

Good Corporate Writing: Why It Matters, and What to Do

Poor corporate writing—in press releases, ads, brochures, web sites and more—is costing companies credibility and revenues.

Here's how to put the focus back on clear communication

by Natalie Canavor and Claire Meirowitz



Can good writing be tied to the corporate bottom line?

We conducted a totally unscientific survey, tapping IABC colleagues, WorldWIT (Women in Technology) and other networks for insights into the state of corporate writing and its impact on organizational health.

We got an earful of anecdotal evidence that revealed that 1) quality writing on the corporate scene is in bad shape; 2) it matters—a lot; and 3) there are ways to counteract the downward slide, but the reasons for it are profound, and the fix won't be a quick one.

We acknowledge at the outset that we began our survey without any claim to objectivity. As professionals whose entire careers have been invested in the crafts of business writing and editing, our feelings about what we see in all media—from newspapers to organizational newsletters to government forms to web sites—hover too often between dismay and horror.

We can't help wondering what readers think when they read, "The network must seamlessly accommodate these immerging usage patterns," or, in a food catalog, "Your taste buds will experience an exciting bust of flavor."

Typos are inevitable, you may say, and people forgive such carelessness. But consider a few recent examples of convoluted writing from our cringe collection.

From a global company's advertorial: "Given the limitations on current storage management technology imposed by heterogeneous storage infrastructure, achieving nominal capacity allocation and utilization efficiency is

nothing short of a black art.”

Or this, from a web site that, as far as we can figure out, promotes services that test the user-friendliness of web sites: “Design happens at the intersection of the user, the interface, and their context. It’s essential for interface designers to understand the gamut of contexts that can occur, thereby ensuring they create designs that are usable no matter what’s happening around the user.”

So here’s the question: What does writing like this cost companies in terms of credibility, image and sales? What’s the result when audiences cannot understand what we’re saying, or simply don’t read it? How do we measure the dollar loss of

failing to explain our products, messages and values?

The ponderous and the pretentious

“You’ve just got to wonder if so much corporate writing is really written to be understood,” comments Don Ranly, who has been teaching journalism at the University of Missouri for 31 years and who has led close to 1,000 writing seminars in corporate settings. “You’ve got to know so much of it is ponderous and pretentious and trying so hard to be obtuse that it’s just the opposite of simple, clear, concise language that says what it’s trying to say.”

Obtuse writing is more inappropriate than ever in the wake of globalization. Whatever the

language, there’s a critical need for clear, jargon-free writing that can be readily understood by non-native readers, and that can easily be translated.

During the course of our research, we learned of two defense contractors whose communications produced very different results. One, which will not be named, was competing for major contracts against several other companies and, having brilliant engineers, was confident of winning them. But that didn’t happen. Why? Poor proposals. “They had no clear direction, they were too complex, they were not well organized, [and] the sections didn’t connect or flow,” explains Mel Haber, whose company, Writing

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Skill-building strategies

If you think your company’s communication skills could use improvement, there are steps you can take.

■ **It’s like psychotherapists say: First you’ve got to acknowledge that you have a problem**—in your department and/or your company overall. You also have to decide that good writing is worth the battle. If your communication unit is turning out sterling, appropriate prose, good for you. But according to Diane Turnbull’s recent article on communication in *Lab Medicine*, “business consultants and counselors vouch that communication is the No. 1 problem in the workplace.”

■ **Centralize the review of important written materials**, and make writing supervision an important job. Vica Vinogradova was hired by DataArt Inc., a New York software outsourcing firm with a development center in Russia, to be the vice president of corporate communication. Part of the reason Vinogradova was hired was that DataArt had signed some important clients, and a typo on an invitation to a corporate party was no longer an option. DataArt has just 165 employees, but a company with thousands of employees could implement this approach

on a department-by-department basis.

■ **Training, training, training.** In the old days, many corporate communicators had honed their skills early on as journalists. Today, those without that experience—whether they are professional communicators or employees in other departments who find themselves writing for internal or external audiences—can benefit from intensive training. A set of outside workshops or an internal course by a good writing instructor can be productive.

■ **Give employees tools to use.** A reference book or style guide can solve a lot of problems, but few companies use them. You can urge adoption of an existing one (see list on page 32) or, better yet, create your own, dictating how things should be done. Yes, it’s time-consuming, and it needs to be done collaboratively. Also consider furnishing templates for lower-level employees to draw on for writing letters and other day-to-day communication.

■ **Gain support by connecting writing to core goals.** Demonstrate how strong writing can help achieve sales, efficient staff interaction, successful proposals or whatever other objective is important. Have the courage to build tracking into your own materials. Success

breeds support. Demonstrate return on investment, response rate, reader interest or better understanding of benefits or policies, and you’re likely to enlist management in the cause—and get bigger budgets.

■ **Show them business publications** such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Financial Times* or the *Asia Times*. “We never write for the [target] audience—we write for those who approve our copy,” observes journalism professor Don Ranly. “And those people think they’re better communicators than those they hired to do the job.” Gaining trust from higher-ups is critical, he points out. “Once they trust you, they will let you write the message the way you want to.”

Specifically, he says, write the way *The Wall Street Journal* does—“interesting, bright, full of anecdotes and examples, paced, varied”—and use it to make the case with executives. “These people generally think of the *Journal* as their Bible and read it religiously,” Ranly says. “It tests out at the eighth-grade level! So many people feel they should be writing on a graduate or college level when there is no reason to do that whatsoever.”

—N.C. & C.M