ARTICLE

Lexico-mmerce: A guide to the origins of business terms

Business interactions are littered with jargon. While we may understand what these terms refer to, their origins are often not immediately apparent to us – despite us using such terms so frequently. For instance: why do we give a *ballpark* figure? Why is it called *lever*-age? Why do we pay through the *nose*? This article will attempt to provide answers to these questions and more.

Ballpark

The term 'ballpark' is commonly used in the business world to denote an estimated value or amount. In order to garner the origins of this term, we must transport ourselves back to America in the 1950s.

During this decade, U.S. military scientists were preoccupied with developing missiles. When testing accuracy, it was considered overly optimistic to expect a missile to land on a single point each time.[i] As such, scientists determined that a missile would be deemed close enough to its target if it landed within a 100 square metre range of the centre point.[ii] Since 100 square metres is approximately the size of a baseball field (known in the U.S. as a 'ballpark'),[iii] the scientists would say that the missile was 'in the ballpark' if it had fallen within this range of the centre point.[iv] The term 'ballpark' was therein coined as a means by which to intimate an approximation or estimate, resulting in the business phrases 'ballpark figure' or 'in the right ballpark'.

Budget

A 'budget' is nowadays used in the business world to describe the money that an individual, group, organisation or nation has at its disposal.[v] The origins of this word meander through centuries of European history.

Before coming into English, the word 'budget' evolved through a number of languages. The Celts originally developed the word 'bolg' meaning a bag or sack.[vi] This in turn became the Latin word 'bulga', which retained the same meaning. The word then evolved into 'bouge', when inducted into French. Out of this, the French developed the word 'bougette', meaning a wallet for money or documents.[vii]

This brings us to the 15th Century, at which point the English loaned the word 'bougette' – though they later decided to use the more Anglicised spelling 'budget'.[viii] Despite being spelt differently, the English word retained its historic meaning as a bag for holding items. Out of this, the phrase 'open your budget' was conceived, meaning 'show me what you've got' or 'you're hiding something from me'. This connotation of the phrase, as being synonymous with concealment, came to the fore in the 18th Century – being used in reference to Chancellors of the Exchequer.[ix] Until the Chancellor's annual declaration of the nation's finances,[x] the general public was practically in the dark as to the state of the country's financial position that year. Accordingly, 'open your budget' was used by the public to encourage Chancellors to shed light on the nation's finances – at which point the financial parlance of the word 'budget' was arrived at. The word has since become synonymous not only with the Chancellor's annual declaration, but as a general business term describing the financial state of any individual, group or organisation.

Finally, alongside its financial connotations, the word 'budget' also has roots in journalism and print media. In the 16th Century, almost a hundred years after the word 'budget' had come into English, the word also came to mean a large amount of something. Among other things, the word was used to collectively describe news – as in the phrase 'a budget of news'. The print media cottoned on to this use of the word, with it subsequently featuring in publication names such as 'The Pall Mall Budget'.[xi]

Cash Cow

A 'cash cow' is used to describe a business, product, service or investment that is capable of yielding regular profit.[xii] The term (unsurprisingly) has rural beginnings.

In the early 1970s, farmers pioneered the term 'cash cow' to denote the fact that – after having given birth – a female cow could be milked relative easily, with the sold milk yielding a steady source of income for the farmer.[xiii] In the decades that followed, the term lost its agricultural parlance, and was welcomed into both commercial and everyday lexicon.

Feeling The Pinch

'Feeling the pinch' refers to when a person or organisation has less money than they need or previously had.[xiv] Understanding where the phrase comes from requires us to travel back almost 200 years.

In the mid-19th Century, those without enough money to buy food would tighten their belt to mitigate the decrease in waist size that hunger and starvation was causing them. In doing so, they would feel their belt pinch[xv] – with the phrase since becoming synonymous with situations in which businesses are short of money.

Heads Up

Giving someone the 'heads up' is business speak for alerting or notifying them in advance of an occurrence.[xvi] Its origins are somewhat removed from this business world however, dating back over a century to the heat of battle.

In the early 20th Century, when an oncoming danger loomed, U.S. military commanders would call for their unit to look up and observe the approaching peril in case they needed to respond immediately. The exclamation used by these commanders was 'Heads up!', parlance which has not only become staple of office lexicon, but has also lent its name to the 'heads-up display' panels in military fighter planes used since the 1970s.[xvii]

Invest

When used in the commercial world, the verb 'invest' describes placing money in something for the purpose of reaping financial reward.[xviii] Its origins are worlds apart from this however.

