39 POWERFUL IDEAS *YOU CAN USE IN* TEACHING

Business Communication

Teaching writing fundamentals, social media, electronic media, communication ethics, personal branding, employment communication, nonverbal communication, planning business messages, routine and positive messages, persuasive messages, negative messages, visual design, team skills, interpersonal communication, communication in a world of diversity, electronic slides, presentations, and report writing.

39 Powerful Ideas You Can Use in Teaching Business Communication

For more powerful ideas, go to Bovee & Thill's Business Communication Blog (http://boveeandthillbusinesscommunicationblog.com).

Please Don't Buy This: Patagonia's Un-Marketing on Cyber Monday

From Black Friday to Small Business Saturday to Cyber Monday, business communication over the Thanksgiving holiday weekend is all about buy, buy, buy.

In this hypersaturated message environment, this email missive from the outdoor-clothing supplier Patagonia on Cyber Monday definitely stood out, starting with the large headline "Don't Buy This Jacket" and a large photo of one of its signature fleece jackets.

Rather than promoting the jacket as a must-get gift for holiday shoppers, Patagonia used the email to talk about the environmental impact of its products and to encourage readers to take the Common Threads Initiative pledge: reduce, repair, reuse, recycle, and reimagine.

Here's how the company explained its unusual message:

> Because Patagonia wants to be in business for a good long time – and leave a world inhabitable for our kids – we want to do the opposite of every other business today. We ask you to buy less and to reflect before you spend a dime on this jacket or anything else.

The message wasn't entirely un-promotional. It did point out that the high durability of the jacket meant that wearers wouldn't need to replace it for a long time. However, this was done within the context of the "reduce" message, and it clearly stands in opposition to the planned obsolescence that drives so many product categories today—how many weeks until the next generation of smartphones replaces the perfectly functional current generation?

Was Patagonia's message a cynical ploy to gain favor with its environmentally conscious target consumer? One might jump to that conclusion, but we've been following the company for a long time and respect its managerial ethos. While the message clearly resonates with the target audience, we believe it definitely fits the criteria of ethical communication, regardless of one's personal stance on sustainable commerce: It includes the information readers need in order to make an informed response, it is true in both word and spirit, and it is not deceptive in any way.

This is a great example of communication ethics to discuss with your students, as well as an intriguing case study in promotional communication. For example, can a company benefit in the long run by discouraging customers to buy less in the short run?

The Challenge of Nuanced Messages in Lean, Text-Only Media :(

You know that feeling when the the words don't quite capture the spirit of your intended message, but words are all you have?

Let's say your project team has just been reprimanded by the boss for missing an interim deadline. You're confident that the team will meet its final deadline, so you're ready to brush off the criticism and get back to work. Your colleagues, however, left the meeting grumbling about being criticized in public, and you fear that morale will slip.

You could craft a restorative, inspirational message to soothe the bruised egos and get the team's energy turned around in a positive direction. However, writing such a message could be risky, because world-weary teammates might just brush it off as happytalk and resent you for trying to be a cheerleader. Moreover, to minimize the chances of a negative reaction, you'll have to spend a lot of time trying to get the words just right.

Alternatively, you could also suggest that your colleagues lighten up and stay focused on the ultimate goal of the project. However, you already know that telling grumpy people to cheer up is a sure-fire way to make most of them even grumpier.

Instead, you opt for a quick bit of gentle and jovial sarcasm, designed to help release the negative emotions in a collegial way. When you get back to your desk, you write the following one-line message via IM or email:

> Well, let's pick up the pieces of our shattered lives and move on ;)

The over-the-top phrasing is a subtle way to remind everyone that the criticism wasn't all *that* traumatic, the use of "our" reminds your colleagues that you're all in this together, and that

winking emoticon tells everyone to lighten up without actually saying so. The apparent sarcasm connects with people who are marinating in their negative emotions, but it's really a pep talk disguised as sarcasm. With apologies to Julie Andrews, you're feeding them a spoonful of medicine to help the sugar go down.

But wait: you remember reading somewhere that emoticons are "unprofessional," so you replace it with a simple period:

> Well, let's pick up the pieces of our shattered lives and move on.

Oops. That one minor change to make the message more professional turned it into a statement of resigned sadness. If you were delivering the message in person, you could use a real smile to replace the emoticon. Even over the phone you could use a brief chuckle. But with IM or email, all you have are soulless squiggles on the screen.

You search your keyboard for any acceptable symbol that might help:

> Well, let's pick up the pieces of our shattered lives and move on!

Great, now you've managed to sound bitter and demanding at the same time.

Under these circumstances, are emoticons really all that bad? And given the trend we're seeing in many industries toward a less "corporate" voice in business communication (spurred in large part by social media), is it only a matter of time before a few basic symbols enter the mainstream for all but the most formal messages?

When you think about it, is ;) all that different from ! ? They are both symbols designed to give words a particular emotional shape. In fact, the exclamation point would probably welcome the help. As the only emphasis character at a writer's disposal, the exclamation point is asked to do too much and is often overused as a result.

