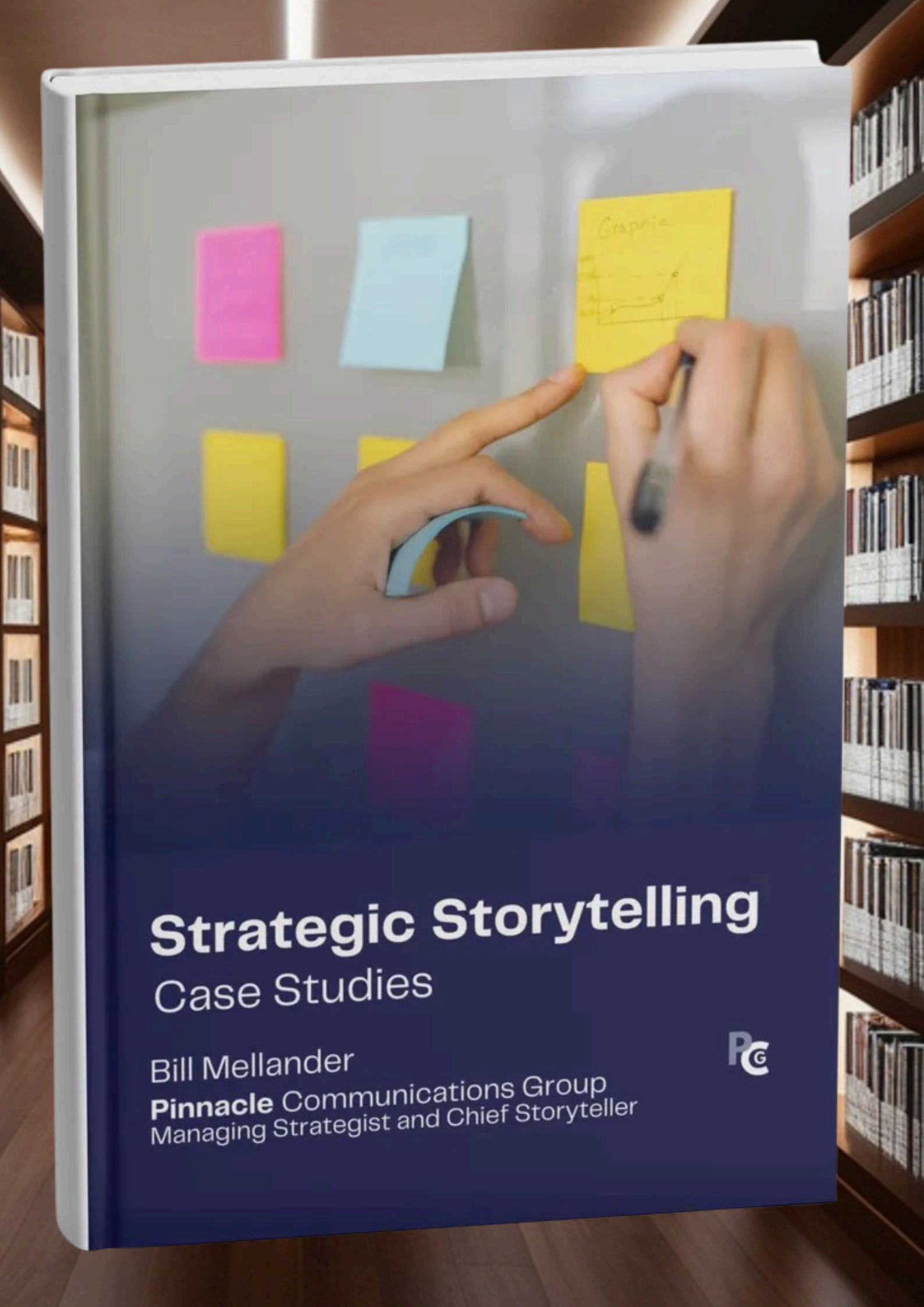
Graphic
Strategic Storytelling
Case Studies
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> A little common sense can go a long way in corporate communications. Be human when crafting messaging. Whenever possible, do it positively.
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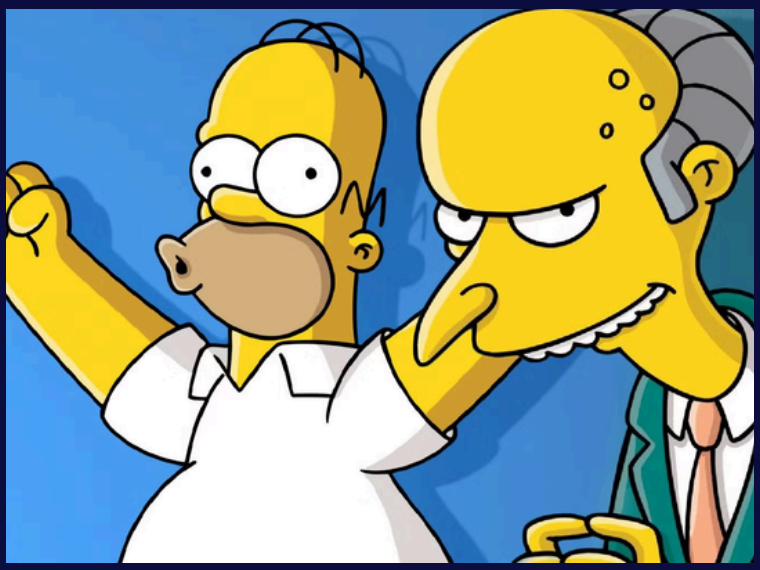
> **Here is a look at some communication case studies.**



