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## **Plain Language Builds Trust, and Trust is Good for Business**

by Deborah S. Bosley | Sep. 1, 2009 in **Featured Stories**

The average consumer spends less than eight seconds deciding whether or not to read information. In those eight seconds, you either gain your customer's attention and trust or you lose it.

For example, a Fortune 100 financial services company mailed a letter to millions of its senior clients about the Internal Revenue Service requirement to take money from IRA accounts. Although the company wanted each recipient to call the company to arrange for payments, in the first week, they received 10,000 angry phone calls because clients didn't understand the letter. The company lost hundred of hours and thousands of dollars, not to mention the most important fallout: confused and frightened customers.

What was the problem? Most readers didn't get beyond the first sentence that, in bold and underlined, mentioned the IRS. Nothing strikes fear in people like seeing "IRS." In addition, clients couldn't understand the jargon, didn't know what action to take, and felt the company was not being helpful. In other words, the letter was not written in plain language.

After we redesigned the letter, the company received extremely positive phone calls and gained millions of dollars in new assets because clients could understand the information. The new letter built trust and trust built profits.

In a recent survey by Siegel + Gale, 84 percent of the public would trust a company whose written information was easy to understand. By implication, the same 84 percent would not trust a company whose information they couldn't understand. A Stanford University study showed that when readers encountered

complicated documents, they lost respect for the writer.

Plain language is the use of proven writing and designing strategies that allow consumers to understand and use written information. Strategies include the use of short sentences and paragraphs, defined terms, little to no jargon, concrete words and a helpful format.

For example, which do you think would be easier for your customers to read and understand?

"[Name] informed you of the procedures for calculating interest for insufficient estimates. If the enclosed invoice(s) include charges for insufficient estimates, a detailed insufficient estimated [sic] used to calculate these charges is also enclosed." **Or**

"How to pay your bill: To avoid penalties as well as additional interest, you must pay this bill by its due date."

In addition, plain language focuses on the questions readers have:

- Can I understand and find information in one reading?
- Can I trust what the company tells me?
- Is the information accurate?
- Has the company focused on my interests and needs?

Some big businesses have seen the value of plain language. Bank of America recently launched a national television campaign for their Clarity Commitment, a one-page summary of important elements in mortgage contracts. Other businesses that have benefitted from plain language:

- Federal Express used plain language operations manuals saving \$400,000 in the first year.
- Computer manufacturer Allen-Bradley rewrote computer manuals in clear English and reduced help desk calls by 99 percent. Support calls went from 50 a day to two a month.
- General Electric Information Services rewrote a software manual in plain language and saved up to \$375,000 a year in help desk staff costs.

But plain language is not just good for big business. Small-business owners often

miss opportunities to solve problems for their employees and their customers. No business ever heard customers complain that information was too easy to understand.

By using plain language to describe products and services, word contracts, and describe policies and practices, small businesses can avoid many of costly expenses that come from using complex, muddy written language. For example, ERISA lawsuits often include a claim about how Summary Plan Descriptions were written, and liability suits swirl around poorly worded instructions for a child car seat. Imagine the impact of these types of lawsuits on a large or small business.

Finally, clear language that is specific and readily understandable is not only good for customers, but also good for your employees, who can better understand their jobs and what is expected of them.

For example, from an employees' manual from a trucking company:

“When the process of freeing a vehicle that has been stuck results in ruts or holes, the operator will fill the rut or hole created by such activity before removing the vehicle from the immediate area.”

After a plain language revision:

“If you make a hole while freeing a struck vehicle, you must fill the hole before you drive away.”

Bosley is an associate professor of English at UNC Charlotte and also an expert in plain language. For 20 years she has helped public companies as well as business, government, and nonprofit organizations create written information, including legal and financial disclosure documents, that makes it easy for people to read and understand the information they receive. For more visit [www.theplainlanguagegroup.com](http://www.theplainlanguagegroup.com) or contact Bosley at (704) 641-1334 or [Deborah@theplainlanguagegroup.com](mailto:Deborah@theplainlanguagegroup.com).