What position do you take with your students regarding emoticons in their writing for the business communication course? Is it time to introduce judicious use of a few subtle and simple emoticons, at least for internal communication? (Just to be clear, we're talking here about using text emoticons only, not *graphical* smiley faces, those collections of yellow cartoon characters available in many IM and blogging systems.)

Photo credit: VersatImage

Is Video in Your Teaching Plans?

One of the more intriguing instructional questions we see on the horizon is how (or perhaps whether) to address video in the business communication curriculum.

Now that video is cheap to produce and often free to distribute, more and more companies are using video to supplement or replace written messages. Of course, video has been used for years, but it was usually concentrated in a few functional areas as marketing and training or reserved for special occasions. Significantly, video was often the domain of trained videographers who were comfortable making the many aesthetic and technical choices that quality video requires.

In much the same way that basic desktop publishing went mainstream, video is now a common media choice for many business professionals. The benefits for senders and receivers can be huge, whether it's an engineer posting a how-to video to the customer support blog or the CEO issuing an important public statement. The wild growth of YouTube and other video-sharing sites—even for clips that don't involve piano-playing kittens—is evidence of how readily professionals and consumers alike embrace content in video form.

Unfortunately, just as it was easy for the untrained to make hideous brochures and posters when they first got their hands on desktop publishing capabilities, making awkward or ineffective videos is easy, too.

Imagine a public, negative-news message from a CEO, such as the announcement of a facility closure or a product recall. A print form of this message would be challenging enough to write, given the multiple stakeholders in the audience and the level of emotional involvement. However, with a lean medium such as a news release or a blog posting, the number of nonverbal signals associated with the message is small, so the communicator can focus his or her energies on the words themselves and not have to worry too much about whether the packaging of the words will send unwanted messages.

In contrast, using video to send this message introduces a wide array of nonverbal variables. For instance, a CEO sporting a $200 haircut and $2,000 suit while sitting comfortably in a mahogany-paneled office won't be a very sympathetic character for delivering news of a major company layoff. At the other extreme, surviving employees who worry if they're next and community members who count on the company's economic activity might not be too comforted by a poorly lit CEO standing stiffly in front of a blank wall with a look of gloom and doom on her face. The same message delivered in two starkly different visual settings could trigger profoundly different reactions from the viewing audience.

Even for less dramatic messages, the communicator has to consider a significant number of variables: setting, lighting, props, camera angles, clothing, speech patterns, body language, vocal characteristics, whether to add musical cues on the fade in or fade out, and more.

With many instructors still trying to fit blogging and other new media into an already overloaded syllabus, we realize the thought of adding video might be enough to make one scream. However, as video continues to go mainstream as a business communication medium, how can today's and tomorrow's business professionals learn the nuances of good video production?

Video clearly falls outside the scope of a focused business writing classes, but what about broader business communication courses? Do you address video as a business medium now? If not, do you anticipate doing so in the future?
Photo credit: Andrew Rennie

After the BlackBerry Service Outage: Turning the Conversation Back to Positive

Corporate calamities are a great time to observe business communication in action and to analyze the substance and style of a company's response to a crisis. Apologizing and offering restitution are among the more challenging communication tasks during such times, partly because these messages can be a challenge to write in and of themselves, and partly because the negative communication takes place within the company's ongoing (and generally positive) conversational stream with its stakeholders.

Striking the right balance is often difficult. On the one hand, you have to be sufficiently humble and contrite in front of angry customers—without wallowing in negativity. On the other hand, you have to find some way to move the conversation forward and nudge it back onto a positive track—without acting as though nothing happened or that you've already forgotten about it and moved on. For example, how much do you have to beat yourself up in public to show remorse, and how soon is it appropriate to shift from "apology mode" back to business as normal?

Research in Motion (RIM) is an interesting case of a company searching for that balance while trying to turn the public dialog around. After recent global service outages that left millions of BlackBerry users without email and web access for up to three days, RIM had to soothe angry customers while continuing to push forward with positive communication on other fronts. Those ongoing communication efforts are challenging enough on their own, as RIM tries to battle declining share and become a mass-market must-have in the face of strong competition from

Apple's iPhones and smartphones based on Google's Android operating system. To make matters worse, the service outage hit just as Apple was introducing its latest phone and RIM was preparing for its annual developers' conference, where one of its tasks is convincing software companies to create more apps for the BlackBerry line.

The postings on RIM's Facebook page offer a convenient (if incomplete) way to track its outgoing communication efforts. Here is the essence of the first 10 messages that appeared after service had been restored around the world:

(1) October 13: Announcing that service has been fully restored

(2) October 14: Expressing thanks to customers for their patience and support, directing them to BlackBerry's Twitter account if they need support

(3) October 17: Announcing a "Thank You Gift from BlackBerry," a series of free software apps that will be made available to current customers over the next four weeks, with a total value of more than $100; more details to come

(4) October 18: Promising more info to come on the free apps, but announcing a new operating system for BlackBerry smartphones and tablets

(5) October 19: Announcing that the first free app is now available

(6) October 20: Announcing that the second free app is now available

(7) October 20: Posting a video that promises to answer the question "how extreme is gaming is on the BlackBerry PlayBook?"

