

Bad Writing Inc.

BY JOEL SAMBERG

Good writing is dead.

Well, not really, but with a considerable number of emails, press releases and other forms of corporate communications showing signs of carelessness and indifference, it's not exactly the picture of health.

There is plenty of accomplished writing coming out of Fairfield County businesses, some generated in-house, some provided by highly skilled marketing-communications agencies. But too often it is the sloppy, nominal work that stands out.

Is good writing being devalued in corporate America?

The promotional merit of good, effective writing should never be underestimated. Too many executives and managers apparently fail to recognize that whatever is written on behalf of their products, services and projects – including hiring efforts and networking ventures – can end up as archival material that represents their companies for years to come.

That includes websites, brochures, e-newsletters, advertorials, even letters and memos. In today's cyber world, anything can show up anywhere and last forever.

Rambling, boring, ostentatious, cliché-ridden or grammatically challenged writing can easily come back to haunt businesses and organizations. Good writing from the start pays off. Unfortunately, fewer people seem willing to take the time.

Email is perhaps the biggest culprit, from subject lines to body copy. How often have you received an email that has absolutely nothing to do with what the subject line indicates? It might say "Kittens & Puppies," for example, and because of that you may decide to wait until morning to open it. But it could in fact be from your biggest client asking to meet him in the morning for an important discussion. He simply hit "respond" on your last email – the one in which you presented a promotional idea tying in to a local pet shelter – and wrote a new email without bothering to change the subject line.

I received a corporate email the other day for which the subject line read "Re," fol-

lowed by body copy that said, "Tomorrow is fine my bad for not getting back to you sooner."

Email is fast and easy – maybe too fast and easy. It empowers us, making us feel as if we're dynamic skippers on the information superhighway, with no need for self-evaluation, and certainly none for criticism.

Many companies rely on their own employees to provide content for business communications, including websites. Often it's a budgetary decision: why hire a communications firm or reputable freelancer when writing is a fundamental skill we've all learned in school? I believe that's one of the reasons professional writing is not always seen as a valuable corporate commodity. Yes, we can all write. We can all add, subtract, multiply and divide, too – but would you use just any employee to run your accounting department?

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Here's an actual line from a website I recently stumbled upon: "The owners of the company have made a commitment to continue to provide the excellent service and expertise which has led to the success of these firms through the years."

The owners may have a commitment to service, but evidently not to syntax or spelling.

Thousands of press releases are generated every day. When deciding which ones to save and which to discard, editors won't be charitable to the ones that are weak and unconvincing. Here's an actual

selection from a release issued by a non-profit organization: "On March 4th, three planes loaded with thousands of pounds of emergency resources and supplies delivered much-needed goods to the local orphanage. 'When we approached the orphanage to see what we could do to help them, we were simply doing what all of us do every day,' the organization's president said."

Does the president's comment do anything to set him and his organization apart?

I took the liberty of pulling together a few simple suggestions for my fellow corporate communicators that may help put an emphasis back on good, effective writing, particularly for the in-house crowd for whom corporate communications may not be a primary job description.

- **Reread everything** several times before deeming it final – at least once for the sole purpose of eliminating as many words and phrases as possible.

- **Avoid clichés** like a pandemic.
- **Simple words** and phrases are always better than those that try to impress.
- **Know your audience.** Realize they're not stupid, but are as stressed and cautious as you and will find it easy to dismiss what they read if it doesn't grab them right away.
- **Get a second pair of eyes** to read all material (and a third when possible) – preferably someone who isn't already familiar with the topic. Beg for their honest opinion. Listen to them.

Help might actually be just a water cooler away; most companies have people on staff with a proven facility for writing and editing who can provide that valuable fresh pair of eyes. They may appreciate being asked to help because they, too, want to keep good writing alive (if and how you compensate them for the extra work is another matter).

So go ahead and send out an internal email to find the right person. But be careful: don't put 'Fresh Pair' in the subject line.

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