

On the Value and Necessity of Writers

A company will never outgrow the need for writers. Writers engage in the art of communication. They use words to inspire, inform, and persuade in the best, clearest, and most engaging manner. A company can no more do without writers any more than a baseball coach can get rid of all players who aren't utility infielders. Although the utility infielders, players who can play numerous positions, are valuable assets to any team, where would the team be without its specialists: home run hitters, outfielders, and pitchers?

Writers know words and how to put them together in the clearest way. That is their job. Despite other employees who are able to do the same thing adequately, because a writer specializes in words and communications, she has the training and expertise to do it in the best possible way. The reason Clint Eastwood makes successful movies is because that is his job. He has the experience and training to do it. In fact, when faced with studio criticisms of his work, he once remarked to a screenwriter, "If they're so interested in the opinion of a grocery-store clerk in Reseda, let them hire him to make the movie." He makes movies well because he knows how to make movies. Others might be able to do it but not nearly as well. Clint Eastwood makes movies; writers write.

Business owners have to ask themselves if they want to be a mediocre company or a great company. Do they want a reputation of just being pretty good or of being excellent? Are they interested only in the bottom line or in things that sustain the bottom line? Good communication will go a long way in sustaining the company's reputation and image. These intangibles feed the company's economic success. Perhaps they could get by without writers, but I think they want to do more than just get by. They want to be the best at what they do; they want excellence.

Good Grammar or Good Grief?

A cereal that I like—and still eat—had several things on the box that caught my eye a few years ago. Maybe it's the writer in me but I actually read things like cereal boxes. The grammar geek part of my brain was signaling a multiple-alarm fire. Paragraph one contained several sentence fragments. Another paragraph contained inappropriately placed dashes that made it sound like "breakfast, lunch, or dinner and even snacks" were something the company had discovered. Oh really? And Al Gore created the internet.

I don't think they were trying to stake a claim of discovery, but the improper use of punctuation made it sound that way. Furthermore, the box described the cereal as having "natural quality characteristics." It sounded like jargon for something but that's pretty vague. I still don't know what that means.

It didn't look to me like they had any writers to check this before it went to print, so after I read the box, I wrote a letter to point out the numerous mistakes. I was appalled that a company trying to build a national reputation would produce writing that demonstrated a complete lack of regard for good grammar. They sent me a \$.50 coupon for my next purchase. Eventually they changed the text on their box, and I'd like to think I had a role in that, but I'd also like to think that writers are worth more than \$.50.

You could probably argue that the company is still making money and good cereal, and you would be right. A case could probably also be made that many people won't notice the poor grammar; at the same time consistently poor grammar doesn't communicate well. Even if a reader can't understand why the reading doesn't communicate well, he will know instinctively that it doesn't. Just

the fact that they eventually changed the box tells me that they were concerned enough to make a better impression. Why not have writers around to put your best foot forward to begin with?

The Main Point

Another example comes from a consulting firm that a friend of mine works for. They offer cost reduction services in healthcare. I admit up front that they are a successful, growing business. They know their industry and are good at what services they offer. However, I had to wade through a lot of extra words just to get to the main point of their business.

Aside from some grammar mistakes, the material was presented in a way that required a PhD to decipher the main point. Main points need to be easy to grasp. Business people don't always have the luxury of wading through dense text. Executive assistants and others need to understand if something is important enough to pass on to vice presidents and CEOs who are even more pressed for time. Why not highlight the benefits that a company provides like this:

- *Increase benefits*
- *Lower employee out-of-pocket expenses*
- *Minimize claims impact*
- *Increase network size*
- ***Decrease employer cost***

This arrangement is a little cleaner and makes the main points stand out. I understand that their services can save companies a ton of money on healthcare, but unless the reader can access the main points easily, most readers won't even see many of their main selling points, at least not on the first try. The information is there but not as accessible as it should be. A good writer can present information in a presentable and clear way.

Artificial Intelligence vs. the Real Thing

I read an article some time ago written by a well-known journalist Mike Royko, titled "Lincoln's Speech Doesn't Compute." He described his encounter with a computer style check program. He considered buying it but decided to give it a test run first. He typed in "The Gettysburg Address" in its entirety. The program spit back a report of thirteen major errors. Mr. Royko was quite amused that such an inspirational piece of history probably wouldn't have passed a grade school assignment, at least in the mind of the computer program.

Computer programs designed to correct writing style and grammar mistakes are inherently weak: they aren't human. They can't judge writing based on content, mood, and word choice. Content is part of what drives a document. Furthermore, style of writing changes from era to era and even from document to document. Word processors, spell checkers, and style checkers can't think or reason. They can't tell if something is inspiring or personal or persuasive or even explanatory. Can we really rely on them to help us decide if something is important to say and say well?

Not writing the Gettysburg address, you say? How about a good sales pitch or a persuasive policy statement or a letter of apology to a consumer? Styles vary, mood counts, and word choices make a difference. Computers can account for none of this. Human writers can.

Conclusion

Writers are essential to the production of documents for several reasons. First, they are experts at grammar, and grammar is necessary to communicate meaning. Second, they know how to arrange text to make the main points of a document easier to grasp. Third, good ideas expressed well demand human reasoning. Writers specialize in such things. Not only do writers provide all this, they make the work load of managers, assistants, and technicians lighter by shouldering the burden to write documents that save time. Along with their expertise businesses also gain the thanks of many others for making communication more readable and, of course, excellent.