(8) October 21: Announcing updated Twitter capability for BlackBerry smartphones

(9) October 21: Encouraging customers to continue sharing comments, saying "We love hearing your feedback, Team BlackBerry"

(10) October 24: Announcing the winners of a meet-the-celebrity contest (unrelated to the outage or the free apps program)

The substance of the free app program is open to question—for example, more than a few Facebook commenters weren't too impressed with getting a $5 game (and a frankly rather juvenile-looking one at that) as the second app, and some complained that they should've been able to choose the apps themselves. In addition, by stretching out the delivery of the apps over a period of four weeks, rather than making them available all at once, RIM is forced to keep the story of the outage alive, because the announcement of each new app will remind customers of the service problem. (Although it might've been staged this way to prevent overloading the app store, or for some other viable technical reason.)

However, aside from these questions, RIM seems to have done a reasonably good job under the circumstances of addressing the communication issues related to the outage while pushing the dialog forward. The company simply can't afford to stand still or dwell on a problem that has been fixed, given the challenges it faces from Apple and the Android platform. For the first week after the outage (posts 1-3 and 5-6), the Facebook messages focused mostly on rebuilding goodwill with customers. Following that, the messages were all forward-looking announcements on other matters.

From the messages we've reviewed, RIM apologized in a straightforward, unemotional manner and identified the technical reason for the outage. Calling the free apps a "thank you" gift also puts a positive spin on the make-good effort. (Although thanking people for their "patience," when they had no choice but to sit and stew, is always a curious if perhaps unavoidable choice.)

Image: RIM media gallery

The Crowd Is Watching: Social Media and the Shrinking Margin for Error

Judging from the vociferous comments in the social media atmosphere, one might think that Netflix's decision to split itself in two or Bank of America's introduction of a debit card fee were some of the worst horrors ever visited upon the human race. BofA isn't likely to reverse its decision, even if thousands of people really do drop their banks for a credit union on Bank Transfer Day. However, the online uproar certainly prompted Netflix to first apologize for not doing a better job of explaining its decision—and then to reverse the decision entirely. [Update 11-1-11: In response to an overwhelming number of complaints, BofA just announced it is scrapping plans to introduce the debit card fee. The crowd has spoken!]

When we began covering social media in our textbooks some years ago, it was soon apparent that these new tools were much more than tools: They were disruptive technologies that were going to fundamentally alter the relationships between companies and their stakeholders. Sure enough, consumers have more power to influence business than ever before, and they aren't always yielding that power with a gentle touch and a kind word.

In addition to aggregating consumer voices, social media can amplify consumer moods and emotions. Unpopular decisions that might have once caused little more than isolated, ineffectual grumbling can now spark organized protests that tarnish brands, deplete goodwill, and even cause changes in corporate strategy.

The message to companies: You better get it right, you better get it right the first time, and you better explain yourself before, during, and after every change you make. Effective communication has never been as important as it is in this volatile new world of business. And even if you're doing something that makes strategic or financial sense, prepare yourself for a negative response.

Photo credit: tomboy from morguefile.com

Teaching Students to Keep Their Cool After a Public Insult

Consumer-review websites such as Yelp can be a boon or a bane to local businesses. They can help businesses with little or no advertising budget get exposure through positive word-of-mouth, but they can damage businesses when unhappy customers use the Internet to vent their frustrations.

When a bad review is justified, it can alert potential customers to consider other options and help the company improve its operations. However, an unfair negative review helps nobody. It can divert potential customers away from company that might well meet their needs, and it can inflict temporary or even lasting damage on a company that doesn't deserve it.

Unfair negative reviews can come in a variety of flavors, such as when consumers are at least partially at fault (e.g., ignoring product descriptions on an e-commerce site, ordering a product that clearly doesn't meet their needs, and then criticizing it), when a minor glitch in service is blown out of proportion, or when individuals use review websites as their personal creative-writing platforms and are more interested in being funny or snarky rather than honest and helpful.

Fortunately for unfairly maligned business owners, Yelp, TripAdvisor, and other sites give them the chance to respond. However, these scenarios do present one of the more difficult writing challenges a business owner is likely to face. Unlike an apology for poor service, for example, where the owner can express regret in a straightforward manner and perhaps offer some form of compensation, the unfair review requires a great deal of finesse. The owner's response needs to correct the misinformation without engaging the reviewer in a public argument. Moreover, maintaining a calm, professional tone can be a challenge when one's reputation and livelihood have been subjected to unfair insults.

Putting your students in the roles of maligned business owners can be great practice for writing clearly while keeping one's emotions under control. Have each student find a harsh negative review on Yelp or TripAdvisor and imagine that he or she is the owner of the business in question. The student should assume that the information in the review is factually incorrect and write a hypothetical response that corrects the misinformation without "taking the bait" of the emotional attack. Encourage students to really imagine just how upset hardworking business owners would be after seeing their names dragged through the mud. By role playing scenarios like this, students will get practice at keeping their emotions under control when they are unfairly criticized in any professional setting.