A guy was sucked through the water intake pipe of a nuclear power plant while scuba diving – and lived. The power company released a statement emphasizing the importance of safety and security. It details the many signs clearly warning against approaching the intake pipes while swimming and makes it clear that they believe the diver did this intentionally.

First, assigning blame isn't necessary; it rarely is. Remember what your kindergarten teacher told you – when you point a finger, three others are pointing back at you. There is a better time and place for discussing fault. Second, why not start your statement by saying you're glad the diver is miraculously okay? It's what everybody is thinking.

Whether this thrill ride was intentional or unintentional, the undisputed fact is that you have a guy who survived getting sucked through a quarter-mile long pipe that pulls 500,000 gallons of water a minute. You're not exposing the organization to additional liability by being human. What you are doing is buying credibility by proactively suppressing the stereotypical image of the big, bad power company with Mr. Burns at the helm and Homer at the controls.

Always consider compassion. It humanizes your message. Standard fair language is given more meaning and the image of an emotionless corporation is mitigated.

Off the Rails

If you need an illustration of the importance of a robust and adaptable crisis communication plan, look no further than Norfolk Southern Rail Road's response to February 2023's derailment in East Palestine, Ohio.

Derailments happen hundreds of times a year. Every rail company has response plans in place. These plans incorporate varying strategies for communication management. Norfolk Southern has acknowledged that when this incident blew up, figuratively and literally, its crisis communication team was ill-prepared.

The complexity of the rapidly developing situation and the overall lack of coordination among municipal responders created an operational mess that was going to be difficult for any crisis communicators. The subsequent investigations revealed operational and safety issues that worsened the matter for Norfolk Southern. But they had already lost control. The rail company has acknowledged that there was confusion internally over who owned the message and that their playbook was not adaptable to address what became a multi-faceted crisis.

Here are some things to think about. Events that involve first responders are always tricky. Never cede control of your message, no matter the communication protocols of other agencies or organizations. You're responsible for the reputation of your brand. Crisis communication is often a communal effort; make sure you're at the table and your voice is meaningfully contributing.

Be honest, transparent, and proactive, always. You don't have to have all the answers. Make sure those you train are properly prepared to concede that fact in a way that illustrates forthright confidence.

Finally, always plan broadly. The people you're training have assorted levels of expertise in the arena of reputation management. Make your communications playbook too specific, and it becomes harder to call an audible. You'll end up off the rails.

Words Have Power

The aftermath of the June 21st U.S. strike on Iran by a squadron of B-2 bombers offers an interesting media relations case study. It highlights the significance of word choice. Think carefully about the words you select.

