Writing Well in Business

Henry T. Price

Your messages create the image the public has of you and your business.

A CEO in South Carolina says, "My young sales staff can sell, but they don't know enough about grammar and punctuation to write a proper business letter to the customer." The Wall Street Journal has said that 80 percent of businesses surveyed believe that their employees' biggest problem is written communication.

It's ironic that in a time when the need for precision in the use of English is increasing exponentially, powered by enormous strides in technology and the use of computers, our ability to use the language is rapidly declining.

The first impression many people get of you and your business is often a written message on a piece of paper or a written message on a computer screen. All too frequently, that first impression is a turn-off. Your messages, both verbal and nonverbal, are HUGE in creating your image.

Unfortunately, unless you have been living in a cave for the past three or four years, far from any civilization, you are all too aware of the shortcomings of our elementary and secondary education system in preparing our young people for the rest of their lives. An article by Sue Oliver in the January-March 2004 issue of the Business & Economic Review quotes a 1995 report from the Winthrop University Center for Economic Development that talks about South Carolina: "The economic value lost as a result of an undereducated or undereducated workforce is estimated at $624 million...."

The same article talks about the huge cost to society of a student's dropping out of school. The shortcomings of our educational system cover a wide range of subjects, but one of the most damaging is our continuing and worsening inability to teach our young people to read, and especially write, the English language. If you doubt that, the next time your newspaper runs a story about the performance of young, college-bound South Carolinians on the SAT, read it carefully.

Frankly, if your employees can't read well and can't use the precision and conciseness of proper English, your business is at a severe disadvantage in today's highly competitive world.

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