

NewsStand - What is Normal?

by Ed Newman

AMSOIL Director of Advertising

This article appeared in National Oil & Lube News, April 2012

Is "severe" really the new normal?

It's interesting to study the history and evolution of language. We seldom realize that many words once had very different meanings. For example, the word "awful" once meant something wonderful, delightful, amazing...full of awe. Today, a New York chef will not be too pleased when you tell him the main course was awful.

The word "manufacture" has also changed significantly. The Latin root from which this word is derived meant "to make by hand." In olden times to say a thing was manufactured meant that this product had been hand crafted by craftsmen. Now it means the opposite. A manufacturing plant today produces machine-made goods. Strange.

There are an abundance of examples of words with meanings that have altered over time. A balloon was once a game that people played with an inflated leather ball. Evidently the first hot air balloons in France must have reminded people of this ball, so they borrowed the existing word. The word "cute" had once been acute, meaning keenly perceptive and shrewd. Today we call babies cute and puppies cute, but I doubt that either of these are keenly perceptive in the manner of the original word.

The word propaganda is another word that has undergone change. It is actually a Latin word that was introduced in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV in response to the global rise of Protestantism. He formed an "Office for the Propagation of the Faith" to oversee Catholic mission efforts in the New World.

In 1928 Edward Bernays, in a book titled Propaganda, argued that propaganda was a good thing, a useful tool for the ruling elite because the masses needed to be moved. He wrote that the government and media should work together to create an appetite for the right goods, services, leaders. Its association with the Nazi war machine has turned it into a bad word, even though the practice continues to this day. We now call it "spin."

Businesses practice spin, too, often with the aim not of informing but manipulating the public. It is against this backdrop that I want to start a discussion regarding the words severe and normal.

nor•mal adjective

1. conforming to the standard or the common type; usual; not abnormal; regular; natural.
2. serving to establish a standard.

se•vere

adjective

1. harsh; unnecessarily extreme: severe criticism; severe laws.

Note: Definitions supplied by Dictionary.com

If Normal means the standard, why do we oil industry folks tell our customers that Severe is Normal? Severe means extreme. It means out of the ordinary. It is not typical, not normal. The very first definition of severe is "unnecessarily extreme."

In 1974 news correspondent Edwin Newman published his incisive *Strictly Speaking: Will America Be the Death of English?*, a critique of the decline and abuse of the English language. Newman is not an advocate for Standard English for its own sake, and he is not against the natural evolution of language. His biggest complaints are with politicians, members of the media, and those in academia who deliberately use language to sensationalize, obfuscate, and bewilder.

As I write this column, Northern Minnesota and Wisconsin are experiencing severe weather. The late winter storm is not only closing schools, it has also closed most businesses. When the weather forecasters say, "Brace yourself for severe weather," they mean unusually bad weather, the kind of weather that packs a wallop, the kind of weather we get only infrequently. Severe means exceptional, atypical, out of the ordinary.

So why, then, do we change the meaning of the word severe when we apply it to driving conditions? The way most oil companies present the definitions of severe and normal driving conditions, you'd think severe is the same as normal. In fact, one website I visited actually said this. "Most drivers operate under severe-service conditions... And another says, in capital letters as if to shout this truth home to us, "IN OTHER WORDS, "SEVERE" IS "NORMAL."

Does this kind of word wrangling really help motorists understand their real maintenance needs? Are we bringing clarity or confusion to the meanings of normal and severe? If the two are identical, why do car manufactures and OEMs create this differentiation in the first place?

We pretend we're being helpful by asking questions that don't really bring clarity to our customers' minds. "Do you drive in stop-and-go traffic?" The amount of stop-and-go traffic is not specified. When we ask motorists if they drive in extremely hot or cold temperatures, can you show me somewhere in North America, besides San Francisco, where the weather is never extremely hot or cold?

For me the bottom line should always be, "What's in the best interest of the customer?" Are motorists being helped by these altered definitions designed primarily to induce fear and keep them coming back for more oil changes and services? My recommendation is that we think these things through a little more and not just ruin the meanings of two more words in the English language.

Truth is, if we are really interested in protecting engines operating in severe conditions, we should recommend motor oils that have been designed to operate in severe situations. A brief review of the history of lubrication reveals that synthetics were engineered for helping military vehicles in severe weather and jet engines in extreme conditions. It's not the answer to everything, but for most a premium synthetic is the warranted solution.