While the planes were still in the air, dust was still settling from explosions, President Donald Trump took to television to declare the strikes a “spectacular military success.” He also stated that Iran’s nuclear capabilities have been “completely and totally obliterated.”

Don’t say a lot when a little will suffice. Trump unnecessarily provided a baseline for comparison. Now, ongoing coverage will be considered in comparison to complete and total obliteration. From a media relations standpoint, it frankly doesn’t matter if the strikes did blow the Iranians to kingdom come.

Public statements, particularly in the case of unfolding events where determination of cause and consequence will take time, should focus on facts, nothing more. Do it with confidence and compassion. Most of us will never have to draft or deliver statements detailing cross-global bombing runs, but the principle remains the same. And yes, even when you have ordered a devastating military attack, it is possible to speak compassionately. In this case, choice of language has backed the administration into a corner, where anything less than complete and total obliteration will be met with cynicism.

Always consider message longevity when choosing your words. This was a proactive media relations push. Aside from strategic military objectives, the administration also wants to showcase American military might. A factual, uneditorialized statement would have dominated coming media cycles based on its merit. Consider your ability to continue leveraging or, if necessary, spin future developments. Never use language that risks your future thunder or limits your ability to manage an evolving message.

Don’t let aspirations cloud your message. In the case of the Iran strikes, we don’t know if Donald Trump was overstating with his declaration, but it wasn’t necessary. Overstate, exaggerate, or speculate and risk losing control of your message. It doesn’t have to be intentional. Aspirational thoughts, desires, and eagerness can unintentionally lead you down a dangerously expressive path. Remain focused on the facts, constantly. Think this way when crafting or delivering messages. Emphasize this to those you coach.

Initial statements are the foundational piece of a broader narrative. Think of this when deciding what to say and how to say it. Each development is a new story. How they come together is the narrative. Whether the narrative is positive, negative, triumphant, or tragic, choose your words carefully. Every syllable said now affects what you say next.

Dialouge is Dead

A month or so ago, a friend of mine did something unusual. He sent a note on Facebook with a story attached. The note said, “What’s your take on this? I’d like to hear what the other side thinks.” After I regained consciousness, I sent Ryan my thoughts. He responded with a simple “Thanks, brother.” There was no debate or argument, just a simple sharing of ideas.

Ryan is a person with whom I can have honest conversations about politics and other social issues. His views are not the polar opposite of mine, but it's close. That said, we engage in honest conversation. Not a debate. We’re not interested in changing each other's minds. There is value in understanding different opinions.

I have many friends with whom I share similar perspectives. We have conversations about things, sure. But there’s no exchange of ideas because our thoughts are generally aligned. Idea exchange is rare today for one big reason. Dialogue is dead.

Real exchanges of ideas don't happen anymore because one individual or the other feels a need to defend their position, rather than explain. Defending and explaining are not the same thing. Explaining is a calm, factual process to provide context, while defending is a reactive, self-protective behavior often driven by a perceived threat and characterized by excuses, blame-shifting, or over-explaining.

It is no longer enough to talk about differences of opinion. In many cases, there is no interest in understanding the other side. It is no longer possible because our feelings are so ingrained that our minds can't compute the possibility of understanding something beyond our own beliefs. You don’t have to agree with something to understand it. If you don't understand it, you certainly can't disagree with it.

Message and Meaning

Of course, our brave service men and women should not act on illegal orders from their commanders.

There is even a process in place for soldiers to ensure they are operating in accordance with their oath and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Thank you, senators, congressmen, and women, for reminding those who serve of this responsibility.

This is how the President of the United States could have addressed a recent video featuring six lawmakers, who are veterans of the military or intelligence community, reminding troops they can refuse illegal orders. Instead, the President called for the execution of sitting members of Congress.

Distinguishing between message and meaning is one of the most subtle yet crucial elements of strategic issues management. It most commonly comes into play when considering if or how to respond to critical statements. The message is defined by a literal recognition of what is actually said. Meaning is an interpretation of the message. Focusing on the original video, the real and possible responses, and putting politics aside, this is a case study in message and meaning.

