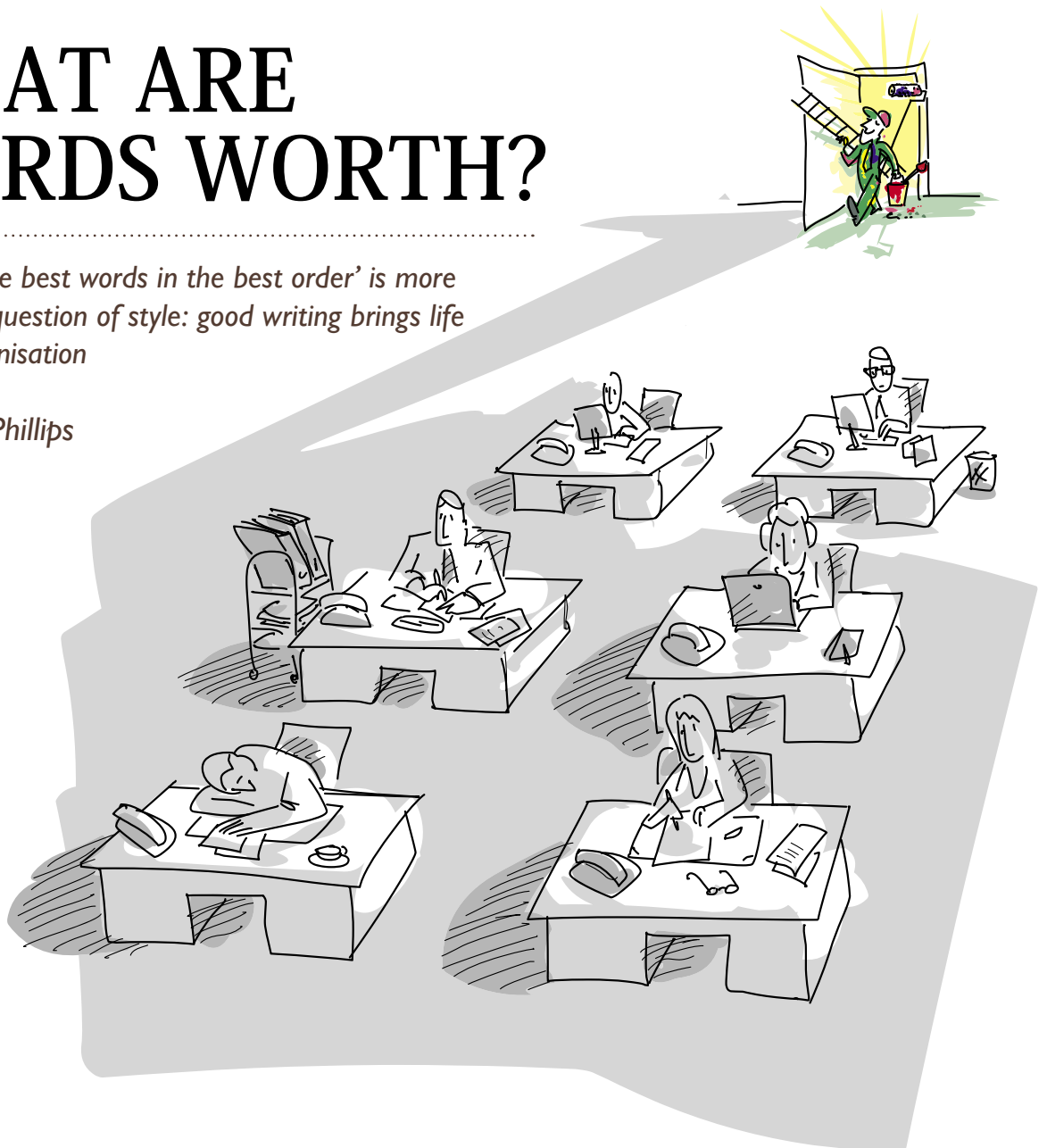


WHAT ARE WORDS WORTH?

