

Better English, Better Business

Falling standards in national literacy – does it matter to business?

It should be a foregone conclusion, or is it?

A surprising number of businesses, committed in principle to the ideal of quality communication, are nevertheless failing to make the connection that falling standards of English have a detrimental effect on their business communication. The obvious can elude them: how *can* quality be assured if they present mistakes in what is, after all, a vital core activity? If a company cannot deliver its message clearly, consistently and well, then it can fall at the first hurdle.

Some years ago, a Better English Campaign was set up. The Government then was aware that, in schools where standards are too low, deficiencies in pupils' abilities to read, write, speak or listen impede their progress in all aspects of the curriculum, not just English.

Some companies complacently accept the problem as it presents itself in the business environment. Alarming, some companies do not realise it exists. Some, no doubt considering themselves the enlightened ones, decide to outsource some communication activities to advertising or marketing agencies. But in order to retain the competitive edge, a company must *correctly manage* its outsourcing so that core staff retain quality communication skills.

The bottom line is: what does it tell the customer if you make mistakes when you write or talk to them? What happens if you cannot match your agency's portrayal of you? You are in fact distorting your message, losing credibility and failing to match customer expectations.

As always, it is companies who expect success who are prepared to hear about where things are going wrong. They are prepared to address the specifics needed to get it right, first and every time. It makes economic sense. It is a concept well understood in Total Quality

Management. They know that there is no time to be complacent if they want to deliver total customer care and secure the competitive edge.

It is ironic that those who read this article and say "Well, actually we have no problems with falling standards in business communication" are those who probably do! They are so often the ones whose writing contains inexcusable grammatical and spelling errors (spellcheck cannot always help!) and whose speech may show flawed logic, jargon and other barrier words.

Fiona Talbot runs TQI Word Power Skills communication consultancy which helps successful, responsive clients redress the balance and strengthen their communication profiles. They know that getting their communication right is not a luxury but an economic necessity and

that they alone are accountable for their success. TQI Word Power Skills undertakes a linguistic analysis to see where they go wrong, or under-perform, then works with them on the technical skills needed to communicate their message well.

Fiona previously worked in Rotterdam in the Netherlands, where she established a communication consultancy with a multinational client base. She was impressed with the determination shown by her clients to excel in their use of English, recognising its value to them as *the* international business language. If they had a problem, they were prepared to pay for a solution – and as, TQI Word Power Skills can offer low cost solutions, price is not the issue.

Pressing questions have to be asked about our own attitude to language and business communication if we are prepared to get it wrong. **The issue actually is: does it matter or not?** *The debate starts here!*

Footnote: Help is needed if your staff find writing difficult

Employers need to be aware that some staff may have problems writing, through no fault of their own. Dyslexia, for example, may or may not be diagnosed.

In any event, staff need your support in getting their writing to work the way your business needs it to work.

There are always solutions: you just need to be aware of the problem, to be fair to all concerned. Writers, readers, customers, stakeholders, business objectives and success: they all matter every time we write!

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