When differentiating message and meaning, if a response is warranted is the first consideration. Choosing to say nothing can say a lot. In this case, a proactive response may not have been necessary. What statement did the video actually make? It reminded soldiers of a fundamental piece of their training curriculum. The message is laced with innuendo. But the verbatim is a straightforward reference to a commonly understood, basic principle of American military service. By not saying anything, you downplay the innuendo and assume control of the conversation.

You gain control of the dialogue because you separated message and meaning, looked at them independently, and understood their connection. The original party is now left to convey whatever meaning they sought to subtly express, directly. They're now operating reactively.

The controversy surrounding the meaning of the original video is what makes this a good case study. While a proactive response was strategically not necessary, the alleged not-so-subtle subtlety of the original statement meant questions were a certainty. Our alternative response is a meaningful message, again, appreciating the original statement's literal translation, putting the onus on the original party to say their innuendo out loud, something they might not be willing to do, or they would have done it in the first place. As before, you've taken control of the dialogue.

Understand both message and meaning. Be prepared for both. Concentrate first on the message. Meaning is a slippery slope. Your emotions, personal motivations, and biases fuel interpretation. It can cloud your understanding, particularly if you are offended by your perception of meaning. By responding to meaning instead of message, you risk making your opponent's statement for them.

One week into 2026, the mayor of Minneapolis may have dropped the sound bite of the year, throwing down the f-bomb in a nationally televised press conference. If this was an unintentional lapse in composure, it illustrates the kind of mistake that can make or break a crisis response. If this was a planned expression of emotion, it created the clip, but was it strategically helpful?

Maintaining your cool, particularly in the early stages of an event, is considered a critical component of crisis communication. Lose control of your emotions, and you risk losing control of the narrative. It doesn't have to be intentional. The human element of speech, compassion, is imperative, but uncontrolled emotion can unintentionally lead you down a dangerously expressive path. Remain focused on the facts, constantly. Think this way when crafting or delivering messages. Emphasize this to those you coach.

In the case of Mayor Frey, the expressive language was, by all appearances, a purposeful illustration of his anger and frustration. I spoke with several journalists who regularly cover Minnesota politics. They uniformly said, with certainty, that this was scripted, rehearsed, and played well with his base. It added emphasis to his message. It also caught many people off guard. Theatrics can be dangerous. Beto O'Rourke faded into relative obscurity after a series of 2018 events where his enthusiasm left voters questioning his seriousness as a candidate. O'Rourke jumped on tables. Tom Cruise faced years of Hollywood ridicule after leaping onto Oprah's couch to exclaim his love for Katie Holmes.

Whether jumping on furniture or cursing, this can never be allowed to happen extemporaneously. There is a fine line between theatrics and transgression. Particularly in crisis management, you can never allow yourself to lose control.

When is it okay to curse? This is a tricky question. There are a million reasons to say never. Do you kiss your mom with that mouth? Parents tell kids not to cuss because historically it's seen as impolite or creates a bad impression. They want kids to learn better ways to handle emotions and express themselves, reflecting family values, cultural norms, and a desire for respectful communication.

Can bad words have strategic value? Think about it carefully. Good words or bad words, choose every word you use carefully. Each syllable you utter now affects what you can

Can bad words have strategic value? Think about it carefully. Good words or bad words, choose every word you use carefully. Each syllable you utter now affects what you can say later. If those choices point you to language that might get you sent inside from recess, apply that word's context to each stakeholder group orbiting the issue at hand. Your legacy stakeholders are always important. In a crisis, the stakeholder universe expands. Part of your crisis management process needs to be identifying who else is now watching.