Choosing 'the best words in the best order' is more than just a question of style: good writing brings life to your organisation

by Dafydd Phillips



I have seen the future and it is covered in latex". This gem of corporate communications landed on the desk of Paul Abrahams many years ago when he worked as a journalist. Today he is head of corporate communications, EMEA, at Nomura, and he still remembers that phrase: surely, a sign of successful communication? "I've never been able to top that", he says – perhaps with tongue in cheek. On a more serious note, the example does contain several qualities that many would agree are the hallmarks of good writing. Short, sharp and to the point – with a dash of humour as well. But what constitutes good corporate writing? As writers, corporate communicators are trapped in a half-way house, between the need to be eloquently informa-

tive on the one hand, and the business demands of the management team on the other. Communicating complicated business strategies in a way that does not tread on the toes of legal requirements, the bewildering choice of tools, platforms and channels that have developed with the growth of social media, and the difficulty of communicating across international borders: must the style of writing in corporate communications by necessity deviate from the kind of quality expected elsewhere?

CLEAR AND CONCISE Paul Abrahams does not think so: “Good writing is good writing”, he says. As a young journalist, the Financial Times sent him to journalism school, an experience he credits with setting standards for his writing that he still sticks to. “It was very effective in making me write in short sentences, using shorter words. Clear, concise writing is important, both in journalism and in communications.” Early on in his time at Nomura he wrote a style guide which to this day is given to new employees on their induction. His number one writing tip is to “use full stops as often as possible, rather than let sentences drift with multiple clauses which may make the author seem sophisticated and over-educated, but actually makes it more difficult to understand the meaning of the sentence”. Establishing a style guide that asserts a commonly-accepted and consistent set of guidelines for things like spelling and syntax might strike you as the first step towards ensuring consistent quality in your company’s copy, but what do you include in the guide and what do you leave out? Let’s look at the essentials. Richard House is director of possibilities at Story fountain, an international consultancy specialising in corporate stories. In his opinion, the basics of good writing are “Clarity, simplicity, brevity.” Beyond that, he believes that writing should somehow embody the persona of the company: “The persona (who is to be) projected in written or spoken communication does more to form opinions than either content (what to say) or form (how to say it).”

In the written word, ‘persona’ might be translated into ‘tone of voice’, which needs to not only cap-

ture the spirit of your organisation but also somehow stand apart from the competition. As House puts it, “In terms of tone, it’s a noisy ‘battle for attention’ out there. Flat and objective doesn’t do it any more. People remember effective communicators with strong personal styles, like Steve Jobs, or Richard Branson, or even Jack Welch.” It is not easy to define tone of voice: it will change from strategy to strategy, from company to company, and from project to project. Factual or technical guides call for a neutral tone; an annual report might be best served with a lively, positive style; and a press release should be phrased as simply and factually as possible, so that the press will not re-word your news. A good example of adapting your tone of voice for a specific audience is the acclaimed ‘One’ magazine, which is handed out to all employees at UniCredit, the Italian-based banking organisation with operations in 22 countries. The magazine features a range of texts, from news items and interviews to reports on roundtables and articles on sponsored events. Faced with this variety of content, Felix Göttler, UniCredit’s head of internal and online communication, has a basic rule and that is that “tone and writing style must always be appropriate to the various topics. This means that the style of articles with a strong human interest may be more informal than those with a strategic focus. After all, the style must suit the format deployed, whether it be a report, an interview, a

“In terms of tone, it’s a noisy ‘battle for attention’ out there. Flat and objective doesn’t do it any more. People remember effective communicators with strong personal styles.”

feature, a column or a commentary. As a rule, a consistent tone throughout all articles does not appeal to readers.” The tone of voice also determines or is determined by the attitude of the communications to the topic at hand, as Göttler explains: “Sometimes a neutral tone is correct, yet when talking about topics like working families, a more personal style is appropriate. At most, we see ourselves as cheerleaders when reporting on “soft” topics like major celebrations or sporting events; in our experience, readers do not appreciate the use of enthusiastic vocabulary in any other context.”

