

A WORD WITH YOUR CUSTOMERS

by Peter Bartram

A famous chain store puts up notices on some checkout aisles: “10 items or less”.

A food company labels its organic mushrooms: “cultivated on substrate from extensive agriculture which is permitted in organic farming during a transitional period”.

A conference promoter calls its latest event: “Optimising Knowledge Sharing and Maximising Intranet ROI Through Winning Content Management Strategies.”

Welcome to the world of customer communication in the twenty-first century, where language is more likely to baffle than enlighten.

Words are the raw material of any customer communication. Yet, when it comes to writing them, too many companies fail to get them right. Reports, letters, brochures, packaging, product instructions, – a whole range of different printed matter, in fact – turn up either littered with grammar and punctuation mistakes or written in such an impenetrable style they could have been drafted on the Planet Zog.

And let’s not forget the Internet. Cyberspace has generated its own breed of cyberbabble, language so thickly encrusted with techno-jargon it’s only comprehensible to nerds.

Consider the three examples that started this article. “10 items or less”. Should be “10 items or fewer”. Simple rule: use “fewer” when the subject can

be counted (as with grocery items), less when its an indivisible quantity (as with water).

Mushrooms: what the food producer is trying to say is that its mushrooms are grown in mixed compost that is allowed during a switch to full organic production. So why not make that clear?

The conference: what the organiser wants to get across is that the event is all about how to make more money by using information better. But, perhaps, that doesn't sound quite so important as a parade of capitalised multi-syllabic words. Or perhaps it does.

Should senior managers in companies which care about their customers really worry about these issues? I think they should for two reasons.

First, large (and, for that matter, small) companies are increasingly concerned about their corporate reputation. They believe there is kudos (not to mention profit) in behaving ethically. Communicating badly with customers is not the mark of an ethical company.

But, secondly, the task of raising writing skills in any large organisation is not going to be easy. If various studies are to be believed, literacy standards among the working population are depressingly low - and falling. Nearly half the UK workforce – 12 million people – struggle with reading and writing skills no better than those expected of a child leaving primary school, according to a 2006 report by the House of Commons' Public Accounts Committee.

Edward Leigh MP, the PAC's chairman, summed up the problems this causes: "The low level of literacy and numeracy in the adult population is bad for national productivity and bad for those individuals who may struggle to cope with work and daily living."

Sadly, there doesn't seem much prospect of any swift improvement.

Another report, published by Cambridge Assessment, part of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (also in 2006), contained depressing findings.

It revealed that the number of spelling mistakes in the GCSE papers of pupils gaining A to E grades had more than doubled between 1980 and 2004. In all, one in 50 of the words in the average examination script were spelt wrongly. Errors included "unnaturally" for "unnaturally", "inevitably" for "inevitably" and "shear" for "sheer".

So what's to be done?

For a start, senior executives should acknowledge that writing standards are a customer management issue. Then they need to do two things. The first is to put in place some kind of quality control process so that customer communications – whether they're a brochure or a simple reply to a customer complaint – are subject to review before they're issued.

If that's the case, they could avoid grammatical howlers such as the following prime piece of sloppy writing from a standard letter currently used by the UK Passport Service. (Let's not forget that public bodies also like to think they have customers, too.)

"Your photographs did not meet standard No 14 & 15 as your eyes are not clearly visible due to the reflection from your glasses, the best way to resolve this is to remove your glasses for your next photos, sorry about the inconvenience caused., please send us two further photographs that meet all of the above standards."

This is a paragraph written by somebody who is plainly a stranger to the concept of the sentence. All of the commas should be full stops with new sentences (beginning with a capital letter) after each stop. The writer seems to have suffered a bout of panic towards the end by including both a comma and full stop after the word “caused”. The full stop would be correct and the following “please” should have a capital “P”.

If we’re going to be picky – and I’m afraid that good writing is often about being picky – the word “standard” should be plural as should “No” for numbers, as two numbers are given. If we’re going to be really picky “due to” should be “owing to”, which is a point for the grammatical purists. But let’s not go down that avenue now – writing clear English ought to be enough to satisfy us. And if the UK Passport Service bothered as much about its written output as it did about its customers’ photographs, an illiterate letter, such as this, would never even reach the mail room.