Apply these three filters when thinking about a dirty word:

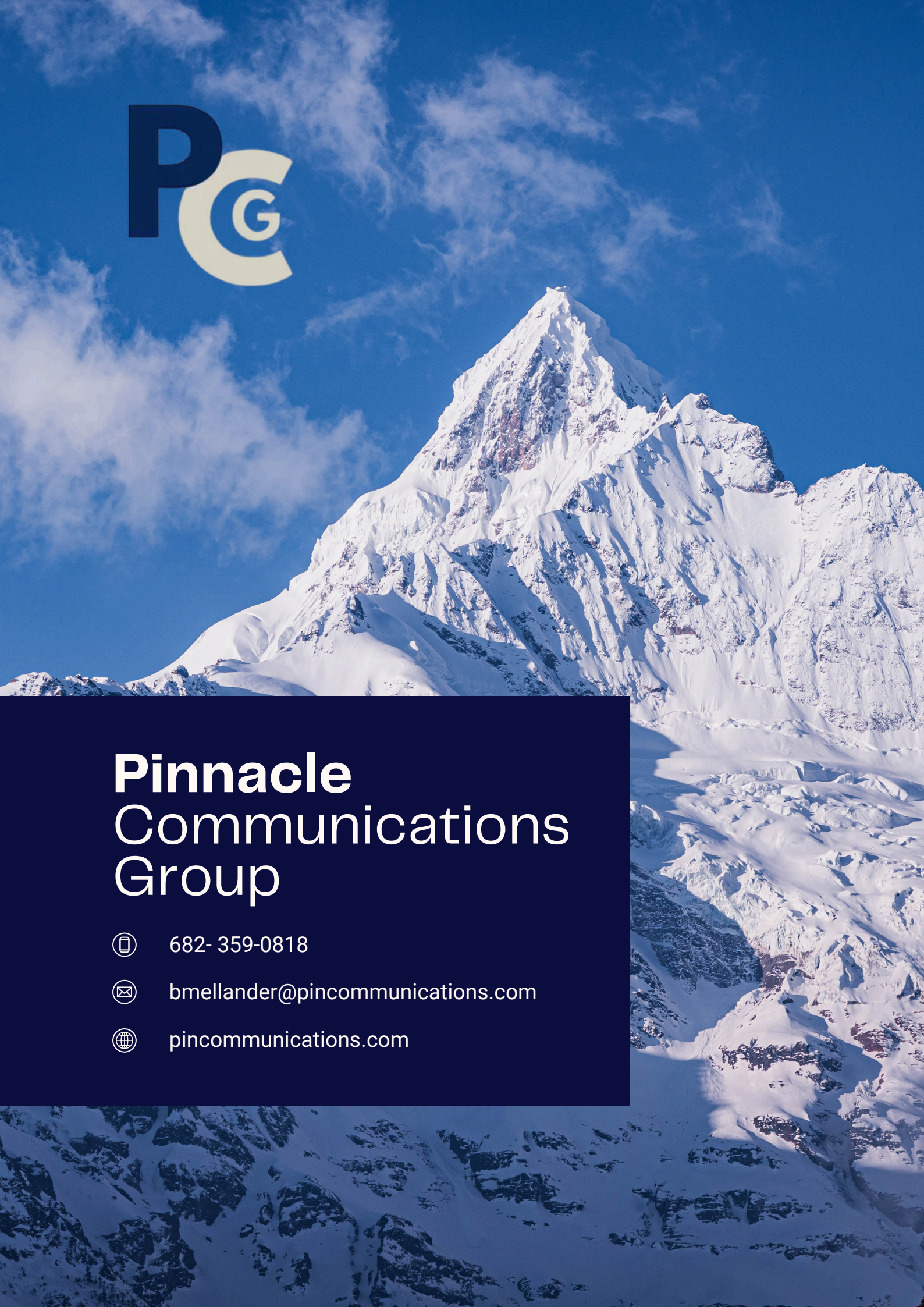
Connotation – what are the different meanings or interpretations, looking at race, gender, and ethnicity?

Callous – what are the tangential emotions connected to the word? Is it cruel, unfeeling, or cold-hearted?

Cliché – in what ways could this word dilute your message?

In recent years, words that were historically considered untouchable have become less taboo. Language evolves in unison with cultural norms. Irrespective of what your mom told you, a 2022 study published by the Cleveland Clinic found that vulgarity can actually correlate with higher verbal fluency and honesty, indicating a rich vocabulary and cognitive flexibility.

The bottom line is that there is no right or wrong answer. If you assess that something adds strategic value in your message, proceed cautiously. Avoid off-the-cuff emotion; it is always dangerous. In crisis management, you are never going to win the narrative on day one. But you can certainly lose it.



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