Hundreds of years ago, the languages of Latin and Old French contained a verb 'investire' meaning to put on clothes. From this emerged another sense of the word in Italian in the 17th Century, whereby placing money in different stocks or ventures was analogically likened with dressing the money up in different clothes.[xix] Since then, the word has retained this commercial parlance, and is typically used in business to mean the placing of money in a venture.

Leverage

In the business world, the verb 'leverage' means making the most of an existing resource for future gain or betterment.[xx] Its origins are somewhat more literal.

In the early 18th century, the noun 'leverage' described the action of a lever. A century on, as the industrial revolution beckoned, its meaning slowly evolved to refer to the power or force possessed by a lever – and therefore the potential it had to create an advantage for the user. By the mid-19th Century, this noun had traversed the mechanical context and entered into the mainstream, with 'leverage' being used to describe any type of advantage (not just advantage resulting from the power or force of a lever.)[xxi] And in the decades that followed, the noun became the verb 'leverage' that we know today – namely, the action of harnessing a resource for gain. It was around this time that the financial meaning of 'leverage' came into being too.[xxii]

My Two Pence/Cents

The phrases 'putting my two pence/cents in' or 'my two pence/cents' worth' are often uttered in business before sharing a view that was unasked for.[xxiii] The origins of these phrases, however, lie in the world of postage stamps.

In the 19th Century, before the days of social media and even the internet, people would voice their opinions to politicians or publication editors by writing letters to them.[xxiv] In Great Britain in the early part of that century,

postal charges were raised from one pence to two pence.[xxv] Similarly, in the U.S., the first class postage rate was two cents per ounce during the latter part of the 19th Century.[xxvi] It is thought that 'two pence' and 'two cents' phraseology comes from this context; people would put two pence or cents worth of money towards postage costs for a letter containing their opinion.[xxvii] It is from these origins that the current parlance derives, with 'two pence/cents' worth' used nowadays before expressing an unwanted opinion.

Paying Through The Nose

The phrase 'paying through the nose' is often used in business to describe a situation where you pay what you deem an extortionate price for something.[xxviii] Its origins are much more gruesome.

Back in the 9th Century, the Irish were ruled by the Danish Vikings.[xxix] The Danes levied extortionate taxes, and – for anyone who defaulted or refused to pay – the punishment was to have their nose slit from tip to eyebrow.[xxx] It is from this archaic derivation that the business world inherited the phrase 'paying through the nose'.

Reach Out

The phrase 'reach out' is often used by businesspeople to describe getting in contact with someone, typically for help or to begin a conversation or venture.[xxxi] Its beginnings lie outside the business world however, and are thought to have begun in a telephone company advertising campaign.

In the mid-1970s, the agency handling U.S. telephone company AT&T's advertising devised the slogan 'reach out and touch someone' to be at the forefront of a campaign showcasing long-distance phone calls. The campaign comprised numerous adverts throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s encouraging the American public to use the telephone to keep in touch with those too geographically distant to visit – be it a soon to be married sibling, a poorly medical patient or a loving grandparent.[xxxii] The start of the campaign's slogan, 'reach out', was seemingly absorbed into business lexicon, and has been used to denote getting in contact with colleagues and business contacts ever since.

Touch Base

The phrase 'touch base' is often used in a business context to refer to fleeting contact or re-engagement with someone.[xxxiii] Its origins lie in the world of sport and leisure.

In order to be awarded points in baseball, a player must touch all the bases en route to the home plate.[xxxiv] Since the late 19th Century, baseball rulebooks have described this using the contraction 'touch base', as in 'whether a man did or did not reach and touch base before a fielder secured the ball'.[xxxv] Similarly, rules of the game 'hide and seek' circulated around the same period refer to 'touch base', as in 'rush back to touch base, crying the name of the player…just spied'.[xxxvi] Over time, the phrase became synonymous with social reconnection – as is the current business use of 'touch base'.

Closing

And there we have it – the origins of some of the most commonly employed business words and phrases. It is hoped that this article has revealed how today's commercial lexicon came into being, and how the English language has been influenced by other languages and by other aspects of society.

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