But quality control of written work is rather like a literary equivalent of sweeping up after the elephants. It’s designed to clear up the mess writers have made of their work. Far better to have fewer (not less!) mistakes in the first place.

Which brings us to the second key issue that executives should attend to – raising writing standards in their organisations. Large companies spend small fortunes on staff training. A fair portion of that budget goes on training staff to handle customers better. In most cases, very little goes on training staff to write better.

But here we enter difficult territory. Tell somebody they need training with a computer and they’ll grasp you warmly by the hand. Tell them they need help

with writing and they'll grasp you warmly by the throat. Most people don't like being told that their writing skills are not up to scratch.

Executives could best tackle this by creating an environment in which members of staff are able to seek help in their own ways. Some might prefer to work on their writing by themselves. Others could prefer to attend a course or study privately, but away from the workplace where they won't be shown up in front of colleagues. Flexibility is the key to raising workplace writing standards.

But, as with so much in corporate life, nothing is likely to happen without leadership. Executives must show by example that they are committed to plain English by using it themselves. Too many don't.

This, for example, was the rallying cry of one chief executive of a technology company to his troops: "I believe that a cross-pollination of creative properties in multiple media formats with a vertical market approach allows companies to maximise the return for their investment in creative properties and talents and will prove to be the economic engine for our industry in the future."

Doesn't exactly stir the blood, does it? Worse still, it doesn't communicate any clear meaning. Lesson: good writing needs to start at the top.

We live in an age of sophisticated and discriminating consumers. They are likely to become more so. Customers judge companies by the quality of all the exchanges they have. When the quality of those written exchanges is poor, customers apply the appropriate black marks. Those companies that pay attention to writing quality should find they've carved themselves another slice of competitive advantage.

* Peter Bartram is the author of *How to Write Well at Work: simple steps to get you writing with fluency and confidence* published by New Venture Publishing. You can read the first chapter free online at www.writewellatwork.co.uk

Boxout

WHAT NOT TO DO WHEN SOMETHING GOES WRONG

When a gas company suffered a computer error, it sent direct debit customers inaccurate quarterly statements. The error doubled the opening balance on the statements of those customers who were in credit. The circular letter, (reproduced below with the company's name changed), added to the confusion. The second letter shows how the company could have clarified the error.

Dear Customer

Please find enclosed copy of the quarterly statement you will have recently received from Wonder Gas Limited. Unfortunately, due to a previously unnoticed system error this statement is incorrect.

The opening balance should reflect the closing balance on your previous statement dated 31/12/02 but due to the aforementioned system error this is not the case. The opening balance is exactly double what it should be as you will be able to confirm by referring to your December statement.

For example

Closing balance on 31/12/02 statement £150

Opening balance on 31/3/03 statement £300

Obviously, the closing balance on the December statement should then be the opening balance of the March statement but as you can see, the figure has been doubled. And, because the opening balance is incorrect it also makes your closing balance incorrect by the amount of the duplication, in the above case by £150.

To summarise, your balance on the enclosed statement is wrong by the exact difference between your December statement closing balance and March statement opening balance.

Please accept our sincere apologies for any confusion and inconvenience caused. Rest assured Wonder Gas Limited are doing everything possible to ensure this situation does not occur again in the future.

And this is how it could have been written:

Dear Customer,

We recently sent you a quarterly gas statement, a copy of which we've enclosed. Unfortunately, the amount shown as the opening balance on this statement is exactly double what it should be. As a result, the closing balance on this statement is also too large.

This happened because we made a mistake in setting up our computer. The computer took the closing balance on your previous statement (ending December 31) and wrongly doubled the amount when it was credited as the opening balance on this statement (beginning January 1).

You can work out how much you have been wrongly credited by doing this simple sum:

Opening balance (Jan 1) – Closing balance (Dec 31) = Wrong amount

If you are uncertain about how much you have been wrongly credited with, please telephone our customer helpline on 0870 000 000. We are very sorry for the inconvenience this has caused you and we are taking steps to make sure that it doesn't happen again.

But don't be too sure about it!