Twitter Exercise to Help Students Grasp the Value of Their Business Communication Course

This Twitter exercise can help students students grasp the value of the communication course and practice writing tight, focused messages at the same time.

Have them write four messages of no more than 140 characters each to persuade other college students to take the business communication course. They should think of the first message as the “headline” of an advertisement that makes a bold promise regarding the value that this course offers every aspiring business professional. The next three messages should be support points that provide evidence to back up the promise made in the first message.

As they think about ways to promote the course to other students, your students will have the opportunity to think through what you've shared with them in class so far about the value of the course and to visualize themselves putting their new skills to work.

If you prefer not to use Twitter for this, students can submit their messages using any medium you choose.

Putting Social Media to Work: Three Examples (with PowerPoint Slides for Classroom Use)

These PowerPoint slides offer annotated examples from three companies making effective use of social media tools to develop customer relationships:

- Biznik
- Segway
- Lie-Nielsen Toolworks

You can download the PowerPoint file from the link below.

Download Bovee and Thill blog - Social Media in Business Communication - Three Examples

Wishing You and Your Students a Great Fall Term!

Hard to believe fall is upon us! We hope you had a relaxing and productive summer. We'd like to start off the new season with a brief reminder of the free online resources we have available to help business communication instructors and students, including the many resources available exclusively for adopters of Bovée & Thill texts.

Business Communication Headline News

Business Communication Headline News delivers late-breaking news stories, interesting blog posts from a variety of communication professionals, and other information you can use to enhance lectures and class discussions. You can also follow BCHN on Twitter (@buscommnews) and Facebook.

Real-Time Updates

Bovée & Thill's Real-Time Updates service offers a wealth of material we have personally selected for instructors and students, sorted by media type and textbook chapter.

Business Communication Communities on Facebook and LinkedIn

Connect with business communication instructors and professionals from around the world in the Bovée & Thill online communities on Facebook and LinkedIn:

- Facebook: Teaching Business Communication. Share your opinions about issues that are important to instructors of business communication, ask your peers questions, and offer best practices for instruction.

- Facebook: Bovée and Thill's Inner Circle for Business Communication. Devoted exclusively to college and university instructors who are adopters of Bovée & Thill texts.

- Facebook: Social Media and Electronic Communication Workshop. Learn about electronic communication and social media quickly and easily. Members can receive one-on-one mentoring, as requested, as well as opportunities for group chat and webinars.

- LinkedIn: Teaching Business Communication group. This group is a discussion and resource-sharing forum exploring all aspects of teaching business communication.

- LinkedIn: Bovée & Thill's Inner Circle for Business Communication. This group is also devoted exclusively to college and university instructors who are adopters of Bovée & Thill texts.

Bovée & Thill YouTube Channel

The new Bovée & Thill channel on YouTube offers videos with advice on teaching the new elements of business communication.

Bovée & Thill's Web Search

This powerful metasearch system developed by Bovée and Thill lets you quickly access more than 325 search engines. The tool uses a simple and intuitive interface engineered to help business communication instructors and students find precisely what they want, whether it's PowerPoint files, PDF files, Microsoft Word documents, Excel files, videos, or podcasts.

Website Registration

You'll notice that instructors and students are now asked to register for Real-Time Updates and *Business Communication Headline News*. We implemented this change to preserve the integrity

of these resources as unique benefits for adopters of Bovée & Thill textbooks. Registering gives you full access to the entire Business Communication Network, including the Learn More media items highlighted in the texts, downloadable student assignments, and more. During registration, instructors are asked to enter a special one-time password that you can retrieve from the publisher's website (instructions for doing so are provided on the registration screen). After registration, you and your students can log in simply by entering the email address and personal password you provided at registration. Note that registration is not required for this blog or for Bovée & Thill's Web Search.

If you experience any challenges in registering, contact us at cbovee@businesscommunicationblog.com.

Again, we wish you and your students a successful fall term. If we can answer any questions or entertain any suggestions, please feel free to contact us at the following email address: (cbovee@businesscommunicationblog.com).

Court Bovée and John Thill

From Lighthearted to Laugh-Out-Loud: Are Social Media Changing the Tone of Business Writing?

Have you noticed more companies lowering their guard when it comes to communicating in a lighthearted style?

We have only anecdotal observations on this, but as social media change the nature of the relationships between companies and their stakeholders, we've noticed an uptick in the number of companies working humor into their routine communication efforts.

At the subtle end of the humor spectrum, for example, the software company Techsmith includes the following privacy statement at the end of its email newsletters:

We're happy to have you on our list, and since we want to keep you all to ourselves, we never share your email address with anyone.

“We want to keep you all to ourselves” is a pleasant and slightly offbeat way to convey both the privacy assurance and the idea that Techsmith values its customers.

At the other end of the spectrum—far, far at the other end—the online music retailer CD Baby has some fun with its version of letting customers know their orders are on the way:

Your CD has been gently taken from our CD Baby shelves with sterilized contamination-free gloves and placed onto a satin pillow.

A team of 50 employees inspected your CD and polished it to make sure it was in the best possible condition before mailing.

