

Can you afford Weak Writing?

By Susan McConnell

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Recently I received an email from a key customer service manager at a major health insurance organization in response to a few questions about my policy. I read it several times over and still couldn't figure out what the heck the woman was saying. Poor punctuation, misspellings, incomplete and/or run-on sentences and many more problems completely obscured whatever points she'd intended.

In addition to demonstrating a complete failure to communicate, this woman had seriously compromised the integrity of her employer. All I could think was, *they hire people like this? And I'm paying them big bucks for less and less coverage?*

Unfortunately, I've seen this woman's mistakes in countless "professional" communications from others — but fortunately, not all at once.

Good writing matters!

It matters in your emails, on your web site, in your print collateral and *any other piece of written communication from your business and everyone in it*. Your expertise, credibility, professionalism and profitability — all are at stake.

Communicating clearly and correctly in writing can be the difference between a sale and a sale lost. If you and your competitor are equal in all other regards — offer, pricing, availability, etc. — but your messages are clearly more professional, you've got a leg up.

If your or your employees' writing skills are sub-par, you owe it to yourself and your business to improve them. For the worst offenders, especially those who interact regularly with the public or your client base, consider a remedial class at a nearby community college or adult education program. Better yet, hire a writing coach. (I know a good one!)

For the rest of you, here are five basic tips to ensure your writing works for you rather than against you:

1. **Keep an arsenal of resources at hand**, either bookmarked on your computer or hard copies within arms-reach. Basics include a dictionary, thesaurus and all-around resource such as Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*. There are scores of "good business writing" manuals available in book stores. Find those that are relevant to you and use them!

2. **Don't rely on spell-check programs.** They won't reliably catch that you meant to say "two" instead of "to" or "their" instead of "there."

3. **Read what you've written aloud.** You'll be amazed at what's missing, misspelled, sounds awkward, etc. The very best writers and editors not only read aloud, they read backwards, upside down, and more.

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4. Have someone else read and critique what you've written. On sensitive topics, this is crucial. In longer documents that have been in production for a while, your own familiarity will develop numerous blind spots. Someone else can spot the flaws you don't see.

5. Whenever possible, put the writing away for a while. Come back to it with fresh perspective. While the conveniences of email, text messaging, and chatting have clearly increased the speed of business, they've also increased the incidence of major snafus. How many "oops" can you afford to make?

Want to take your writing skills to a higher level? Susan McConnell offers one-on-one and group coaching for various kinds of writing skills. She also consults on marketing communications strategies, message development and more. Learn more at www.mcconnellcommunications.com.

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