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Hewlett-Packard and ‘pretexting’ - A rose by any other name

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Calling a lie something prettier has, as we see from the HP situation, the very real potential to put companies and their boards and executives at great risk, argues Phil Rudolph

I learned a new word recently. The word is “pretexting”. I know it’s a new word because it isn’t in any of my dictionaries, and I have several quite good ones.

With a respectful nod to William Safire, who himself took on the etymological origins of “pretexting” in his September 24, 2006 New York Times Magazine column, I thought it would be fun for each of us to learn more about this exciting new word.



First, let’s discuss context. Where did this word come from? Well, it first started appearing with any regularity – at least in the lay press – in connection with the recent spate of news stories relating to the scandal at Hewlett-Packard (though I suspect that specialists in the art of “pretexting” have been using the word for awhile – such is the nature of new words).

Dunn and dusted

What’s going on at Hewlett-Packard? At least as the press is reporting it, it seems that the company’s Board was (understandably) upset about leaks of matters that were being discussed at their meetings.

In response, the Board Chairman, Patricia Dunn, launched an investigation into the leaks. Private investigators were hired. And these investigators set out to surveil Board members and certain members of the financial press covering HP.

Here’s where the fun begins. It appears that these private investigators, working on behalf of HP (and with the apparent knowledge of at least some senior HP officials), obtained the private telephone records of these individuals by actually impersonating the individuals themselves.

How was this done? By misappropriating Social Security information and other confidential information of the Board members and the press, and using this information to persuade the phone companies that the investigator was, in fact, the customer.

This had the effect of fooling the phone company into divulging information that should be divulged only to the phone company’s customers. And what is this practice called? You guessed it – pretexting.

Roots provide clarity

Okay, so the word is new. But it must derive from some linguistic roots, right? Right. In fact its root is the far more familiar word, “pretext”. Pretext, which is a noun, means (according to my Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary, Eleventh Edition) “a purpose or motive alleged or an appearance assumed in order to cloak the real intention or state of affairs.” That sounds about right. Even a relatively smart person unfamiliar with the verb “pretexting” might be able to derive a clue or two from this more familiar root.

Having fixed on the etymological origins of our new word, let’s see if there are there any synonyms that will help us better understand this new word. There are, indeed, a few. If you speak, for example, to the FBI, the California Attorney General, and others of a prosecutorial bent, they might suggest the following synonyms for “pretexting”. They might suggest “fraud”. They might also offer up “identity theft”. Occasionally the word “felony” might cross their lips. (A New York Times story on September 19 described the potential legal violations here as “wobblers” – another nifty new word – because they can be brought either as felony or as misdemeanor counts.)

But, as with all fields of scholarships, people with other perspectives will almost certainly challenge these characterisations.

One such dissenter might be the very well known lawyer for HP, who was said by the Wall Street Journal on September 12 to have told the Board that pretexting “was not generally unlawful”. So there appears to be some good-natured semantic wrangling over whether “pretexting” might be thought of as “legal” or “illegal” – you know how lawyers can be!

Are there any other synonyms that might help us break this logjam? There is one that springs to mind. Let me see, what was it again? Oh yes – “lying”. That’s the one.

Call it what it is

All of which begs the following question: why go to all this trouble to come up with a fancy new word when this perfectly serviceable one is ready, willing and available to do the job? I don’t know for sure, but I suspect the answer rests in the fact that “lying” sounds too ugly – not the sort of thing that any self-respecting business person would want to get their hands dirty with.

“Pretexting” on the other hand – now there’s a word with style. Just speak it aloud to yourselves and listen to the syllables flow. No one who’s not paying attention could ever mistake such a euphonious word for something as pedestrian as “lying”.

I can almost hear some of you saying to yourselves, “What’s the big deal? Is this really important? It’s just a word!” With due respect, this is really important. This is really important because, though lying is not always illegal, lying is generally wrong (I urge

you Kant critics out there to give me a pass, here – I said “generally”).

Lying is something we are taught at a very early age to avoid. And lying does ruin reputations and credibility – two characteristics that are necessary for business success and that, once lost, are very difficult to regain.

Calling it something else makes it easier for otherwise rational and intelligent people to approve of or take action they might otherwise avoid if they thought of it in terms of what it really is.

Calling it something else makes it easier for a Board Chairmen or senior executives to even think about picking up the phone and asking their lawyer “is it legal?” by helping them slide past the more important threshold question “is it right?”

Wood for the trees

So calling a lie something prettier has, as we see from the HP situation, the very real potential to put companies and their boards and executives at great risk because it fosters a cognitive separation between their actions and the words used to describe those actions. It fosters rationalisation. And it can lead to disastrous consequences.

Would HP be in the pickle it finds itself in today had it been more honest with itself about what it was doing? That’s hard to say. I won’t pretend that our newly minted euphemism for “lying” is the reason the company is in this high profile mess.

But I do think business leaders, company employees, and others often fail to spot ethical pitfalls by spending too much time in the trees and forgetting to look at the forest.

And I think the use of weasel words like “pretexting” encourages this tendency by creating a mental separation between what conduct may appear to be and what it truly is.

There is a quaint old expression that "you can't put lipstick on a pig." To this I might suggest the following addition – "sometimes it's wrong to try."

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