

## **Write to the Bottom Line: How to Make Your Company's Communications More Powerful**

When does it start, this fear of writing that plagues so many of us? In my many years as a professional communicator, I've watched countless people wince at the thought of committing their thoughts to paper. And while I'm glad to lend a hand, I believe that businesses that take an active role in upgrading their employees' writing skills will, at the same time, improve such important areas as teamwork, attitude, and productivity.

### **Impact of writing on the bottom line**

Good communication has direct impact on your company's bottom line. Effective word choice increases motivation, sales, and success. Communication departments know this. Marketing departments know this. And researchers are confirming this. According to a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, a study by two University of Michigan researchers revealed that well-chosen words in company documents create a positive perception of employers by their employees.

This is no surprise. What's troubling is that so many employees are simply unable to write better.

### **Teaching writing in a company setting**

While there's no quick fix, training is an essential component of any solution. Training within a corporate setting, though, should not just be a review of grammar or punctuation or, heaven forbid, diagramming sentences. It should lead to new ways to view the power of communication. Here are some ideas about how to structure group and individual instruction for maximum benefit.

First, the trainer should demonstrate that morale, loyalty, and productivity are directly linked to the written word. When participants are sensitized to language, they will *hear* how what they write sounds to the reader. The following questions and answers can start discussions that extend well beyond organized classes.

### **Examining your company's communications**

**Q. Do your business letters get right to the point? Or does the reader have to wade through several lines – even paragraphs – to find out why you're writing?**

A. To understand the reader's perspective, remember how you feel when you answer the phone on a busy day and a salesperson you've never met greets you with a cheerful "How are you today?" The truth is that we're all too busy for introductory banter – in letters or in phone calls. In your company's written materials, make your point right up front. That way, readers can absorb the rest of your information, confident of where you're headed.

**Q. Do the articles in your company newsletter meet the WIFM requirement? That is, do the articles let the readers know “What’s in it for me? Why should I read this? What impact does it have on me? Why should I care?”**

A. A story can motivate, persuade, inform – or just fill space. Since we are inundated daily with paperwork, be sure to choose articles that demonstrate a connection to your readers’ work and personal lives.

**Q. When you announce policies and regulations, do you use a benefits-oriented tone?**

A. Think about how you respond to rules in your personal life. For instance, have you ever joined a health club and paid your money, only to be handed a list of don’ts? “No drinks in the exercise room.” “No children allowed in the aerobics classes.” “Penalties for late payments.”

Nobody likes to be ordered around. And most rules exist for reasons of safety, fairness, or company growth. So let your employees know how policies will benefit them. If you require employees to sign up for on-site training, for instance, let them know that this training will help them do their jobs better or more safely or quality more quickly for a promotion.

If the policies will be unpopular, acknowledge the difficulties – and be sincere.

### **Organizing communications classes**

If structured classes are not in the cards for your company, even talking about these concepts is a good starting point for change. If you plan to organize communication instruction, though, these hints will help make it successful.

- Begin with a needs assessment. Find out what kinds of writing are required for different groups. Reports? Memos? Letters? Then get samples from the participants to determine how varied the levels of proficiency are. Usually, people need information about how to focus better, how to organize more clearly, and how to address different audiences.
- Divide participants by ability and by rank in the company. Since good class interaction increases success, create groups of individuals who will mix. Limit class size to 12 or 15.
- Focus immediately on “live” pieces of writing, i.e., reports or letters they have already written. Just eliminate incriminating names or sensitive information, reproduce, and distribute.

- Arrange for the instructor to meet with each participant privately for a short session. That way, in a non-threatening atmosphere, everyone can get advice tailored to his or her needs.

### **Breaking the ice**

Group instruction offers lots of benefits, including providing impetus for participants to rely on each other as future resources. There are a few caveats in dealing with group instruction, though. First, most of us are very sensitive about what we write. We take our words seriously. We wear them close to our hearts. We don't like anybody messing with them. And often, we think that if you don't like the way we write something, you don't like us.

I first learned this many years ago when I began teaching English composition to college freshmen. Although I had also taught French to rather happy-go-lucky classes of juniors and seniors, I discovered quickly that composition students were a different breed; as they turned in assignments, they put up a wall. If I critiqued their writing, wasn't I really criticizing them? In a corporate meeting, the potential for this kind of defensiveness exists, so choose an instructor who has great familiarity with writing for a company.

To defuse this defensiveness, a good instructor avoids labeling things as right or wrong. Instead, the emphasis should be on choosing the right words to create the desired impressions. In an atmosphere like this, all participants feel safe in offering their interpretations.

### **Meeting the executive need**

Aside from the potential for defensiveness, group instruction has another weakness that is less easily overcome. Often, executives in positions of great influence hate to write. Or they simply don't know how to produce effective reports, memoranda, or letters. And sometimes, they don't understand how words can build goodwill, commitment, and team spirit. Yet their handicaps cast a shadow over the entire company, because their written documents create lasting impressions about their firm's strengths, attitudes, and opinions.

Here's the dilemma: High-level executives don't want to bare their souls in front of peers, but they need help. In fact, they often want it desperately. In these cases, one-on-one instruction is an excellent solution. Confidential, intensive sessions can target real documents, pressing needs, immediate situations. And if lack of privacy is a problem, these sessions can be held off-site, away from uninvited eyes and competing responsibilities.

To maximize the time investment, executives can establish a relationship with a communications professional who will give virtually instant feedback on documents as they create them, thanks to email technology. In writing, as in any skill you're refining, you benefit most from having help at the moment you're working on it.

As a society, we'll know that we've made vast improvements in communications skills when people are as quick to volunteer to write the company newsletter as they are to plan the December holiday bash.

*Article published both in the international magazine, IABC Communication World, and in the Prentice Hall textbook, Successful Communication For Business and Management. Ellen Zimmerman offers private and group communications classes to business.*