

(How) Is Our Word of the Year Different from Last Year?

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If you look up the **definition** of our current year, you will find that it is a “common year” starting on Friday of the Gregorian calendar, the 2021st year of the Common Era (CE) and Anno Domini (AD) designations, and the 21st year of the 21st century. The United Nations declared 2021 as the International Year of Peace and Trust, Fruits and Vegetables, and Creative Economy for Sustainable Development. Most major world economic, entertainment and sporting events scheduled for 2020 that were postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic were hosted in a bumper 2021 sporting calendar. So, despite this year being called common, nothing about it was.

Yes, it certainly feels better than 2020—it was less uncertain and more hopeful. At the same time, there is still immeasurable change happening both in the world at large and also on a very personal level. Last year brought some big changes, this year every one of us has had to adapt in many, smaller ways. 2020 had been a challenging year, but we spent most of it waiting for—and expecting—the pandemic to be over. 2021 is the triumphant year where we realized we could still haul back our lives and freedoms. A year that forced us to continue to adjust, overcome and succeed. So how can we describe it all in one word?

Red Havas launched its inaugural **Word of the Year** in 2020, intrigued by how any one word or phrase could possibly be used to describe such an unconventional year. This fall, our agency once again asked some of our clients, colleagues, and friends: What one word or phrase would they use to define 2021? And they delivered—a wide range of words were put forward, coalesced around two major themes:

- Adaptability/adaptation/adaptive/adapt, including agility, adjust, evolving and transforming
- Resilience/resilient/flexibility/flexible, including endurance, bouncing back, relentless and overcoming

And our 2021 Word of the Year is: *Adapt*. To us, it doesn't sound as corporate jargony as the words *agility* and *resilience* have become. We also like that it's a verb, we like that it's simple and that we can extrapolate on the many ways people have been forced to adapt at work, at home, in social interactions and travel, in response to different virus variants, to highs and lows, to having "long COVID" or to a vaccine debate that won't go away anytime soon. The concept of adaptability and resilience naturally both fall within this sphere—very often, in explaining the reason for their selection, our respondents referenced resilience when discussing adaptability and vice versa. And for business, the phrase 'adapt or die' has never been more apt than in 2021 as business stopped waiting for change and made it happen themselves.

Overall, there was a wide range of themes and emotions among this year's submissions around how the times really are changing and so are we—demonstrated by key words like *journey*, *reinvention*, *restart* and *turning point*; how we are seeing our way through—thanks to our *endurance*, *relentlessness*, *pushing through* and *thrive*; how our emotions continue to run the gamut—from *devastated* through *hopeless* to *connected* and *hopeful*; as well as a few choice words for a new lexicon in a new era—like *delta*, *cancelled*, *hybrid* and *headspace*.

But this year, we were excited to see a huge shift from a passive and anxious climate to very active and enthusiastic responses. Most of these veered far from the well-heeled findings of major dictionaries around the world. **Perseverance**, selected by Cambridge Dictionary as its 2021 Word of the Year, was mentioned a handful of times, mostly in connection with our respondents' comments relating to adaptability and resilience. COVID-specific words such **vaccine** (Merriam-Webster's word), **vax** (the Oxford English Dictionary's), vaccinated, delta variant or other related, but more unique options like **strollout** (Australia National Dictionary Centre's choice to describe the slow vaccine rollout Down Under) had few or no mentions among our responses.

Our most original Word of the Year submission was probably *coronacoaster*, submitted by our friend Brandi Boatner, Digital and Advocacy Communications Manager at IBM. As Brandi explains, "This word applies to both my personal and professional life. Some days were good. Some days were bad. It was a constant rollercoaster of emotions. However, I am stronger, wiser and more focused thanks to my time on the wild ride that is the *coronacoaster*." Check out our **Word of the Year e-book** that features the word of their year and rationale from colleagues, brand communicators and marketers, and fellow word lovers from around the world. Or, listen to the final **Red Sky Fuel for Thought podcast** of 2021 for a discussion about our findings, featuring us in conversation with **Dino Delic**, director of insights & analytics at Meltwater.

As communicators, we can certainly relate. 2021 has been the year to think big and act small, to be bold and yet humble, to hurry up and wait. We had to adapt to new ways of reaching our targets and connecting with our clients at a much faster pace. We had to be agile, adjust to new trends, budgets and client needs, and be comfortable with our continuously changing circumstances, accepting curve ball after curve ball at work, at home, in our town, in our country, in politics, in our

relationships, in our families and even financially—while continuing to deliver.

Amidst our new normal of **remote work**, virtual learning and happy hours via Zoom and Teams, compromise would be a negative, adaptability feels like a positive. Many of us have shopped for bigger homes in the suburbs we never thought we'd want, let our kids have more screen time we'd ever thought we'd allow, and settled into having blurred lines between our personal and professional lives that we never thought we'd be comfortable with—and through it all, we find a way to thrive.

We are calling *adapt* our winner of 2021 because it has been an unsung linguistic hero so many times before, attesting to the indomitable human spirit that is made to adapt and which we have done over and over again throughout history. We should all give ourselves a round of applause as we became experts in how to adapt in every part of our lives. We can't wait to see how we adapt in 2022, and what new words and phrases we will bring forth in the next 12 months.

About the Authors:



James Wright: *One of the most recognized agency heads in the world, James is global chairman of the Havas PR Global Collective agencies and global CEO of Red Havas, a global micro-network of Merged Media agencies. Before moving to the U.S., James was formerly group CEO of the Havas-owned Red Agency Australia and responsible for Havas-owned PR agencies across the Asia-Pacific region between 2011-2018. He advised brands including AWS, Capgemini, Coca-Cola, Heineken, Mondelēz, Novartis, Toyota, Yahoo7 and the Australian government. He also served as chief commercial officer for Havas Group Australia/New Zealand, working across*

advertising, PR and media.

Under his leadership, the Red Agency transformed into a regional powerhouse of creativity and one of the most awarded agencies in the Asia-Pacific region, winning multiple Agency of the Year titles. In 2017, PR Asia named James Agency Head of the Year at its annual awards show, and PR Awards Asia named him Asia-Pacific PR Agency Head of the Year. That year, he was also the Australian PR juror for the Cannes Lions Festival, the second time he has performed the role, having previously done it in 2013. In 2008, at the age of just 28, he won the coveted PRCA's Consultant of the Year (U.K.) and the same year was named International CSR Leader by PR News USA at its All Stars Awards. In 2016, he was inducted as a Fellow of the Public Relations Institute of Australia, one of the youngest ever admitted.

James joined the Havas Group in 2011 from the U.K. Previously, he was managing director at international agency Grayling, where he led international accounts including BT, HSBC, Sony, Jaguar and Land Rover.



Linda Descano: *Linda is an executive vice president of Red Havas in New York. Linda specializes in providing strategic counsel on corporate communications, executive visibility, issues and crisis management, and Merged Media communications strategies to global corporations and organizations. Prior to joining Red Havas in 2015, Linda was managing director and global head of content marketing and social media at Citi; other roles during her tenure at Citi included president and CEO of Women & Co., the award-winning financial lifestyle community for women, and director and portfolio manager of the Citi Social Awareness Investment program. A PR News PR Professional of the Year and one of*

Campaign U.S. Digital's 40 over 40 honorees, Linda brings a unique blend of storytelling experience and investment acumen, complemented by work in B2B, B2C and B2B2C, giving her an uncanny ability to help clients create authentic conversations and campaigns.