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Helping organizations drive revenue and generate profits through stronger business communications

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Now is the time to pay even more attention to the words you choose. With attention constantly divided between work and CNN, with cutbacks and layoffs and the necessity of doing more with less, and with emotions and fear at an all time high (low), it is very easy to say one thing and have your reader hear an entirely different message.

Psychologist Bruce Baldwin has talked about the “doing two or three things at one time syndrome.” He says that once we get good at multitasking, we begin to feel guilty when we do just one thing! “Doing just one thing at a time makes individuals feel uncomfortable,” he says, “and the result is an individual who is no longer able to ... enjoy just one activity.”

Think about what you do while you read. (What are you doing right now? Are you listening to the radio or a colleague’s phone conversation? Are you on “hold” on the phone? Are you reading this while you’re planning for that meeting you have in an hour, or thinking about picking up the kids, or what you’ll eat for lunch?) It is so hard to simply focus on one issue at a time, and the better we get at juggling twenty-six things, the more natural it seems, and the less “present” we become.

Your readers are doing the same. They are not entirely focused on your message, whether it is written or spoken. According to Baldwin, 85% of people surveyed say they are good or excellent at conducting a conversation and appearing to pay attention while they’re thinking about something else at that moment. (Read that sentence again, please!!) So, if we (and they) can fake it face to face, think about how easy it is to pretend to be paying attention to the email at hand, while paying it no mind whatsoever!!

Compel Your Reader to Read

Use your subject line to help the reader.

Vague subject lines hurt both the reader and the writer because they make it easy for the reader to simply pass over your message. This may not be intentional; it just is. The average person gets about a billion emails a day (this is my statistic, care to disagree?!) and decides as quickly as possible what he or she can delete from the mailbox or from the mind. Be precise and truthful. Here are a few examples of subject lines that get attention and break preoccupation:

Are you available to speak at Nov 12 meeting? (Much clearer than: Speaker Needs)

Action Requested: Rooming List Due Friday (Much better than: Rooming List)

Video First Draft Done (Much more important than: Video)

Feedback from class at Hyatt, 10/2/01 (Much more valuable than: Feedback of FYI)

Think first!

Will your reader be interested in the information you’re providing? Why will it matter to him or her? Is the next step crystal clear to the reader? Will needless messages go back and forth to clarify a point that could be discussed more quickly and easily by phone? The four prewriting questions that I harp on during each writing workshop (Why am I writing? What do I want to say? What do I want to accomplish? What action do I want from my reader?) help you focus your message so your reader gets a clear picture.

Be as positive as possible.

Avoid words that annoy or distract the reader from your goal. When your point is to get

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Compel Your Reader to Read *continued*

them to agree to meet with you, it makes no sense to say something like, “If Tuesday is a good day to meet....”

Try: Is Tuesday AM or PM more convenient for you to meet? When we meet Tuesday.... (So that you’ll know, I originally wrote the above sentence as: IF your point is to get them to agree with you.... Do you agree that the word “when” at the beginning of the sentence helped it to flow?)

An email I read recently said, “Jessica, if we are going to continue to work together on this and do business together we need to talk.” By changing this just slightly, the message becomes one of reconciliation: “Jessica, I would appreciate the opportunity to talk about this. I want us to continue working together to move forward on important issues for us all. Would any time this week be a good time to talk?”

Limit the use of the word, “but.”

“But” negates whatever comes before it. For example, what message do you get when you read these sentences? “The project is almost complete, but I wasn’t able to get to the timeline,” or, “you did a great job on the projections but where is the timeline?” Did you feel like the fact that you didn’t get the timeline completed negated all the work you did on the project? Change these to, “the project is almost complete and I’ll need another week to finish the timeline,” and, “you did a great job on the projections and I’ll still need that timeline.” See the difference? Feel the difference?

Clarify Always!

Yesterday I said to my outgoing assistant (do you think she is outgoing in personality or outgoing as in leaving?), “Please put my new bio on the desktop so Lily will know where it is.” My new assistant (now you know!) later said to me, “Do you know why this bio is on the desk and not in any folder?” Do I know why? Yes!!! Because my former assistant heard my words and thought I meant put it on the wooden desk top, when I meant the desktop on the computer!

When readers read their mail, our messages, it’s pretty darn likely they will not be hanging on our every word. Write so that you can be understood. Write so that you cannot possibly be misunderstood.

For more tips, or to schedule Sue Hershkowitz-Coore, CSP to speak at your next meeting, please send an email to Sue@SpeakerSue.com.

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