THE BEST WORDS IN THE BEST ORDER Judging these different tones of voice is a major challenge in corporate writing: how do you make sure that your different ‘voices’ don’t come across as insincere? “It is important



to be genuine, and not faking a personality”, says Katy Evans-Bush, a London-based writer and editor in the fields of social media and communications. “Fakery always shows, and false enthusiasm is a real turn-off for customers, clients and stakeholders alike.” She has put a great deal of thought into how and why we write – that much is clear from her excellent eponymous blog. According to her, corporate communicators should always bear the reader’s point of view in mind. “You know what you want people to know,” she explains, “you also need to get into their heads and think: what do they want to know? Why do they want to know it? In short, what’s in it for them? We all consume enough goods, and use enough services, and attend enough meetings and conferences, to be able to imagine ourselves in the reader’s place. If you can do this it will take care of almost everything else.” Evans-Bush is also a published poet and is the editor of the semi-annual online arts and literary magazine, *Horizon Review*. For her, poetry is an excellent formative influence for any successful writer. “Samuel Taylor Coleridge said that poetry is ‘the best words in the best order’, which makes it very similar to corporate

communications,” she says. “Poetry is about being concise. It’s about attention to detail; it demands that you pay fanatical attention to every word you write. Poetry relies on the one thing every corporate writer needs to think about: when you write a poem you’re making something to give someone – in fact, to give the reader. No matter how heartfelt your impressions are, or how compelling your story, if the reader can’t tell what you’re on about, the poem isn’t a success. It’s exactly the same result you’ll get with a corporate report no one wants to read. When I started getting really serious about my poetry-writing, I felt a definite improvement in my corporate writing. It really tightened up my thinking; it was a confidence boost.”

A MATTER OF METAPHOR

Applying discourse analysis to corporate communications is a growing field of study. Dr Veronika Köller of the University of Lancaster, UK, has researched the role of metaphor in corporate communications, for example in “Business women and war metaphors: possessive, jealous and pugnacious?”. The favouring of certain metaphors in relation to a particular sector or group (in this case, business women) is the result of a mixture of deliberate and unconscious choices by the writers, as Dr Köller told *Communication Director*: “The more conventional metaphoric expressions, e.g. ‘she joined the top brass’, are probably used unconsciously, as a cliché that is likely to be produced when journalists have little time to write an article.

But there are also more unusual, novel or creative expressions, e.g. ‘she is a fearsome fighter’, which journalists may use deliberately to make their texts interesting and entertaining. I found in my research that businesswomen sometimes use exaggerated war metaphors to refer to themselves, e.g. ‘I am ruthless in using every bullet I have’. By doing so, they may hope to capitalise on the positive value that an aggressive masculinity has in certain business contexts.” Dr Köller also argues that the preponderance of religious and political metaphors in corporate communications are meant to align the company along an established model of religious or political power-entity. Such metaphors helps to structure “the company as a community, and thereby foster stakeholder loyalty”.

Thus the use of language is just another tool for increasing productivity and profits. “It is no coincidence” she says, “that it is the areas of religion and politics that corporate writers are drawing on, even if they do so un- or semi-consciously. Because those used to have the social and cultural power that corporations have now.” In another paper, Köller quotes an interview in *Fortune* magazine in which the journalist asks “Should investors fear indigestions?” to which the corporate representative replies “We don’t digest (acquired companies), we integrate them”. Köller believes that it is very important for corporate communicators to monitor and if necessary refute metaphoric concepts about their work. “It’s a question of impression management — if journalists use certain metaphors often enough to write about the company, those can influence the way people think about the company. Metaphors with negative connotations can therefore damage the brand.”

