

WRITER'S BLOCK: Buzz-phrases, Twitter and ADD



By Jeff Cutler
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Hingham -

The current random buzz-phrase at my office is "Mmmm, shiny." It's meant to poke fun at the short attention span people have and how individuals can easily be distracted by new cars, celebrity-of-the-day gossip or new uses for Pomegranates.

"Mmmm, shiny" can be uttered when a pretty bird flies by, if you see a coin on the ground, or even if you're just watching TV and a cool commercial is played.

Ours is an era — or a moment — in which the next best thing is always around the corner and the new gadget or avocation is already old news by the time mainstream media and even a handful of blogs are talking about it.

Take Twitter for instance. This form of online communication is familiar to a huge community of geeks, 20-somethings and savvy marketers. Punch the word "twitter" into google and you won't end up with a short burst of laughter, you'll pull up Twitter.com, the Website.

It's here that you'll view people 'tweeting' at each other in spurts of 140 characters. You can send your tweets via cell phone, instant messenger or through the Twitter site. But as foreign and strange a concept as this is, it's already becoming old news. And that's frightening to me.

I'm the last person you'd ever want to corner at a cocktail party if your subject is Attention Deficit Disorder. I think ADD is as real as a short passport line at the post office or good customer service practically anywhere.

A psychologist I spoke with years ago said ADD is a catchall diagnosis for any problem a child is having at home or school. It's the best way a doctor can get a child into the "system" and then look for what's really wrong. Most of the time it's parents, teachers and caregivers refusing to take responsibility for rotten stewardship of today's youth.

Regardless, phenomena like Twitter only serve to reinforce society's belief that conditions like ADD exist. And while people dash from one event to another and from one community to another, they leave chaos in their wake.

Just the other day I spoke with a friend who was incensed about shopping carts at the local market.

She couldn't understand how some shoppers could in good conscience decide that it was smart to leave shopping carts all over the parking lot.

I agreed and thought that Sylvan Goldman would be very disappointed by how his majestic invention was being treated. You see, Goldman patented the shopping cart in 1940 as a timesaver for customers. He must not have realized how badly people would want to save time 67 years later.

It probably takes less than 30 seconds to herd a cart back into the corral and once there it remains poised to assist with the next customer's shopping. Instead, the mentality seems again to be one of instant gratification and "disposalism."

If we all were to take this approach, everything we have would be worthless. Books would be thrown out once they were read. A new diet or self-help routine would be introduced every week. And our collection of toys and tools and clothes would be regularly replaced.

It occurs to me that we might already be headed in that direction.

Thousands of people stood in line a week ago to get a \$600 iPhone. According to an informal poll taken by a gadget reviewer in California, 37 percent of the people in line already had a phone with a different carrier. They simply bought a new phone and switched service providers to get the next best thing. The remaining 63 percent were already AT&T customers who just wanted the newest phone.

Taking a step back from all of this, I wish people around here would nurture their ability to pay attention for more than 140 characters. I'd like to see less cart carnage in shopping center parking lots. And the next time a self-important, SUV-driving soccer mom cuts me off, at the very least I hope she's got all her ADD-afflicted children buckled in.

By the way, last weekend I spent seven glorious minutes playing with an iPhone at the Hingham Apple store at the Derby Shoppes. Mmmm, shiny.

Jeff Cutler is the owner of Novel Ideas, a writing services firm based in Hingham, MA. Jeff is a frequent contributor to the Hingham Journal and other Mariner papers; he's the author of "Mountain Bike America: Boston" and you can read his writing regularly here in Writer's Block and at www.bowlofcheese.com. He can be reached at jeff@jeffcutler.com. And yes, if you were wondering, there were exactly 140 characters in today's column's final paragraph.