Metaphorically Selling
How to Use the Magic of Metaphors to Sell, Persuade, & Explain Anything to Anyone
by Anne Miller

When Lee Iacocca asked Congress for $1.2 billion in loan guarantees for the failing Chrysler Corporation in 1980, he cleverly created the metaphoric image of a "safety net" rather than a "bail out." He argued that the government provided safety nets for its citizens, and that Chrysler employees represented a large group of citizens; Chrysler's problems were America's problems, and Chrysler's bankruptcy would be America's loss. With "safety net," Iacocca made Congress see the benefits of a loan as clearly as they could imagine a great nylon net protecting a circus performer performing on the high-wire. Congress ultimately made the decision that they could not deny Chrysler employees (and hardworking Americans) a safety net. Iacocca succeeded in securing the loan guarantees he needed.

Iacocca understood that speaking metaphorically — using visual words that conjure images in your listener's mind — is an extraordinarily powerful communication tool. When ideas come packaged in highly vivid language, they are simply easier to understand and explain, and more often than not, lead to actionable results.

Author Anne Miller shares Iacocca's "$1.2 Billion Metaphor" to introduce the power of Metaphorically Selling. Through four sections, Miller illustrates the influence of metaphor in business. Section One explains metaphors, when to use them and why clients are so responsive to them. Section Two shows how to create winning metaphors targeted at clients. Section Three demonstrates how to harness the power of metaphors throughout the sales and presentation process, and Section Four provides exercises and tips that enable and enhance a business' competitive communication edge.

Section One: The Case for Metaphor

One of the greatest sales challenges is often just simply being heard ... consumers have heard it all, and continue to hear more of it — until you and your competitors are virtually indistinguishable. The overabundance of information on products and services is overwhelming and rather than feeling more capable of discerning differences and making decisions, consumers feel paralyzed by too much choice. Twenty-five hundred bids for our attention bombard us daily through every medium available: television, radio, newspapers, internet, magazines, billboards and product placement.

Miller demonstrates that the one surefire way to distinguish your product from the rest is with visual words — metaphors. Imagery, the core of metaphoric language, will surprise, grab, inform and persuade your listeners where mere explanation will not. The words that work are those which make your listener experience
something ... see it, feel it, maybe even hear, taste or smell it. Think about what would appeal to you most: a product or service that would increase your sales, or one that would help catapult, jumpstart, galvanize, trigger, swell, ignite, or electrify your sales?

Consider the story of Steve Jobs when he was courting a wavering John Scully from Pepsi to become the CEO of Apple. His winning argument was not a list of facts and benefits. It was the choice of images he created in Sculley's mind when he asked: "Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water or do you want a chance to change the world?"

**Information + Metaphor = I See What You Mean**

This simple equation illustrates how metaphors enable your listener to see instantly, in a vivid and emotional way, what you mean. The result is a fresh perspective in their mind. The more specific your comparison, the more impressions it will conjure up: "He is the 'Donald Trump' of the department," "He is a regular 'Scrooge' when it comes to budgets," or "She is the 'Martha Stewart' of precision."

**Why Metaphors?**

The human brain is more responsive to the emotional and visual than to the cognitive and verbal. What gets attention, what sticks in memory, what moves us, is what we are made to see and feel. As amazingly rational as humans are, our brains crave pictures the way a child craves candy. Consider these facts: We remember 20% of what we hear, 80% of what we hear and see, and when images are vivid, we remember an astonishing 95% of them.

**Section Two: Building Metaphor Muscle**

Miller outlines a four-step process for creating winning metaphors.

1. **Determine Client's Blindspot.** What is preventing your client or listener from literally seeing what you mean? The first step in changing someone's mind is to identify the exact nature of the resistance or blindspot. According to Miller, there are two kinds of resistance:

   - **Objective resistance** is based on facts and is often easily overcome. For example, your client is operating under a simple misconception that your company forges tools, when actually you're in the business of packaging and delivering. A simple correction of facts or a further explanation can alleviate this type or resistance.

   - **Subjective resistance**, also called a conceptual blindspot, is rooted in emotion. For example, your client may be hanging onto a bad experience with a product similar to yours and cannot shake his conviction that all such products are profoundly flawed. Miller
explains that by employing the language of metaphors, you can help him to see your product in a whole new way.

2. **Snapshot Client.** In order to create a winning metaphor, draw on images and emotions from your client’s world. Miller cites the example of a female motivational speaker she heard give a lecture; the woman was talking about success in the business world by using vivid baseball and football metaphors. Unfortunately, her audience was all women who didn’t relate to a single metaphor and hence disengaged from the talk.

The number one rule in selling is to put your client at the center of any communication. What you know about your client is as important, if not more so, than what it is you want to say. Taking the above woman as an example, consider this: it’s likely many women in her audience play sports, so she should have chosen female athletes or typically female oriented sports for her analogies to provide more pertinent material for her metaphors.

You always know something about prospective clients and their worlds to create appropriate metaphors for your sale. Snapshot prospects by drawing on their personal background, industry, common knowledge, or general life experiences.

3. **Create Comparison.** Create a metaphor based on a detail from your snapshot that will change the lens through which your client sees your pitch. One example of an effective metaphor drawn from a snapshot is illustrated by a health insurance salesman approaching a prospective, albeit reluctant client — a farmer. “Buying insurance today is like treating your apples before blight or insect damage wipes them out. You really can’t afford to wait and see what the season will bring.” By framing his presentation in a situation that his client could relate to, the insurance salesmen succeeded in creating a winning metaphor that earned him a client.

4. **Relate Back to Situation.** Relating your metaphor or analogy to the topic at hand emphasizes your point and spares your listener any confusion that might derail the deal. In the previous example, the salesman knew that the farmer would understand the metaphor in his first statement but he drove the point home by relating the statement back to the insurance policy.

