

## **Communications Shape How Your Business Is Perceived**

*Question:* Which of your employees influence how the world sees your company?

*Answer:* Every employee who writes a letter, prepares a proposal, or sends an email.

Emory University's Vice President for Marketing, Ellen Dracos Lemming, introduced this concept – one that she mastered while in the corporate world – to the academic community by saying, “Every telephone call, every lecture, every letter, every discovery, every sports event, every press release . . . must create a positive experience every time for everyone who interacts with us.” (“Defining the Emory brand experience,” August 2005)

### **Poor Writing is Pervasive**

Does corporate America recognize this truth – and its implications? A 2005 survey conducted by the International Association of Business Communicators delivered these sobering findings about the state of written communications in America:

- “Quality writing on the corporate scene is in bad shape
- It matters – a lot; and
- There are ways to counteract the downward slide, although . . . the fix won't be a quick one.”

*The Winchester Star* offered this: “In an era of nonstop e-mail and instant and text messaging, written communication skills within companies may be getting even worse as quality is compromised by the perceived need for speed.” (“Clarity and corporatespeak,” December 6, 2006)

How big a problem is poor writing? A study by the National Commission on Writing (September 2004) reported that “Two-thirds of salaried employees in large companies have some writing responsibility . . . however, people are coming to work unable to write.”

### **Solution? Communications Training**

It's no surprise, then, that forty percent of the companies responding to the Writing Commission's survey admitted that “they find it necessary to invest in training employees to write – to the tune of an estimated \$3 billion-plus annually.”

So how should you go about developing effective training? And are we talking primarily about fixing poor grammar or typos? While those are issues, the bigger

concern is that employees fail to understand how writing that is unclear or sloppy or rude costs the company money. If I, as a customer, am treated carelessly, or if I get information that is inaccurate, I lose trust in the company. What follows? I think about finding a different provider for the products or services I buy.

How can your company wrestle with this pervasive problem? We recommend a three-pronged approach.

### **Style Guide, Group Classes, Private Instruction**

First, develop a customized style guide for your organization. Include not only the quick fix kinds of tips (e.g., website vs. web site), but the bigger picture, strategic information. What is your company's mission? What is your philosophy about customer service? How should this be reflected in how you respond to inquiries? Include samples of good letters, solid proposals.

Second, offer group instruction in written communications. Start with a needs assessment. Find out what kinds of writing are required for different groups. Reports? Memos? Letters? Get samples from the participants to determine how varied the levels of proficiency are. Limit class size to 12 or 15. In class, focus on "live" pieces of writing, i.e., reports or letters the employees have already written.

Third, with executives, you often need a different approach. To teach them how to produce effective reports, memoranda, or letters, consider one-on-one instruction in confidential, intensive sessions. Does it matter if CEOs understand how to communicate well? Absolutely. Their messages are the very stuff that can either build goodwill, commitment, and team spirit – or erode those forces.

For more about this important subject, go to [www.zimm.com](http://www.zimm.com), choose Other Stuff, and read the October 2006 *GrayMatterz*: "Electronic Words – Yes, They Really Do Matter" and the published article "Write to the Bottom Line: How to Make Your Company's Communications More Powerful."

*Article was published in the Shenandoah Valley Business Journal (March 2007). Ellen Zimmerman has offered successful private and group communications instruction programs to corporations.*