



Untangling the Language: The vague and the verbose risk losses and lamentations

By Hannah Mitchell

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CHARLOTTE – Warren & Associates, a Charlotte real estate consulting firm, has lost some jobs simply because it didn't clearly tell clients what it would do for them.

Though the firm helps some of the region's biggest players with market analysis, economic development and planning needs — customers include the city of Charlotte and Bank of America Community Development Banking — its written proposals sometimes would fall short.

“We sent a proposal for a town plan, and did not get the work because our description of the design element was weak,” said the firm's owner, Frank Warren. “The client said the scope of work was too vague, and it was unclear what they would actually receive as the end product.”

Aware that words sometimes stood between him and income, Warren hired Deborah Bosley, an expert on plain language who advises companies on how to state their messages as clearly as possible for maximum

success. She trained Warren and his staff to deliver stronger, more succinct messages by ridding their writing of technical, repetitive wording and other barriers to understanding.

Then the town that had found Warren & Associates' language so difficult sought proposals for another project. The firm's newly trained writers tried again.

That time, they won.

"You can do the best research and analysis in the world," Warren said, "but if you can't communicate it effectively, you lose your audience."

Like Warren & Associates, other businesses can suffer when they fail to communicate clearly enough to win and maintain clients. And even after signing contracts, firms can be forced to spend time and money correcting confusion caused by unclear language.

Bosley, a UNC Charlotte professor who teaches technical communications, noticed the struggles some businesses endured when their documents were hard to understand. She started a consulting business, The Plain Language Group, about three years ago to help them carry out what seems a simple task, but one that can sink an otherwise brilliant idea.

Bosley had done such consulting for years, but formed the company to better market her services to businesses she thinks badly need the help.

In addition to training employees to write in clear language, Bosley converts companies' poor writing into easy-to-understand documents. She said that, without built-in reinforcement, some people forget their writing lessons, while others simply didn't have the skills to begin with.

At UNCC, she teaches students clear-writing principles they can apply in the workplace, from writing manuals and Web content to instructions and explanations of business processes.

Bosley said a Charlotte-based financial company hired her to train its employees to write clearly after it learned a valuable communication lesson. The company had sent a notice to customers about a contract change, a notice written in unclear language. She said that mistake forced the company to take 10,000 calls from confused customers, costing it hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"They hired me to help them be more effective writers," said Bosley, who wouldn't name the company. "I tested their form documents, then redesigned a number of materials for them."

Decision-makers in nonbusiness circles also are recognizing the importance of clearly written prose. Federal politicians, whose shared official language can tie even the most supple brain in knots, recently bought into the concept of clarity when the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Plain Writing Act of 2010. The bill, which the Senate will next consider, requires that federal documents issued to the public be clearly written.

U.S. Rep. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., was one of 33 Republicans who last month voted against the Plain Writing Act. He has voted against at least two bills that would have required the federal government to use common language in documents and reports, and was the only member of the U.S. House to vote against the 2008 Plain Language in Government Communications Act.

Flake said he opposed both bills because they would have required additional federal spending. He said it's important for people to be able to understand the information distributed by the federal government, but that it's unnecessary to spend more money on such an effort.

He said the 2008 bill would have cost \$3 million, while the 2010 bill would cost \$5 million.

Rep. Mel Watt, a Democrat who represents North Carolina's 12th Congressional District, co-sponsored the plain-writing bill. A spokesman for Watt said the congressman's schedule was too tight to discuss his support of the bill, and forwarded a staffer's memo outlining why he should vote for it.

The memo said that unclearly written documents can confuse and frustrate people and cause them to distrust government, and that some people say complex language may have contributed to the country's financial troubles.

Bosley agreed that plain language builds trust. "Companies that use plain language increase profits and increase and retain customers," she said, "because if you understand the information, you trust the company more."

She said a recent study showed people choose a financial institution that uses plain language, even if it pays less interest on savings than competitors that don't clearly communicate with their customers.

Financial institutions seem to be getting the message, a change seen in a new wave of clear-language advertising in the industry. Locally, Bosley pointed out that Charlotte-based Bank of America, one of her clients, is trying to make clarity a selling point.

Bank of America's "Credit Card Clarity Commitment," as outlined on its Web site, represents "changes that will make it easier for you to understand your credit card so you make the most of it, and to help you manage your money even better. These are just a few examples of our ongoing commitment to clarity."

Matt Bunk, managing editor of the Arizona Capitol Times, contributed to this story.