**Section Three: Selling with Metaphors**

Creating successful metaphors can involve comparisons, similarities or differences, clichés, similes or any number of other rhetorical devices you can imagine. Miller offers several suggestions on different types of metaphors you can use.

**Run A Theme**
One of the most effective ways to sell is to employ a running metaphor, one that offers many possibilities. A running metaphor threads its way throughout your presentation and can be a very effective technique for presenting your recommendations and information; the best running metaphor threads rely on themes or worlds rich in image-laden vocabulary.

For example, when Carol Terakawa, Executive Director of Sales at Yahoo!, had to present an industry update and forecast to senior management — she wanted to do something that would stand out, and decided on a movie theme. Her title page was The "XXX" Strategy — an allusion to the movie of the same name; "The Right Stuff" headed a page that described her team; "Mystic Pizza" was a pie chart explaining revenue sources; and, "Field of Dreams — If We Build It They Will Come" previewed the forecast for the future.

Grabbers: Get Attention

Metaphors of any sort tend to surprise your audience because a metaphor is not usually what is expected. If you can disarm your audience with a metaphor, you can likely pry their minds open to the possibility that there might be more still to learn about the presentation. Miller offers an amusing example to illustrate attention-getting metaphors.

"I heard a speaker open a marketing conference once with a story he’d heard about a guy on an airplane. This passenger sat next to a woman with a very unusual ring on her middle finger of her left hand. When he commented on it, she said it was her wedding ring. The man asked, ‘Why do you have it on the wrong finger?’ Replied the woman, ‘I married the wrong guy.’ After the laughter died down, the speaker linked the story to his point. ‘Given the disappointing results we have all been experiencing in the market lately, is it fair to ask, ‘Are we married to the wrong guy — the wrong strategy?’ He then went on to describe alternative marketing strategies."

Burners: Explain, Simplify, Reinforce Points

In any pitch or presentation, no matter what you’re selling or advocating, explanations are inevitable. You might need to explain something about your particular product, some complex process, or simply why you are better than the competition.

But explanations don’t necessarily require wordiness — with an apt comparison you can familiarize the unknown, simplify the complex, reveal new twists in the straightforward, and refine hard-to-see differences. The well-chosen metaphor focuses understanding instead of allowing it to diffuse. The perfect analogy crystallizes meaning in a visual, intuitive, emotionally poignant way that pierces through resistance to lodge permanently in your listener’s brain.
To illustrate her point, Miller cites the phenomenally successful metaphor utilized by Google when it announced its plan to go public in 2004. Many on Wall Street looking for quarterly earnings were less than thrilled by certain remarks in the company’s public offering statement. In clear terms, Google stated it was not going to offer quarterly earnings reports, as the company would inevitably make an unprofitable short-term investment, and they expected their shareholders to accept the inevitable. Google justified their position with this metaphor: “A management team distracted by a series of short-term targets is as pointless as a dieter stepping on the scale every half-hour.” With this succinct metaphor, Google offered an easily understood explanation and avoided sounding like they were making excuses.

Section Four: Metaphor Maintenance

There are three actionable methods by which you can reinforce your metaphor-making powers.

1. Observe and Connect

Metaphor-makers are curious; they notice and register everything around them, recognize similarities in ostensibly dissimilar things and connect seemingly unrelated ideas and concepts to new situations. To enhance your metaphor-making abilities:

- Fine-tune your radar: Look at something you usually don’t focus on every day. For example, walk down your street but instead of looking at the buildings, notice the roofs or landscaping.
- Broaden your horizons: Subscribe to an online newsletter outside your field of work; attend a lecture in a non-job related topic of interest to you; plan a day-long hike; watch a car race, a ballet or an auction.
- Lighten up: A relaxed mind that’s having a good time is a more creative mind. Free yourself to play more, seek entertainment such as board games, a John Cleese movie or old Lucille Ball shows, and look for the oddball wackiness in everyday life.

2. Travel to Other Worlds

Being able to draw on metaphors from a number of different worlds is a talent available to everyone. Masters of metaphor tour a variety of worlds in their minds quickly to hit upon the comparison that best makes their point. Miller quotes the Cole Porter lyrics from "You're the Top" to illustrate her point:

“You’re the top/you’re the smile on Mona Lisa ... the Tower of Pisa” and so
on. References to architecture, food, entertainment, books, dance, and cars, to name just a few — your possibilities for metaphors are infinite.

Interestingly, Miller observes that sports and cars are among the most surefire sources of imagery in America, perhaps due to an obsession with performance. As college professor Richard Lederer observed: "To understand America, you must first understand baseball. Baseball is not only America's favorite pastime, but the most pervasive athletic metaphor in the American language. Right off the bat we bat around a few ideas and then go to bat for someone. If we don't touch base with others, we may find ourselves way off base or not be able to get to first base."

3. **Become a Clipper**

Keeping your eyes and ears alert for new material will awaken you to a world overflowing with metaphors and comparisons. The more of them you pick up and pocket, the more trained your eye and metaphor-making skills will become. From there, you'll be able to take what you find and use it to dazzle an audience into seeing things your way, and when you reach for a metaphor to close that sale, more often than not, you'll find one right at hand.

**Conclusion**

Metaphors are truly among the most powerful weapons you can use to persuade, excite and inform your clients and prospects. They get you heard, understood and remembered, and belong in all of your communications.

With the help of Anne Miller's Four-Step Model you can start weaving the magic of metaphor into your business arguments. This will help you to sell your ideas and products more persuasively, vaporize objections, clear up confusion, make your point, and close the sale.

As Mark Twain once wrote: "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug."