

The Ten Tenets of Effective Communication (part two)

You can create enduring relationships with your readers when you adhere to these tenets

TO BE MOST EFFECTIVE, YOUR COMMUNICATION must focus on the needs of your audience. When you write, understand your audience, and make sure they will receive and act on the information in the manner you intended. Toward this end, we continue our discussion of the ten tenets of effective communication, focusing on the last six tenets:

- ◆ Accessible,
- ◆ Concise,
- ◆ Correct,
- ◆ Timely, and
- ◆ Well designed.
- ◆ And it builds goodwill too.



Accessible. There is just too much to read—emails, memos, reports, blogs, web links, articles, magazines, books—it can all be so overwhelming. With this plethora of information, readers skim, diving in only when deemed important, interesting, or useful. Few read sequentially, from beginning to end. Besides, attention spans are short. Make the most of these methods by helping your reader easily access what you say in your writing.

Unless a simple word or two will suffice, write descriptive titles and headings using phrases or sentences. This separates your document into small, independent sections that are easily digestible. A reader should be able to skim your headings and get the essence of a document.

For longer documents, don't force your reader to flip or scroll unnecessarily—create a table of contents or summary links at the beginning. Avoid useless links as well.

Concise. What we choose to do with our time is the essence of who we are. We are all busy. With the myriad possibilities, choosing what we do with our time can be a significant challenge.

So, to help a reader select your document to read, it must be concise and to the point. Tell people up front what they are about to read and how they can benefit. For example, this position paper adheres to this tenet in its two-line heading.

Write simply. Convey a lot of information economically. Excise unnecessary phrases. Replace wordiness with short words. Eliminate tangential information. Use simple grammatical forms. A good edit shortens a document by up to 20 percent: 1,000 words down to 800.

Mark Twain once apologized for the length of a letter saying he hadn't taken the time to edit it. Learn from him—edit. Take time so that your reader doesn't have to.

Correct. A correct document complies with the basic rules of writing: grammar, punctuation, mechanics, spelling, word order and usage, and sentence structure. Incorrect writing slows readers and confuses them.

Given too many of these kinds of errors, readers begin to question the validity and accuracy of your writing, and wonder if you were also this careless in researching, analyzing, and presenting your findings. Readers begin to doubt your professionalism, which in turn compromises your arguments, conclusions, and recommendations.

There are dozens of books on the basics of writing. Find one you like, keep it nearby, and refer to it often.

Timely. Few things in life are as useless as information that is no longer beneficial, that is not timely. I once returned home from a cancelled flight to a voice message sent 40 minutes before departure telling me of the cancellation. Not only was this information useless, it proved costly—the airline issued refunds to thousands of passengers on the

numerous flights cancelled that day and gave us all vouchers for a free flight.

Another aspect of timeliness: your reader must be able to understand and act as quickly as possible on the information. Your style, organization, and visual design all help toward this goal.

Well designed. An executive chef once said to me, "Food must look and smell good, for it must pass the eyes and nose before it goes into a mouth." Much the same argument can be made about a written document.

How a document looks speaks loudly about its acceptance because, even before a word is read, you are communicating. Professional looking, well designed documents engender positive impressions and get noticed. Choose fonts wisely, as they evoke different reactions. Just because you can 'drop shadow' or 'outline' text, don't do it. And keep to just a few fonts to avoid that busy look. While you want to impress with your document design, keep within acceptable standards.

Build goodwill. We have all read words that touched us, or that repulsed us. In business writing, strive to create a positive reaction. Carefully consider those who comprise your audience, then 'speak' to those people when you write. Make that personal connection with your words and you build goodwill, not only for yourself, but for your organization and profession—exactly our goal when we write these position papers for you to read.

The ten tenets. Taken together and diligently applied, these ten tenets ultimately demonstrate respect for your audience. By employing these ten tenets in all your writing, you can create positive relationships, ones that can endure. 🌟

—RICH MAGGIANI

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