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## The heartbeat of TQM

### TOTAL QUALITY BUSINESS WRITING

Writing is the single most widespread activity in business today. The advent of computers, fax machines, e-mail and all the other paraphernalia of the mythical paperless office hasn't reduced the need for effective business writing one jot.

Modern professionals now spend more time than ever wordsmithing on their Powerbooks, PC laptops and Pentium PCs -- up to 70 percent of their day according to Fortune (28 December 1992).

Writing is also among the most expensive business activities. A major industrial request for proposal (RFP) might, for instance, cost several million dollars to prepare. Ninety percent of the effort and money goes into the writing, the equivalent of hundreds and even thousands of hours of valuable non-manufacturing hours.

What's more, if it's poorly done, which is not uncommon, the entire venture may be wasted. According to one report, government evaluators who award Federal contracts say that incoming proposals are routinely rejected as technically non compliant, when the real reason is unintelligible writing.

The problem exists across the board -- and boardrooms. A 1991 survey of top managers in two hundred Fortune 1000 companies showed that managers felt more than a third of their colleagues' reports, letters and memos (34 percent) were "unclear, poorly written or

confusing." Forty-one percent were considered weak. Only three percent were excellent.

According to the firm conducting the survey, Motivational Systems, "People who sharpen their writing skills will reap substantial career rewards. Improving the quality and readability of written communications will save America's businesses billions of dollars each year."

### **Why bad writing costs big money**

The consequences of poor written communications are profound, impacting efficiency, quality and the bottom line in ways both unexpected and predictable. Some examples:

- Unreadable manuals help to sink a company... Coleco, a once well known computer manufacturer, lost \$35 million in a single quarter in 1983 when customers rushed to return its new Adam line. The accompanying instruction manuals were unreadable. The firm went into a decline ending in bankruptcy.
- Misunderstood memos contributed to the Challenger accident... Analysis of NASA documents by Prof. Dorothy A. Winsor. Ph.D., showed "a history of miscommunication" as one of the root causes of the Challenger disaster in January, 1986.
- Real tax dollars savings are possible... A study of 225 military personnel revealed that officers took from 17 to 23 percent less time to read clearly written documents. Researchers concluded "The Navy alone could save between \$27 and \$57 million worth of wasted time if its officers used a plain style."
- What do you mean, we invented it twice? A world class oil company spent hundreds of thousands of dollars developing a new pesticide. Then red-faced officials discovered that the formula had been worked out five years before -- by one of the company's own technicians! His report was so opaquely written no one had finished reading it.
- Punctuation counts and counts and counts... Information released by the Federal Government under the Freedom of Information Act revealed that a nuclear-plant supervisor ordered "ten foot long lengths" of radioactive material. But instead of the ten-foot units needed, the plant was sent ten one-foot rods, at a cost so great it was later classified.

### **The challenge to business writers**

As the twenty-first century rapidly approaches, the muscularity and quickness of modern word processors, radio communications, TV, motion pictures, video recorders, cellular phones, and now the World Wide Web, have upped the stakes for career professionals. The successful ones realize that in the past few years readers' expectations have fundamentally altered. Business documents today need to be clear, persuasive, elegant -- and, given the speed and pressures of modern corporate life, often produced RIGHT NOW!

Meet your customer -- For the first time in history we're dealing with an entire generation raised on television, sound bites and the pervasive wiles of the advertising industry. Among readers there is a heightened impatience with excessive length, poor organization, lack of expertise in tone, appearance and presentation.

Traditional ways of thinking, seeing and even evaluating knowledge have been profoundly altered. Business reports, manuals, letters and memos are now generally expected to be:

- Friendly in approach and manner, yet at the same time entirely professional...
- Error-free and though grammatically correct not pedantic...
- Relaxed and articulate but not overly colloquial...
- And often required also to be subtly persuasive.

It's a difficult and exacting mix, as artful as diplomacy and sometimes just as disastrous if poorly carried out.

Beware of textual harassment -- Back in 1990, a friend of mine set out to open a new bank account in Boston. After his initial meeting with the branch manager, the customer relations department wrote to him. Here's their letter:

Dear Sir

Enclosed is the signature card of your checking account to add your wife too. Please sign the card at the bottom where indicated and have your wife sign just below your signature also please fill in any additional information that you would like us to have, such as covers and date of births.

Thank You for your understanding and cooperation.