JILT THE JARGON Brevity, clarity, simplicity, the right tone of voice and the reader’s point of view: some of the basics, then, for successful writing. So why is so much of corporate speak so ugly? We have all endured bland reports, meaningless statements, and impenetrable prose. Perhaps recognising the ingredients of good writing is not enough: bad writing also has its recurring elements, and knowing them makes it easier to avoid them. Thanks to Paul Abraham’s style guide, staff at Nomura are constantly on the look-out for three-letter acronyms, such as TLA (Three Letter Acro- oh, wait...): “There is a horrible tendency for people in business to use TLAs. They are banned at Nomura, although they do sometimes sneak through.” Then there are those key words that bedevil business writing, as if purposely designed to drive us up the wall. If Richard House could ban one word from corporate communications, it would be “jargon”;

Katy Evans-Bush's business *bête noir* is 'effectively' (as she points out, "You either do it or you don't"). Which is to say that corporate writing frequently faces criticism for its over-reliance on jargon and verbal padding. Whether it is technical jargon that blinds the reader with science, official-sounding though empty phrases and convoluted sentences, or words that have been stripped of their meaning by sheer repetition ('passionate', 'excellence', and 'celebrate' to name three examples) – a lot of corporate writing is just plain bad. Richard House is clear about who to blame for today's preponderance of jargon. "Don't blame the communicators, blame the business schools! Language follows function – you have to wonder why, for 50 years, business schools have been generating a technical language as remote as Latin for an MBA 'priesthood', whose functions can be as remote from daily life of employees as a medieval cleric's was from his congregation. Business writers (who are often not economists or trained managers) just follow the lead given them by MBAs. There's a lot of vested interest in 'expertising' the rules of business and pretending we understand them when we don't – and there's no reason why we should. So using business jargon unquestioningly simply promotes an 'emperor with no clothes' type situation for executives who should learn to be more clear and authentic." Impressing the need for authentic and clear communications upon top management is something that Katy Evans-Bush agrees with. "My experience is that business people, managers and so on, often aren't great communicators. They're do-ers. They get things done, but they aren't wordsmiths. They rely on technical language because it's how they talk to the engineers. Or they rely on busi-

ness-speak because that's what they hear in meetings. They want to impress people, so they mimic the official-sounding phrases they hear them use. As professional communicators, we are there to write what our managers would write, if they only knew how. We're the ones who know how to say it so the reader will get it."

WRITING FOR THE WEB Another source often identified as a corrosive influence on writing standards is our increasing reliance on social media and other technological tools. If tools like the internet encourage direct, unmediated communication, does it follow that carefully choosing the right word is now a redundant task? "Entirely the opposite", says Katy Evans-Bush. "Social media is driven by the written word. And not only that – the basis of social media communications is brevity. It takes skill to fit a message into, say, 140 characters, including a hashtag, while also sounding like a 'real person'" She believes that having a clear idea of what it is you want to get out of your social media channels will make using them more efficient. "Is it sales? More buy-in from an existing audience? Are you hoping to gain insight into your users, or drive traffic to your website? Once you know what you're looking for, you can tailor your posts towards that goal. In short, the new media are just as reliant on good writing as the old media ever were." Whether you are writing

“As professional communicators, we are there to write what our managers would write, if they only knew how. We're the ones who know how to say it so the reader will get it.”

for a printed internal brochure or crafting a post for the company intranet, the same degree of care and attention is required, as UniCredit's Felix Göttler explains: "Printed texts cannot be modified once they have been published, and they can be consulted at any time. Therefore, it is important to check them very carefully prior to publication. However, the same also applies to posts on the intranet. Although they can be deleted at any time, they have an enormously high rate of dissemination."

Whether old or new media, internal or external, annual report or internal memo, surely it is worth taking the time to ensure that your communications are as eloquent as possible? As the year draws to a close, why not make 2012 the year your organisation makes a commitment to improving and refreshing its in-house writing style? █

