to see, as opposed to the ones that the manufacturer thinks I want to see? Where are the systems that actually analyze data and provide me with answers instead of more questions? Where are the systems that don’t go down on a daily, weekly or monthly basis, and that don’t require constant monitoring and intervention by an IT staff with more training than a NASA astronaut? User-friendly is another subjective description that would probably only be used by system developers, because they can’t understand why the average end-user with limited computer science knowledge can’t use it. I’ve always wondered if a casino would purchase a system honestly marketed as *user-unfriendly*?

The 2000s have solidified two new buzz words that have me shaking my head in confusion. The first is *bonusing* for gaming systems. I recall a conversation with a marketing director who insisted that its next system had to have bonusing in it. When I asked what he meant by *bonusing*, his answer was (no kidding here), “you know, a system that bonuses stuff.”

OK. I played along with the delusion and had to ask, “Bonuses what?” It was all I could do to bite my lip when the reply was, “All the stuff that needs to be bonused.” I have to credit an industry that creates and perpetuates a buzz word that can only be defined by using the same word to describe it. It’s not enough that one systems manufacturer has *bonusing* that no one can define; now they *all* have to promote the illusive bonusing to be competitive.

When reviewing player tracking systems, it is another interpretative communication game to declare that “we need bonusing” without consensus on what the term *bonusing* represents. Perhaps a different approach is for the marketing department to define promotion/reward plans and then find a delivery system to drive their marketing programs. Marketing departments are the creators of promotional events, and marketing systems are the means to deliver promotions. All three—the creator, the delivery system and the reward—are required to design a promotion. In the end, it is all about how a casino implements its system that determines the effectiveness of bonusing promotions in player development.

I am going to go out on a limb here and actually define *bonusing*: “Bonusing systems provide a player reward in response to a specified and desired behavior.” It is a behavior reward

gaming system provides the method to a) download game themes and pay tables via a networked casino floor to an individual game cabinet, and b) provide game content on a server accessible for play by an individual game terminal.” These are two distinct methodologies of server-based gaming—one where the content is downloaded to an individual game cabinet memory storage device and the other where the content is accessed on the server across the network. But I’m guessing if you asked 10 slot directors, you would receive back 10 different interpretations of what this server-based thing is all about.

Kudos to the marketing departments at various gaming manufacturers for creating more “gaming-speak” words that are interpretively defined as they pass around the industry roundtable. Buzz words create hype, spark interest and drive demand for new

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mechanism just like Ivan Pavlov’s dog-and-bell experiment. Marketing departments are responsible to find and reward player behaviors that increase the casino’s bottom line. In this context, bonusing is only peripherally related to software, systems and intellectual property; it is all about creating an environment where a casino customer develops into a loyal player. Too bad Pavlov didn’t apply for a patent on reward systems.

My next favorite buzz word that defies a consistent definition is *server-based*. I’ve read many articles, seen lots of PowerPoint slideshows, and reviewed a few marketing brochures that all describe server-based gaming systems without a description of what server-based is and what server-based will do. Currently, gaming analysts all speculate about the impact of server-based gaming in the marketplace, but there is not industry consensus on a clear set of features, functionality and benefits that this new technology will provide. I can only imagine the slot director’s frustration when yet another manufacturer comes to present a vision of server-based—how it will be the Nirvana of the gaming world—without addressing the what, how, when and why realities. This leaves the slot director to conjure up his or her own explanation of what the heck is going to happen when server-based finally comes to pass.

I’m going to go out on the skinny branches here and provide my own definition of server-based gaming systems: “A server-based

ideas and technologies. It is up to gaming operators to ask for clear and descriptive definitions in order to fully understand what bill of goods they are being sold and to determine how they will implement this new widget on their casino floor. Meanwhile, I sure would like to hear how “I want a server-based bonusing system” will end after it gets passed around the telephone game circle.



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