

SOUTH FLORIDA SUN-SENTINEL

Business Strategies

WRITING A HAPPY ENDING TO CUSTOMER CONTACTS

My company's marketing department asked me to proofread a booklet they had put together: a collection of my columns from the past couple years.

I was happy to do so, but also was astounded at the mistakes I found — even in the third revision. The copy should have been clean: After all, these were the very columns that had already been edited, copyedited and published in this newspaper.

We're not perfect. Pick up any newspaper, magazine or a new book from a big-name publishing house and you will find mistakes.

So if professional writers mess up, imagine the written communications of workers who haven't had special training or years of experience



**MARCIA HEROUX
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in a newsroom.

Fortunately, we have people like Dianna Booher to help us all out.

Booher, author of *E-Writing* and 38 other books on business communications, says most people take a stream-of-consciousness approach to writing; whatever comes into their minds.

"Think before you write. That's the opposite of what most people do," Booher says.

"Think of the end — what's the punchline?"

After honing your focus, many unnecessary details can be eliminated, says Booher, president of her Dallas-based firm that counts **IBM, WorldCom, Texas Instruments, PepsiCo** and **ExxonMobil** as clients.

Effective writing is important both to a worker's career and to a company's image.

"People judge your technical expertise by your ability to write. You may be a great engineer but you can't write," Booher says, for example.

Business communication is not limited to the engineering or management ranks anymore. Nearly everyone in a company communicates with customers, whether it is a

formal proposal or a "simple" e-mail.

"Now you have almost every level employee writing. You have the \$6 an hour employee writing. Your image as a company is being created by your lowest-paid employee," she says.

More spelling errors are caught with tools like "spell check," but grammatical errors often go unchecked. Workers also tend to write run-on, convoluted sentences. These are difficult to understand and can result in misunderstandings, Booher says.

Booher provides workers with a checklist to review their e-mail, memos and proposals to avoid common errors. "Just like a pilot who gets in an airplane, he just doesn't take

off, he goes through a checklist," she says.

Writing is becoming more important in sales because companies no longer want boilerplate proposals.

"They want a customer-tailored document that responds to their specific question. [Customers] get irritated when they are sent generic information," she says.

Customized doesn't mean using a standard form and throwing in the customer's name every third line. Booher says the result is the customer considers the company unresponsive to its request. "The client is thinking, 'This is a don't-bother-me proposal.'" Booher says.

How clearly a company responds to a request is just as important. A customer-service

employee's response to an e-mail can result in a satisfied customer or a more frustrated one.

Booher works with a major automobile company that found most leased-car customers were communicating initially by e-mail. But the e-mails were not saving either the customer or company time.

"The e-mail comes across so unclearly that it creates more calls," she says.

Poor writing is not only poor form, it also leaves its mark on a company's productivity, sales and image.

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