Our world-renowned packing specialist lit a local artisan candle and a hush fell over the crowd as he put your CD into the finest gold-lined box that money can buy.

We all had a wonderful celebration afterwards and the whole party marched down the street to the post office where the entire town of Portland waved “Bon Voyage!” to your package, on its way to you, in our private CD Baby jet on this day, May 17, 2011.

We hope you had a wonderful time shopping at CD Baby. In commemoration, we have placed your picture on our wall as “Customer of the Year.”

Such an over-the-top message wouldn’t work for a bank or a medical products supplier, to be sure. However, the humor probably promotes a closer emotional bond with CD Baby, if only for poking fun at other companies that take themselves a little too seriously.

Have you seen notable examples of “business funny” that suggest a more relaxed approach to business communication (outside of advertising, that is)? Would you consider having your students try a writing exercise in this vein?

Hall of Fame: Toyota Uses a Negative-News Situation for Positive Communication (with PowerPoint Slide for Classroom Use)

Situations that involve negative news are sometimes opportunities in disguise. After Toyota had issued several vehicle recalls and been subjected to quite a bit of media scrutiny regarding product quality, the company’s chief quality officer took the opportunity to discuss the meaning

of a product recall and explain how Toyota was responding to the situation.We've annotated a copy of the news release that you can download from SlideShare or from the link below.

Download Bovee-and-Thill-blog-Hall-of-Fame-Toyota

Résumé Writing: Using a Partner to Get Unstuck

Many people find it difficult to write about themselves when preparing a resume, and the importance of having a compelling resume in today's tough employment market isn't making the task any easier.

Teaming up with a partner to work on each other's resume can help, particularly on the qualifications summary or other introductory statement, which is often the most challenging part of a resume. To help students get over this hurdle, have them pair off and start by providing each other with the basic facts about qualifications, work histories, education, and career objectives. Then have them meet in person or online for an informal interview, in which they ask each other questions to flesh out the data they have on each other.

With that information in hand, each student then writes a qualifications summary for his or her partner. (The qualifications summary is usually the best type of introductory statement for student resumes. The classic career objective is falling out of fashion, and most students don't have a long enough professional history to write a meaningful career summary.)

Students then review what their partners have written about them, asking themselves whether it feels true to what they believe about themselves and their career aspirations, whether it introduces them effectively to potential employers, and how it might be improved.

In addition to making progress toward a completed resume, this activity gives students the opportunity to practice a number of vital skills, including active listening, constructive feedback, and self-awareness (comparing one's self image with another person's perspective).

If you use this exercise or a similar partner-writing exercise, we invite you to share your experiences and insights.

Managing Communication in a Social Media Environment

Social media offer many compelling benefits, but managing business communication in this rapidly changing environment is not a simple task, for a number of reasons:

- The communication effort is more complex, with more internal and external channels to staff and monitor. Managers need to make sure that outgoing messages are consistent, that incoming messages are addressed in a timely fashion, that problems and opportunities don't fall through the cracks between all the various communication channels, and that all channels are used appropriately and legally. Simply keeping track of all the messages a company sends out—which is required for regulatory compliance in some industries—is such a challenge that new systems are being developed to capture and archive these vast and growing communication streams.

- With more media information channels that require attention, the cost structure of business communication can change dramatically. For instance, companies shifting some of their marketing communication efforts from traditional advertising vehicles to social media may find themselves spending less on media but more on personnel in order to have enough employees available to monitor and respond to social media traffic. If companies are unable to add staff to handle social media work, they need to find ways to shift workloads around so that social media do not become an unsustainable burden.

- Media tools and consumer behavior can evolve so quickly and so unpredictably that companies must be prepared to experiment continuously, adapt ideas that work, and abandon bad ideas—or good ideas that have outlived their usefulness. At the same time, companies must avoid slipping into a purely reactive mode, jumping on every hot idea and trend without integrating their efforts in an overall strategic framework.

- Finally, companies need to have social media guidelines for their employees that strike a balance between too much control and too little. On the one hand, companies that go too far in trying to control their messages or their employees' use of social media won't reap the full benefits. On the other hand, not enough control can lead to chaotic inefficiency, mixed messages that confuse customers, and the risk of exposing information that needs to be kept secret for strategic or even legal reasons.

Among major corporations, IBM has been on the leading edge of social media usage since the earliest days of blogging and strongly encourages employees to use these tools. The company's *Social Computing Guidelines* offer a number of insights into managing social communication and some intriguing topics for classroom discussion. For example, the company makes it clear that employees are personally responsible for any content they publish online and that they must always include a disclaimer that their opinions don't necessarily reflect IBM's official positions. The wide-ranging guidelines also provide helpful etiquette advice that would benefit everyone in the online arena, including "Don't pick fights, and be the first to correct your own mistakes."

Adapted from Mark Evans, "No Social Media for Us, Thank You," Sysomos blog, 9 February 2011 http://blogs.sysomos.com; Tanzina Vega, "Tools to Help Companies Manage Their Social Media," *New York Times*, 14 November 2010 [accessed 30 January 2011] www.nytimes.com; Paula Drum, "I Got People (Online): How H&R Block Connects by Using Social Media, presentation at BlogWell conference, 22 January 2009; Nick Wreden, "Social Media Policies for Business," *Baseline*, 7 June 2010 www.baselinemag.com. "Social Computing Guidelines," IBM [accessed 3 May 2011] www.ibm.com/blogs/zz/en/guidelines.html.