My friend neither understood nor cooperated. He canceled his account and opened another one elsewhere. "Anyone sending that kind of sloppy writing out the door isn't interested in me," he said. And he was right.

Admittedly, this particular letter was unusually bad. Yet the sad truth is that it's not unrepresentative of the kinds of mail modern American businesses daily send out to the public. The effects are disastrous --and entirely unnecessary.

Here are just three real-life reactions from customers of well-known companies, responding to letters received. Like my friend, the writers took their business elsewhere because of avoidable misjudgments in tone, approach and style.

Enclosed please find the ridiculous notice that I received from you today. The words you wrote and your general attitude toward me are the worst example of professionalism I have ever seen. I am forthwith discontinuing my standing order and will purchase my (product) at an alternative outlet.

Yesterday I received a final notice on a past-due payment on (product). This letter was the most degrading and ignorant letter that I have ever received. I am showing all my friends and family, along with all my classmate, the letter I received from your company.

You should realize that the way I am treated now will determine who I want to do business with in the future. As of today, I do not want to continue my account with you, nor do I ever wish to do business with your company again. I hereby request that you cancel, my account and send a credit memo to my credit card company for the difference that you owe me. Please be advised that I will follow up any delay on your part and will talk to the Chairman of (name of company) if I have to.

Incredible, isn't it? A September, 1992 government report revealed that only about one US company in five provides any training at all for its writers. Managers who wouldn't permit clerks to insult customers to their faces allow them to WRITE OFF good business through the mail every day -- and at an incalculable loss.

As we've already seen, the problem also applies at administrative levels. According to the Fortune report cited earlier, the versatility and power of computers and modern word processors have been "latched onto as an excuse to fire secretaries and clerks." The result is that managers now typically spend less than 30 percent of their day actually managing. The rest of the time they write.

Among the important consequences of this change is that document quality has drastically fallen off. The pressures of corporate life (and the writers' relative lack of skill) are driving managers to get the paper out the door as quickly as possible, and never mind the grammar. The tension between speed, cost and quality has never been greater.

### **Total quality writing**

Fortunately, the problem contains its own solution. As Deming, Juran and others have shown, genuine quality, even in writing, is always faster and cheaper. The first step, as in all quality initiatives, is to recognize your readers -- both internal and external -- for the customers they are. Your document is a product, and like all successful products should have as its principal purpose pleasing and gratifying its customer.

Writing with a customer focus internalizes what Business Week called "the delight factor," an attitude or state of mind that seeks habitually to "fascinate and bewitch" recipients -- the end-users whose "delight and not mere satisfaction" are the basis of world-class quality. [Non-ASCII character that cannot be represented]

### **The seven habits of highly effective writers**

-- In *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey defined the personal behaviors and attitudes which historically have contributed to success in business. Freely adapting his ideas, we could sum up *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Writers* in the following way:

Habit 1: Be proactive -- Seek to please your readers and anticipate their needs.

Habit 2: Begin with the end in mind -- Focus on results.

Habit 3: First things first -- Analyze your audience and its concerns.

Habit 4: Play win/win -- The best tone and strategy.

Habit 5: Seek first to understand -- What's your reader's point of view?

Habit 6: Synergize -- Learn from other writers.

Habit 7: Sharpen the saw -- Practice, practice, practice!

Total quality writing is thus proactive rather than reactive. Instead of seeking merely to avoid confrontation or offense, it works towards friendliness and the amicable resolution of disagreements. It positively encourages persuasion rather than conflict, and tact instead of argument.

In place of threats or lawsuits arising from misunderstandings, or the need for repetition, i. e., rework, total quality writing strives consciously to generate clarity, goodwill and an

enhanced company image. Total quality writers understand that every memo and letter represents a business opportunity or problem.

**Empowerment** -- A genuine customer focus is also the empowerment of company writers, especially customer service representatives and middle managers. Because it encourages creativity, customer service representatives are liberated from the drudgery of working from boilerplate letters. It frees managers everywhere by enabling them swiftly to generate persuasive written communications. In this sense, total quality writing is leadership -- in written form.

For many firms, letters may be the only direct contact the public ever has with them. For employees, a memo may be the most significant communication ever received from a superior. The value of quality writing, therefore, and perhaps even more important the negative impact of poor or shoddy work, is enormous.

