

Costs of Poor Writing Skills

by Elizabeth Danziger, President, Worktalk Communications Consulting LLC

Many people feel that writing is a “soft skill.” When deciding where to allocate training funds, they might feel that other capabilities are more essential. However, writing affects every element of an organization’s success, and poor writing jeopardizes the bottom line in countless ways. As top-ranked Inc.com columnist Jessica Stillman recently wrote, [bad writing](#) costs your company cash. In fact, it is estimated that poor writing costs businesses upwards of [\\$400 billion](#) per year. Here are a few ways that the costs of bad writing add up:

Turnover and Retention

Workplace communication is a core component of organizational culture. When internal documents are muddled, management communications seem curt, and no one seems to understand one another, employee engagement suffers. According to a [Global Research Report](#) from the Society for Human Resource Management, 90% of employees who rate their workplace culture as poor have thought about quitting. To maintain a robust culture that makes people look forward to hearing from their colleagues and bosses, firms must invest in clear communication.

Sales

Successful sales rely on understanding prospects’ needs and presenting your offering in language that touches their needs and desires. In my extensive experience training sales representatives, I have seen many of them struggle to identify their prospects’ “hot buttons” and reach out authentically and engagingly. This inability to connect with prospects means lost sales. When sales team members fumble outbound emails or responses to prospective customers, innumerable sales are lost.

Productivity

Let’s say one employee writes an unclear email to three people. Each of the recipients is confused and writes back asking for clarification. Perhaps this process goes back and forth a few times. How many work hours were lost because of that one murky message? Extrapolate that over a whole organization: The lost work time is enormous. Add to that the likelihood that readers make mistakes based on their interpretations of poorly worded messages and you’ll see that the cost of rework may be huge.

Safety

In training for a transportation company, I once asked, “What are the costs of unclear communications?” A woman waved her hand and cried, “They don’t bother me at all!” Intrigued, I asked her why. She blithely replied, “I just ignore them!” Imagine – if a set of new safety instructions is couched in difficult-to-understand language, how many readers will glance at it, realize that it is hard to read, and blip over it? Manufacturers, utilities, healthcare, and transportation companies have an obligation to ensure that communication is clear.

Customer Service

Customer service teams guard your brand by interacting directly with customers. When CSRs are courteous and clear, customers are more likely to be satisfied, even if their request cannot be fulfilled. A recent article in the Harvard Business Review revealed that customers want CSRs to begin with empathy and then assertively move to resolve the issue at hand. A botched customer-service email chain can lead to the permanent loss of a valued customer. Training CSRs to identify the core issue and address it empathetically pays off in client satisfaction and repeat business.

Branding

Millions of people saw the image of a midwestern school district's roadside billboard crowing, "Five Reasons Why Our Pubic Schools Are the Best." The district became a national laughingstock. What did this do to their branding? Whenever an employee writes on behalf of your company, they represent your brand – for better or worse. Misspellings, wrong words or phrases, and lack of forethought undermine your efforts to portray your firm as a trustworthy, professional organization.

In short, writing is the lifeblood of your business. Poor writing affects staffing, sales, operations, marketing, and customer service. It can damage your reputation irreparably with one social-media post or publicity error. An investment in writing training is an investment in your company's health.