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E-Commerce - What Is Happening To Our Writing?

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E-Commerce – What is happening to our Writing?

With the spread of electronic commerce to almost every corner of the world businesses are now using the written word to communicate more than ever before. And it is English that the world has chosen as the language of e-commerce. Although China seems to be catching up fast and beginning to tap its vast internet potential, still more than half the world's web population, over 170 million people, use English.

The 10 most popular languages used by internet users worldwide

Source: www.Blueearth.com

1	English	172.3m
2	Japanese	27.3m
3	German	19.9m
4	Spanish	19.5 m
5	Chinese (Mandarin)	18m
6.	French	13.2m
7	Korean	11.7m
8	Italian	10m
9	Portuguese	7.7m
10	Russian	6.7m

But when writing for on-line communication we are faced with an avalanche of problems.

The very speed of the transmission of messages itself makes us feel we should be available at all times to respond to messages and to respond immediately. We are under pressure to be in constant business contact when at home and even in transit, whether it be on a train or in a hotel room. And it is evident that these pressures of time are beginning to take a toll on the quality of our writing.

But are good writing skills so important in today's fast-moving e-commerce world in any case? And is it really *that* important as long as we get the message across?

The Importance of Good Writing Skills Today

The speed with which we communicate in today's e-commerce world has led many people to believe the form of the written word is not so important as the content. Indeed, attention to grammar, sentence structure and a professional writing style sometimes seem to have gone out of fashion amongst many young professionals.

But failure to check work for spelling and grammar errors could jeopardise your chances of promotion, according to research the UK recruitment agency Office Angels. More than 3 out of 4 employers regard a high degree of literacy as an essential skill. Those employees who demonstrate attention to detail are more likely to be promoted.

Incredibly, nearly 50% of employees say they frequently don't check through their work, relying on computer spell checks to spot and amend their mistakes. Among the most common errors are confusion over the application of similar words such as principle and principal, misuse of apostrophes, for example its and it's and the use of American spelling.

Electronic mail

E-mail messages are commonly viewed as vehicles of informality, to be as short as possible and full of omitted words. Readers are mistakenly perceived as good friends of the writer and assumed to completely understand the writer's intended meaning. As a result, messages can be unclear, over-familiar and often lead to misunderstandings. The meaning should be transparent at all times and sentences full and complete.

Busy readers cannot be relied on to remember the background to correspondence immediately. A brief outline of the situation is always helpful to jolt the reader's memory. Your reader will appreciate your consideration.

Like a letter, an e-mail benefits from an opening greeting and a sincerely type sign off. When first making contact, formality is the best option. But in between the message should be concise. With the daunting number of messages most business people have to digest each day no one appreciates a lengthy rambling message. Of course clarity is always more important than conciseness but without a descent into sloppy grammar. After all, we are judged on how we express ourselves.

Businesses today cannot afford to waste time and money by writers' inability to express themselves in an appropriate way using electronic mail

Writing for an International Audience

Our international readership is expanding all the time. How should we adapt our writing for this increasingly wide English speaking audience?

Internet site writers often overlook the fact that many of their readers are not native English speakers and may have difficulty in understanding their use of English. Indeed, what is known as international English is taking

on a greater importance than 'British English', as reflected in the popularity of the Encarta World English Dictionary. The global trend is towards a more simple English which doesn't use complex sentence structures, idioms and colloquialisms.

Clarity in expression at all times is essential. But when writing for a foreign readership an extra effort should be made to speak clearly and simply. It is not so easy for non-English speakers to grasp exactly what is being talked about quickly and your writing should make allowances for this.

Today we have a growth in the number of international staff working in large UK corporations due to a shortfall in suitably qualified staff available in the UK. What are the problems they face when writing for electronic commerce?

Not only do these employees from overseas have to grapple with mastering the subtleties of writing for electronic commerce in another language but they are also under great pressure to produce documents and reports quickly. And the pressures of this fast moving business world afford them little time to attend training courses on professional English writing.

A possible solution is on-line learning. This is an increasingly popular method for busy non-English executives to improve their writing skills with no disruption to their busy working schedules.

Writing for Web-sites

Writing for web-sites is very different from writing for printed documents such as leaflets and brochures. Readers cannot digest as much information from text on a screen and neither can they read as fast because of computer screen low resolution. Writing for web-sites needs to be approached in a totally different manner.

Firstly, when writing for the Web you must consider the extremely limited audience attention span. Web-surfers will move on very quickly if their interest isn't grabbed and held. You need not only to grab your readers' attention but manage to hold on to it to stop them leaving the site. On-line writing therefore needs to be snappy and lively.

Large blocks of text appearing on a screen are a definite turn off. Shorten your text as much as possible. Use blank space to create the illusion of calm and unclutteredness.

Web-site readers will skim the page quickly. The first sentence of a paragraph is therefore of paramount importance, both in a hard-copy report and especially in a document that appears on a screen.

Indeed, often people will scan the first sentence to see if the paragraph holds anything of interest to them. If it holds little appeal for them they will quickly move on. So, put considerable thought into this first sentence. Make it challenging, thought-provoking, or even a summary of the main point of your paragraph.

The on-line writer can use a variety of visual effects to hook readers and keep them interested. Visually, a block page of text on a screen can be intimidating for a reader. So use visual techniques such as a change of font type and size, generous use of headings, use of bullets, boxed statements to get your message across more effectively. Absorbing the information will be easier for the reader.

Too many visual gimmicks, however, can irritate readers and cause them to switch off. Unless they are discreet and entirely appropriate, flying icons, flashing banners, vividly coloured logos all only serve to distract the reader from the main point. Think about the poor foreign reader, who may be struggling to understand the meaning. They need to put in considerable more effort to concentrate on understanding the message than an English speaker. And they are far more likely to be distracted by attention-grabbing devices.

The growth of e-commerce has had deep effects on the way we write. We have developed almost another language of symbols and abbreviations to say what we need as quickly as possible. But we are in danger of shooting ourselves in the foot. Clarity is being sacrificed to speed and, as a result, our messages are not always hitting their intended target and thus, causing delays and misunderstandings. If we don't start paying more attention to this soon our businesses could well suffer.