Image credit: Daniel Iverson

Hall of Fame: TD Ameritrade Aligns Form with Function (with PowerPoint Slides for Classroom Use)

One of the most powerful advantages of electronic media is the ability to structure the design and delivery of a message in a way that supports the optimal flow of the various information points within the message—matching form with function, in other words.The brokerage firm TD Ameritrade did this beautifully on a webpage that directs the reader's eye on a clear path through a well-organized message. We've annotated an eight-slide PowerPoint presentation that shows each step in the communication flow. Download from here or from SlideShare.

Download boveeandthillblog-halloffame-tdameritrade-110419182544-phpapp01

The Serious Side of Funny: Presentation Tips from a Comedy Super-Agent

In the entertainment industry, the road to success often starts with "the pitch," a brief presentation to a studio executive by a writer, actor, director, or producer (or a team of these people). If the executive is intrigued by the concept, it might be discussed further within the studio, and eventually a decision will be made about funding production. With so much riding on this short presentation, it's a high-anxiety event, and making pitches is a vital communication skill. In fact, the ability to pitch effectively is so important that it has its own industry slang term: being "good in a room."

Pitches can fall flat for a number of reasons, whether the concept is just not a good fit for a particular studio, the idea is so unusual that the executives are unwilling to risk investing in it, or the pitch is just poorly presented. A presenter may fail by being unable to summarize what a new show or movie idea is all about, by smothering the executives in too many details, or by trying too hard to sell the concept. Comedy super-agent Peter Principato, recently profiled in the *New York Times*, gives his clients presentation advice that lends itself to a wide range of business presentations in just about any profession or industry:

- First, come up with a single compelling sentence that describes the show or movie. If presenters can't do this, chances are they haven't thought the idea out well enough, or the idea is so complicated that it would be too risky or too expensive to attempt. This one-line summary is essential for another reason, in that the first studio executive to hear the pitch will usually need to share it with other executives or potential financiers before a decision can be made. A catchy, succinct idea is a lot easier to repeat than a rambling, confused concept.

- Second, expand on that one sentence with a single paragraph that builds interest by substantiating the concept and helping the listener envision what the show or movie would be like.

- Third, for a proposed series, explain how the concept would play out, week by week, by describing several episodes.

- Fourth, fill in the "big picture," such as by describing how the show would look on screen or by rounding out the main characters.

(You've probably noticed how this advice follows the classic AIDA model of getting attention, building interesting, increasing desire, and asking for a decision, which is what makes

Principato's advice valuable for just about any profession.) As a fresh take on presentation projects for your business communication class, have students "reverse engineer" a favorite TV program to craft a pitch, including the one-sentence grabber, the one-paragraph interest-builder, and the broader explanation of how the TV series would play out. Have individuals or teams pitch their program ideas to the rest of the class, who play the role of studio executives.

Classroom Slides Now Available for Download from SlideShare

A few readers have reported difficulties with downloading the classroom slides that accompany some of our blog posts. For your convenience, all the slides are now available on SlideShare at http://www.slideshare.net/Bovee.

A Fun—and Challenging—Way to Practice Limiting the Scope of a Presentation

Limiting the scope of a presentation, whether it's to fit the time limit a speaker has been given or simply to deliver a message as efficiently as possible, is a challenge for all speakers.

To give your students a fun way to practice this essential skill, consider assigning some *pecha-kucha* presentations. Pecha-kucha is a style of presentation that might be the ultimate in creative constraint: The speaker is limited to 20 image slides, each of which is displayed for exactly 20 seconds before automatically advancing.

PechaKucha Nights, which are open to the public, are now put on in cities all over the world. You can visit www.pecha-kucha.org for more information on these events or to view some archived presentations.

Image credit: Richard Bussink

Hall of Fame: Fear No Project's Minimalist Design Keeps Focus on Content (with PowerPoint Slide for Classroom Use)

The project management blog Fear No Project provides a good example of how less can be more when a writer wants to keep the focus on textual content. As this annotated PowerPoint slide shows, the design is about as minimal as one can possibly get, but it supports blogger Bruce McGraw's goal of sharing in-depth project management information with his readers.

Download boveeandthillblog-halloffame-fearnoprojectblog-110419185432-phpapp02

Hall of Shame–and Fame: Chargify Infuriates Its Customer Base, The Shares the Lessons Learned

Want to make an unpleasant situation even worse? Spring the news on people with no warning.

Chargify, which provides securing billing solutions for small to midsized e-commerce companies, charges its clients flat monthly fees based on the number of customers they have. This tiered pricing plan keeps costs low for e-commerce startups that still have few revenue-generating customers.

