

COPYWRITING



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The Internet has made it far too easy for employees to publish written information under company brand names. **Grant Butler** discusses the pitfalls and solutions.

Web and email erode brands

“I left school at 16. I’ve become a national sales manager because I’m good with people and can sell. Now I’m sending out emails to major clients and top 100 companies with spelling mistakes. You’ve got to help me!”

That was the frank admission from a recent trainee at one of our writing training seminars. In the good old days, a senior sales manager might have dictated their message to a secretary. The secretary would have cleaned up his or her phrases, written the letter in prim and proper English and most likely ensured that the boss wasn’t about to break any company rules.

Today, many managers have seen their secretaries replaced by laptops and Internet connections. When they need to communicate with a client, they’ll knock out an email and hit send. Heaven help the company, and its brand managers, if the executive: (a) can’t write; (b) is factually wrong; (c) contravenes company policy.

Sure, an executive can create just as many problems on his or her mobile phone but at least those interactions are rarely recorded. Further, they don’t tend to float around with the company’s logo next to an offending item.

DAMAGE CONTROL

Witness the expensive legal and brand damage suffered by a company like Merrill Lynch when emails from its analysts describing recommended Internet stocks as a “piece of crap” and a “disaster” are reproduced thousands of times in print and online.

Another example of an email that became a nightmare occurred in England last year following the September 11 attacks in New York. One hour after the planes hit, a PR adviser to the British Transport Secretary wrote to ministers telling them that it was “a very good day” to “bury bad news”.

If Andersen, FAI, HIH and One.Tel still had brands to worry about, they would also be cringing at the messages – like Brad Cooper quoting Aristotle to Ray Williams: “The spirit of the sole [sic] shines

out when a man bares [sic] with great composure one heavy missed chance after another” – arising from the present inquiries.

Nor is the issue limited to executives. In less than a decade, email and the web have made it infinitely easier for employees at all levels to ‘publish’ material on behalf of their organisations. This ranges from ever-longer email newsletters (why keep it tight when there’s no page limit?) to areas of company web sites through which individual staff members can post updates live to the Internet for anyone to read.

SYSTEMS MATTER

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not out to poke fun at people who have chosen careers that are probably more sensible and better paying than writing. In fact, many people who have chosen to write still require

extensive support, which is why newspapers and magazines have almost as many sub editors as they do journalists.

And this is the point. Organisations that see writing quality as a key component of their branding process implement systems to ensure that every word that is directly associated with their company image is properly checked.

This is, of course, getting harder and harder, but ask yourself these three questions:

1. Who is publishing on behalf of my organisation?
2. What are they writing and where is it going?
3. Do we have a company style guide and is anyone using it?

IT’S ALL PUBLISHING

It requires a shift in mindset to see all writing as publishing.

WITNESS THE EXPENSIVE LEGAL AND BRAND DAMAGE SUFFERED BY A COMPANY LIKE MERRILL LYNCH WHEN EMAILS FROM ITS ANALYSTS DESCRIBING RECOMMENDED INTERNET STOCKS AS A “PIECE OF CRAP” AND A “DISASTER” ARE REPRODUCED THOUSANDS OF TIMES IN PRINT AND ONLINE.

equivalent to company newsletters, annual reports and other major documents. In turn, you need to ask which sort of writing would support your company brand and which might undermine it.

Southwest Airlines in the US has been through this process, and decided not to use email at all in customer communications. On its 'Contact us' page it has a section called 'Why We Don't Accept Email', which reads:

"Call us traditional, but we elect to steer clear of the chat-style, respond-on-demand, quick casual format and focus on meaningful Customer dialogue. This is not because we don't care. It's because that style counters our 30 plus year commitment to Customer Service.

"Our Customers deserve accurate, specific, personal, and professionally written answers, and it takes time to research, investigate, and compose a real business letter. We answer every letter we receive in the order it arrives, and we streamline in order to keep our costs low, our People productive, our operating efficiency high, and our responses warm and personal."

FINDING SOLUTIONS

So, how do you go about answering the three questions above and stemming the Internet tide?

The first step is to do a communications audit to discover who is writing what and for whom. The next is to decide which of these documents has obvious brand implications, then seek to implement some controls about how they are handled.

A key element here is the creation of style guides that govern how your organisation will do things such as present key product names, titles and words like 'Internet' (verses 'internet') and program (verses 'programme').



Style guides can also extend to word usage and expression. Is it okay to use jargon and acronyms, for instance? Should the company come across as friendly and funky, or conservative and old fashioned? The first might be a perfect 'voice' for a clothing company, while an insurance company might prefer to seem more 'old worldly'.

Companies should create style guides that cover words and issues peculiar to their own organisation. They should back these up with standard grammatical and spelling guides, such as the widely accepted *Style Manual* for authors, editors and printers (now published by Wiley & Sons) and the *Macquarie Dictionary*. This means that where the company style guide doesn't cover an issue, employees still get standard advice.

You might also consider updating the spell checkers that are loaded onto staff computers with

an appropriate dictionary, rather than leaving Microsoft Word or other word processing packages to default to American spelling and grammar.

INSTALL GATEKEEPERS

Given that even the best writers make mistakes, it can make sense to put gatekeepers in place. These are like the sub-editors on newspapers and magazines who check and refine all articles before publication. Organisations that take writing and brand language seriously make extensive use of such style counsellors, and there's nothing to stop a company insisting that even quite minor emails are checked before release.

However, the gatekeeper position must be well resourced, or intelligently outsourced, to ensure the checking procedure doesn't become a bottleneck. Given that people are often sensitive about

their writing, it can also help to put someone tactful in the role.

When it comes to implementation, it is important that any new style guides and policies are introduced to staff through dedicated seminars or other procedures, then made available on paper or via the company intranet. The alternative is that your beautiful style guide and all the brand value it can offer languishes on the shelf.

Given that a good style guide is a living guide that changes with language usage and the organisation, you also need a process for updating it. Ideally the organisation can appoint a single person to manage updates and distribution of changes, with all others feeding requests back to them.

GROW WITH WORDS

One of the reasons our organisation is passionate about good writing and brand language is that it is one of the key elements that enables an organisation to grow – or scale – locally and globally.

If you study successful multinationals, you'll see that they not only standardise their manufacturing or service delivery procedures, they are also strong on editorial standardisation. They look and sound much the same everywhere you go, because they've extended the disciplines that many organisations apply to the correct reproduction of their logos to language.

Paying attention to editorial quality in your organisation will improve your brand image, help you grow and deliver practical benefits like reducing miscommunication, within your organisation or externally. So here's that nasty little question again: who in your company is writing what for whom? **M**