

Plain English brings business rewards

Client: Write Ltd

Contract: Communiqué

Published: *New Zealand Herald*, 3 July 2009

The Campaign for Plain English, which is now a worldwide movement, had its origin in Britain in the early 1970s. It grew out of widespread working class frustration as ordinary folk often found themselves disadvantaged by lack of clear information from business and government.

Times were certainly different back then. When the early campaigners asked why people were not given information they could understand, they received a number of astounding answers: “to keep them in the dark”, “to stop them claiming what is rightfully theirs”, “to stop them interfering in things they wouldn’t understand”.

It’s hard to imagine many people in business having such conceited attitudes today, but the problem of gobbledygook persists all the same. Even businesses that have the best intentions can communicate in terribly confusing ways.

Take for example the case of a New Zealand woman who had her flight cancelled. She wanted to know the airline’s refund policy, but the nearest thing she could find on their website was:

"To the extent permitted by applicable laws, any liability of the Carrier for a breach of any provisions of the contract of carriage or related obligations shall not exceed resupply or the payment of the cost of resupply of the services in question."

I can’t explain exactly what that means, or even whether it refers to refunds, but I can tell you this sort of gobbledygook is all too common and exists for a variety of reasons.

Sometimes it results from laziness, or the mistaken view that a document must be filled with jargon to be taken seriously.

Often writers have their boss or their peers in mind, and haven’t considered whether their readers will be familiar with the terminology they use.

And in some professions, such as law and politics, hundreds of years of tradition have created an almost impenetrable language which even the highly educated struggle to understand.

Bad communications have a significant cost for consumers, which is why there is such widespread mistrust for any profession known for its fine print. The result is often heartache when people buy things they don’t need or can’t afford, or enter into contracts when they don’t understand their full implications.

But when a business communicates clearly the opposite is true. Well informed customers not only better understand their rights; they also know their responsibilities. They are much less likely to default on payments or tie up the time of your hard-working staff by asking questions and making complaints.

Put simply, communicating well is clever marketing.

In 2005, The Royal Mail in Britain surveyed the public about the writing they receive from businesses. It found that badly designed and poorly written documents could be costing UK businesses a staggering £41 billion (NZ\$106.2 billion) in lost sales each year. Three-quarters of consumers said they wouldn’t trust businesses that use poor writing, and almost a third said they wouldn’t buy from them.

In tough economic times, when unhappy customers more readily vote with their feet, plain English communications could give your business that competitive edge—and could even determine its survival.

Using plain English is not just about pleasing customers, however. Having a plain English culture at work, where time is put into writing internal documents clearly and resources are set aside for staff training in how to write, can lead to fewer mistakes, increased efficiency and significant business cost savings.

Today most businesses do say they see the value of plain English and many are making real efforts to change. Watch TV for a couple of hours one evening and count how many advertisers are now associating the words “easy” or “simple” with their products and services, and you’ll get the idea.

As a result of this desire to change, plain English campaigners have shifted their focus away from shining a spotlight on businesses that communicate badly, and more towards accentuating the positive.

The WriteMark New Zealand Plain English Awards are one way we do this. The Awards are a non-profit event run every year to publicly recognise and honour New Zealand organisations that are making the effort to communicate clearly.

Businesses and government departments are invited to submit their own documents or websites for awards in a variety of categories.

The top prize of \$10,000 goes to the organisation with the best over-all plain English culture, but there are many smaller categories and prizes, including one for transforming a single sentence from gobbledegook into plain English. It’s our way of saying you don’t have to be perfect to be acknowledged. You just have to have made a start.

All sorts of organisations take part each year including various ministries and councils, and both high and low profile businesses—and they do so for a variety of reasons.

Many have made that start on reworking their documents into plain English and the Awards are an effective way they can gauge how well they are doing. Others enter as a way of rewarding their staff for the work they have put into using plain English to make things easier for their customers.

So, if your business has been considering a move to plain English, or if you’ve already made some positive changes, you might want to consider taking part in the Awards this year.

It’s great marketing after all. There’s no better way of showing your customers you care about clarity and accountability than by announcing on your website or in your newsletter that you’ve entered.

And if you win or get a finalist placing why not make a real song and dance about it? We certainly think it’s worth celebrating!

Entries can be made online at www.plainenglishawards.org.nz and close on 27 July

Winners will be announced at a ceremony on 18 September, hosted by *Fair Go’s* Kevin Milne.