Until recently, the lowest tier in Chargify's pricing plan had an extremely attractive price point—it was free. The idea behind the free tier was to attract e-commerce companies still in their startup phase, and as they grew, they would grow into the higher tiers and become paying clients. However, Chargify discovered that many companies in the free tier grew very slowly, if they grew at all, and Chargify wound up supporting a lot of users that weren't bringing in any revenue.

In order to pull in enough money to deliver the dependable, sustainable services that its clients needed, Chargify realized it needed to raise prices, and that included charging lowest-tier clients for the first time. The company announced its new pricing structure and immediately came under

attack from many of its clients—for the price increases themselves, for the lack of any advance notice, and for Chargify's refusal to "grandfather" existing customers under their original pricing plans. Some called the company "greedy" or "stupid," and a few went so far as to accuse it of bait-and-switch tactics.

As bloggers and commenters across the Internet piled on, the technology news site TechCrunch summed up with the situation with an article that began, "It's been a rough day for Chargify . . ." After spending two long days responding to criticisms on Twitter, industry blogs, and other venues, co-founder David Hauser wrote an unusually frank blog post titled "How to Break the Trust of Your Customers in Just One Day: Lessons Learned from a Major Mistake." He said the company made "a massive mistake" in the way it handled the changes to its pricing model. By failing to alert customers well in advance of the change, he continued, Chargify "broke a trust that we had developed with our customers over a long period of time, and will take much to repair. We should have communicated our need and desire to remove free plans and provided more information about how this would happen, and over a period of time leading up to the change."

The services Chargify provides take money to deliver, and the price increases were necessary, but everyone involved agrees that the situation was not handled well. Hauser and his team will continue to learn new lessons as they expand Chargify, but you can bet they won't ever initiate a price increase without giving their customers plenty of warning. (By the way, if you teach Introduction to Business, this story has a number of interesting angles to discuss in class, including the difficulty of validating a business model before it goes live, the financial imperative to jettison unprofitable customers, and the pluses and minuses of the *freemium* pricing strategy.)

Using Twitter to Teach Message Organization, Composition, and Revision

Twitter offers some interesting possibilities for teaching business writing skills. The 140-character limit forces writers to distill their messages to the essentials, and planning a multi-tweet message can expand this practice in clarity by encouraging writers to think through a unified sequence of points that support a primary headline tweet. Presentation expert Cliff Atkinson suggested the Rule of Four Tweets as a tool for planning presentations, based on the realization that many presentation audiences now use Twitter as a live *backchannel* during presentations.

By writing four short messages (one top-level summary and three major supporting points), a speaker can make sure a presentation has a single, tightly focused main idea with a sufficient

number of distinct supporting points. And then by including those four message points as Twitter friendly statements during the presentation, the speaker makes it easy for audience members to spread the word by tweeting those points to their followers.

We've begun implementing variations on this idea as student exercises in our business communication texts—for a variety of document types, in addition to presentations. Conveying the main idea of a document or presentation in no more than 140 characters helps students verify that they've really thought through their purpose, beyond just a descriptive headline. Supporting that main idea with three strong supporting messages helps ensure adequate support for the main idea. For all four tweets, the character limit requires careful writing and revision in order to convey meaningful ideas clearly and concisely.

The communication tasks don't have to involve messages that would normally be delivered via Twitter, either. It's the experience of expressing a set of ideas within the limits of the medium that makes the approach so appealing. Sending actual tweets isn't required, of course, although if a class is set up with private Twitter accounts, students can send live tweets without worrying about the activity being visible to the outside world. As alternatives, students can e-mail their four messages to the instructor, post them on a class blog, or include them on slides in a presentation.

Hall of Fame: Red Bull's Audience-Centered Approach to Social Media (with PowerPoint Slide for Classroom Use)

The energy drink company Red Bull has one of the largest fan bases on Facebook, giving it the opportunity to connect with millions of enthusiastic customers. This annotated PowerPoint slide illustrates the company's audience-centered approach to social media—sharing information and stimulating conversations among fans—rather than the traditional mode of delivering promotional messages to passive receivers.

Download boveeandthillblog-halloffame-redbullonfacebook-110419185813-phpapp02

New Ways of Working, New Ways of Writing

Note: A video that discusses these nine modes (discussed below) and shows numerous examples is now available on the Bovee-Thill YouTube channel.

As businesses continue to adopt new media choices, the writer's task is becoming more diverse and more demanding. In the old days, few businesspeople outside an advertising agency ever faced the challenge of writing headlines and teaser copy, for example. Today, though, anyone who hopes to e-mail, blog, or tweet effectively has to be adept at catching a reader's attention with well-crafted subject lines, post titles, or micro-messages.Looking across the media landscape, we see at least nine distinct compositional modes. These aren't necessarily limited to electronic media, of course, but taking advantage of the full spectrum of electronic media means having at least basic skills in all nine:

1. **Conversations.** IM is a great example of a written medium that closely mimics oral conversation. The ability to think, compose, and type relatively quickly is important to maintaining the flow of an electronic conversation.

2. **Comments and critiques.** One of the most powerful aspects of social media is the opportunity for interested parties to express opinions and provide feedback, whether it's leaving comments on a blog post or reviewing products on an e-commerce site. To be effective commenters, writers need to focus on short chunks of information that a broad spectrum of other site visitors will find helpful—and avoid the rants, insults, inappropriate jokes, and blatant self-promotion that are the bane of social media.

