

Language Matters!

WHO IS A “CONSUMER”?

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

From *The Oxford Essential Dictionary-American Edition* (1998):

consumer: a person who consumes, especially one who uses a product or service.

consume: 1. eat or drink; 2. destroy; 3. possess (consumed with rage); 4. use up.

Disability jargon is a mess. Labels are dangerous. We think we know something about a person because we know the diagnosis, when all we *really know* is the diagnosis that’s been assigned. The harm of using diagnoses inappropriately has been detailed in other articles, but the target of this article is the CONSUMER descriptor.

CONSUMER is, of course, a shortened version of the longer CONSUMER OF SERVICES, referring to people with disabilities who use the service system. In the vernacular, an adult with a disability who uses the service system is considered a PRIMARY CONSUMER, while a parent is considered a SECONDARY CONSUMER, (the child with a disability is the PRIMARY CONSUMER).

In the Real World, CONSUMER generally refers to anyone who buys things (and uses them up). This is a good thing: when we use things up, businesses make more, people have jobs, the economy is good, and so on.

The same doesn’t seem true, however, in Disability World, and I’m uncomfortable with the word being used about individuals with disabilities. When I hear human service workers talk about “our CONSUMERS,” it conjures up two images. First, an impression that an agency and/or staff people feel they “own” the people with disabilities they serve, and second, an image of a horde of people with disabilities fighting for

space at the trough of human services, sucking up, destroying, and/or using every dollar of an agency’s budget—*consuming!* And these are *not* great images.

First, people with disabilities do not “belong” to human service agencies. Second, in general, whatever services people with disabilities “consume” are paid for by their government entitlements (via SSI and/or Medicaid)—it’s not like human service agencies are benevolently “giving away free services.” And, finally, while many perceive adults with disabilities who receive services as dependent—dependent specifically on human service agencies and/or staff)—the reality is that

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people who work for human service agencies are dependent on people with disabilities for their livelihoods. So who’s really dependent on whom?

In the Real World, *anyone* who buys anything—that’s *all* of us—is considered a CONSUMER, but when it comes to

actually walking in the front door of a store, we’re seen as *CUSTOMERS*. CONSUMERS *use* things; CUSTOMERS are served. And some stores (like Target) have moved to the next level by calling us *GUESTS*. Why are they doing this? My guess is to improve the relationship between sellers and buyers: the host (the seller) is expected to welcome and treat a GUEST (the buyer) better! Additionally, as either GUESTS or CUSTOMERS, we’re thought of

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as individuals who have specific preferences and needs; that’s why such a wide selection of goods is offered.

Again, the same doesn’t hold true in Disability World. A CONSUMER is a recipient of human services with few, if any, *choices* in services. But aren’t these individuals, in truth, CUSTOMERS who need to be served? Granted, unlike a RETAIL CUSTOMER, the HUMAN SERVICES CUSTOMER (in general) doesn’t actually shop for and pay for goods or services. But aren’t human service workers supposed to do just that? *Serve?*

Is CLIENT a better descriptor than CONSUMER? Not in my book. CLIENT is a fine term for people who buy services from lawyers, architects, etc. In those situations, the CLIENT essentially calls the shots, and can hire or fire the professional.

Once again, the same is not true for CLIENTS in the human service system. In general, people with disabilities *do not* call the shots in the service system and, with few exceptions, they can’t hire or fire the professional.

When I talk to human service professionals about the words CONSUMER or CLIENT, many get a “deer in the headlights” look. In general, their responses fall into one of two categories: “What difference does it make,” or “I’ve never really thought about it.”

What difference does it make? Language matters! Words can hurt. Words both define and reflect our reality. How many individuals with disabilities have *chosen* to be labeled or categorized as CONSUMERS or CLIENTS? These are words chosen by the system! In *Language in Thought and Action (Fifth Edition)*, authors S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa write, “[A system of classification

suits the convenience of those making the classification...Classification is not a matter of identifying ‘essences.’ It is simply a reflection of social convenience or necessity—and different necessities are always producing different classifications.”

Shouldn’t we think about this? Shouldn’t people with disabilities have the greatest say in what they’re called? Others routinely change descriptors about themselves: stewardesses are now flight attendants, store clerks are sales associates, etc. Why shouldn’t individuals with disabilities do the same?

What might happen if human service agencies and others who serve people with disabilities and their families changed CONSUMER/CLIENT/RECIPIENT) to PEOPLE WE SERVE or PEOPLE WE PROVIDE SERVICES TO? Not just in word, *but also in deed*. What could happen if a human services professional treated an individual with a disability like a CUSTOMER?

In the Real World—and most specifically, in the retail world—the providers of goods/services go out of their way to meet their customers’ needs if they want to stay in business. They do whatever they can to create and maintain

a pleasant relationship and experience so the CUSTOMER will want to come back again—soon! They say “please” and “thank you” and do much more in the way of *customer service*.

If you’re a professional, think of the worst retail experiences you’ve had. Then think of the best. Compare and contrast those experiences, and think about how they made you feel about the providers of goods and services, *as well as how you felt about yourself*. Can you then apply that wisdom to the manner in which you and your organization provide services? And is it possible some changes are in order?

*Language is the
dress of thought.*

Samuel Johnson