### **TQM and total quality writing**

There's often an intimate link between the excellence of a company's internal and external communications and the general quality of its product or service. According to one CEO, who in 1990 set his company on the road to the Baldrige quality award, "I believe the degree to which you're committed to communications is the degree to which you're committed to anything." Successful companies know this, and capitalize on the customer-driven aspects of communications, both internal and external. Those who show genuine care for their corporate voice -- and simply will not accept anything less than first-rate work -- dramatize their commitment to quality overall.

Being able to write faultless, dynamic letters, memos and reports lifts the self-confidence and pride of an organization's writers, a spirit which quickly permeates the whole company. As pollster Daniel Yankelovich notes; "Quality is not just what you see on the surface, but what is underneath the surface."

Employees sense it too. Their morale and their commitment to put into effect management's new ideas and strategies are precisely what underpin successful quality drives. If a company permits suboptimized writing, to use Deming's phrase, its general commitment to product quality is drawn silently into question -- and, as the English say, once doubted, soonest flouted.

Deming, when being interviewed about the kinds of complaints he was hearing from US workers, spoke of how they felt no one fully communicated with them. "I hear that word a dozen times a day --communications," Deming said, adding about the business of management: "It's all a matter of communication."

In the deepest sense then customer-driven writing, both in and out, may be indeed the heartbeat of TQM. It's all a matter of communication.

### **Deming's 14 points applied to business writing...**

1. Create constancy of purpose -- Quality writers constantly improve.
2. Adopt the new philosophy -- Quality writers are customer driven.
3. Cease dependence on mass inspection -- Quality writers develop techniques of self-evaluation.
4. End the practice of awarding business on price alone -- Quality writers understand

that customer driven communications are priceless.

5. Improve production constantly -- Quality writers constantly monitor and update their skills.
6. Institute training and retraining -- Quality companies provide appropriate training for their writers.
7. Institute leadership -- Quality writing is leadership in written form.
8. Drive out fear -- Quality companies encourage their writers to try out new ideas.
9. Break down barriers between staff areas -- Quality writing includes writers from all levels.
10. Eliminate slogans, exhortations and targets -- Quality companies give their writers maximum freedom and initiative.
11. Eliminate numerical quotas -- Quality companies stress quality communications, not quantity.
12. Remove barriers to pride in workmanship -- Pride in workmanship is the essence of total quality writing.
13. Institute a vigorous program of education and retraining -- Quality companies provide refresher programs to update skills.
14. Take action to accomplish the transformation -- Total quality writing actively transforms business communicators and communications.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Michael Egan

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Michael Egan -- Michael Egan & Associates

Michael Egan, founding president of Michael Egan & Associates, is an author, editor and company trainer who has taught writing and public speaking for more than 20 years in England, the US, South Africa and Hawaii

He is the author of Write Now! Total Quality Writing in the Age of Computers. A new book, Vroom! Turbo-Charged Team Building, will be published by Amacom next spring.

### **SOME SIMPLE QUALITY WRITING TIPS...**

Applying these total quality ideas in practical detail, we can see that excellent writers obey the following principles of good written communications.

- KISS (Keep it simple and straightforward). Computer analysis of the most effective modern writers show that they use simple Subject-Verb-Object sentences 75 percent of the time. Their average sentence length is 17 words.
- Use the first person. "I" and "We" are both acceptable and preferable in modern business prose. Archaic usages such as "this investigator found that..." etc., reek of the 1950s.
- Use good grammar. Unambiguous language is not only good manners, it's essential if companies are to avoid the "But I thought you meant..." syndrome. Remember the "ten foot lengths" of radioactive rods! Lack of clarity leads to rework, confusion and -- since all business writing is potentially actionable -- the danger of lawsuits.

- Develop a sense of layout and design. There's an intimate connection between appearance and comprehensibility. Slabs of undifferentiated type shut readers out, turn them off. Since modern word processors and computers make font variety, graphics and good looks so easy, why not take advantage of them without going overboard?
- Learn from copywriters. Business communicators have much to learn from advertising professionals when it comes to written persuasion. The principles of copythink are not hard to understand and apply. Since our readers are now more sophisticated than ever, success or failure as business communicators depends on our ability to apply these skills and techniques.
- Develop a "YOU" perspective. Good writers analyze their audience, think in its terms, and phrase sentences as much as possible from the reader's point of view. Remember: U comes before I in Persuasion!

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