

The Path to Clear Copywriting

As marketers, we pride ourselves on being great communicators. So how can we ensure our written communications don't let us down? Ella Tassi of LUCID Marketing Communications provides some guidelines.

Ever counted the number of business communication pieces you receive in a day? Of course not. You're too busy trying to keep up with all those emails, memos, letters, SMS messages and faxes... Let alone the phone calls (mobile and landline), meetings and various interruptions at your desk. And, occasionally, you even try to get some real work done.

Anyone who survives the daily grind in Corporate Land is privy to the avalanche of daily business communication. With so much communication competing for our attention, it's a wonder we retain any information at all.

While we no longer have the time to carefully draft, edit and proofread every letter, email or memo we dispatch, it's important to construct sound, lucid and easy-to-read correspondence that enhances, not undermines our professional reputation.

Here are some handy hints to help sharpen your writing skills and ensure you get your point across.

1. Send the sort of communications you want to receive – succinct and to the point. This is especially important in email correspondence, where recipients are notorious for skim reading.
2. If your message is unavoidably complex and therefore long, use sub-headings, bolded key words and bullet points to break the flow and help you group related issues.
3. Use short sentences and paragraphs. Stream of consciousness writing where you dump everything as it comes to you is fine for a first draft, but inexcusable for a final cut.
4. If you have a serious objection, concern or an innovative idea, don't rely on promoting it verbally. Put together a brief email saying: "To summarise our discussion this afternoon, my recommendation/concern is..." and keep it on file.
5. Never fire an email in anger. We've all, on occasion, received an email that sets our blood boiling. Punching out a cutting response is a great way to vent, but sending it could be career suicide. After you've written your emotional response, save it as a draft for an hour and revise it before you send it. Better still, have a colleague read it and provide an objective review. An angry response will not only be badly phrased, it could include comments you'll later regret. Always remember you never quite know to whom your emails will be forwarded, so choose your words carefully.
6. Only use abbreviations if you are certain your reader is familiar with them. To ensure this is the case, write it in full the first time you use it (e.g. *Our Rural Sales Team (RST) has been...*)
7. The same rule applies for jargon. Be particularly vigilant when communicating with colleagues externally. Many organisations create their own jargon, often forgetting the rest of the world doesn't share their vocabulary.
8. Avoid clichés - they make even the cleverest idea seem tired.
9. The tone of your communication piece should suit the medium and audience. An email to a team member will, for example, vastly differ from a letter to an irate elderly client.
10. Be consistent. If using the word *analyse* (the English spelling) then don't use *organize* (the American version).

11. Think of punctuation as a means of controlling the rhythm and pace of your message. A comma – a brief pause. A full stop and a new paragraph – a deep breath before you launch into your next point.
12. To avoid losing key points of your argument, refrain from using long-winded sentences.
 1. Use exclamation marks with caution. The odd sprinkling is a great way to draw attention to an especially pertinent point, but overuse makes you seem slightly hysterical. In fact, exclamation marks rarely have a place in formal communications.
 2. Use non-sexist language. The feminine suffixes of “ette” (eg. *usherette*) and “ess” (eg. *hostess*) are outdated. To avoid the clumsy use of “his/hers” (*each staff member will receive his/her...*) use “their” (*each staff member will receive their...*).
 3. Apostrophes are used to signify possession (*Melbourne's weather*) and a missing letter or number (*don't, won't, can't*). Common errors are words such as *90's* (incorrect – as this denotes possession. It should be the *'90s*) and plurals of abbreviations (eg. *ATM's* is incorrect, it should be *ATMs*).
 4. Quotation marks (or inverted commas) denote phrases that are spoken by a particular person, or are a borrowed phrase. For example: *Jacob said, “You must be joking!”* Note the punctuation remains within the quotation mark where it is attributed to the quote.
 5. Capital letters should only be used at the beginning of sentences or if the word is a proper noun. For example, names of individuals, companies, countries, cities, etc., all begin with a capital letter. In terms of using capital letters in titles, it is only appropriate if it is an official title (*Frank Smith, Chief Financial Officer, is an accountant*).
 6. Writing words with each letter in upper case (*WARNING!*) can be used to draw attention to specific words, where appropriate (such as in a heading). However, bear in mind that a series of capital letters is more difficult to read than lower case. In addition, over use can seem like you are shouting your message at the reader.
 7. As a general rule, numbers included in text should be written in words if below 10 (*one to nine*) and as numerals if above (*10, 11, 12...*). The same rule applied for the words *first to ninth* and *10th* and above. This rule is broken, however, if your document is of a financial nature and includes numerous numbers, percentages and tables. In addition, if the sentence begins with a number, always spell it out (*Ten years ago...*).
 8. Don't be intimidated by writing. Get your message down on paper then tweak and refine it until the key proposition virtually leaps off the page.