3. **Orientations.** With vast amounts of information presented in so many different formats, the Internet can be an extremely confusing place, even for knowledgeable professionals. As information piles up, the ability to help readers find their way through an unfamiliar system or subject has become more valuable than ever, particularly when material of interest is spread across multiple websites that are out of the writer's control.

4. **Summaries.** Writing clear and concise summaries has always been an essential skill, of course, but the info-grazing habits of today's online readers makes it even more vital. For example, popular bloggers are often good at summarizing masses of information for people to busy to sort through it on their own.

5. **Reference materials.** With virtually unlimited capacity and the ability to provide immediate access to any location in an information structure, the Internet is obviously an ideal repository for reference materials. However, browsing, searching through, and making sense of these vast warehouses can be quite a challenge for information seekers.

Even with search capabilities at hand, readers don't always know which search terms will yield the best results, so writers can help by including orientations and organizing the material in logical ways with clear headings that promote skimming.

6. **Narratives.** Compelling storytelling can be a good way to cut through the clutter of online media, whether it's sharing a company history or demonstrating a product.

7. **Teasers.** The combination of length limitations (such as on Twitter) and hyperlinking opportunities seems custom-made for writing teasers—intentionally withholding key pieces of information as a way to pull in readers or listeners in. Although they can certainly be effective, teasers obviously need to be used sparely and with respect for readers' time and intelligence.

8. **Status updates and announcements.** A lot of social media writing involve status updates and announcements, an area where some new business professionals may need a little practice to transition from personal and social updates to "business appropriate" updates.

9. **Tutorials.** Given the community nature of social media, the purpose of many messages in these media is to share how-to advice. Writing tutorials is great practice for analyzing audience needs and crafting messages that are clear, concise, and logically organized.

Hall of Shame: Waldorf-Astoria's Passive Use of Passive Voice

Indirect language and passive voice can be great tools for diplomacy, but as New York's Waldorf-Astoria hotel recently demonstrated, they can also be used to avoid the appearance of taking responsibility.

The Waldorf was clearly in a bind when a large contingent of the Saudi royal family arrived and needed a whole lot of hotel rooms, at a time when the hotel was booked for the Thanksgiving holiday. The hotel would not confirm what happened or explain its decision, but the apparent result was that more than 100 other guests with confirmed reservations discovered they had been bumped. In addition to the decision itself, there is the significant customer service question of why the hotel didn't inform all those it had to bump before they arrived. Even though the hotel made other arrangements for these guests, when you book a room at the world-famous Waldorf, you want to stay at the world-famous Waldorf.

However, what really caught our attention was the language used by Hilton Hotels, the Waldorf's owner, to explain the situation. Hilton's statement included the following:

"On those occasions when a guest relocation occurs, it is always our intention and goal to ensure that the affected individual is totally satisfied."

When a guest relocation occurs. We'll even concede the "guest relocation" euphemism. It's the word *occurs* that is the real gem here, as though some mysterious force relocated 100 people who had confirmed reservations. These relocation didn't passively "occur." Waldorf actively relocated 100 customers.

Yes, the hotel was clearly in a jam, but just as clearly it made the decision to accommodate one group of customers at the inconvenience of another group. We're not saying the hotel should have just come right out and explained exactly what it did, but it could have shown more respect for the bumped customers by taking responsibility for the decision. Here's one possibility:

"When circumstances force us to relocate guests, it is always . . . "

This keeps the business decision behind the scenes but puts the hotel in the role of the active agent responsible for the decision. This seems like a reasonable middle ground between offering a full explanation and pretending that a Thanksgiving miracle happened.

What do you think of Hilton's statement? What would you advise your students to say if they were in the role of Hilton's PR manager?

The Commenting Conundrum: Are Blog Comments a Useful Measurement of Social Media Engagement?

Judging from the number of articles offering advice, the question of how to encourage more comments on posts is a matter of wide concern among bloggers. In fact, this dilemma seems to be at the heart of the social media model.

Blog comments can be tremendously valuable in multiple ways, of course, from gathering market intelligence to correcting or expanding information offered in a post. The question we'd like to focus on here is whether comment volume is a useful measurement of social media engagement:

- Is comment volume a meaningful measure of engagement specifically and of communication success more generally, relative to the other metrics available (including friend, membership, or subscriber totals; page
views; file downloads; and product orders)?

- Other than those situations in which collecting information via comments is the primary purpose of a blog post, can bloggers meet their ultimate goals without generating high volumes of comments?

- What would change if comment volume on a given blog was two or three or ten times higher?

- Is a lack of comments necessarily a negative sign, or is it more just a reflection of how things are?

- If a blog has only limited commenting traffic, does it truly qualify as a social medium? Or is it really closer to the traditional publishing model, in which readers get the information they want without participating in a conversation?

While pondering these questions, we stepped back to consider our own behavior as blog readers, both in our personal interests and with the thousands of business-oriented blog posts we read every year.

Why Don't Readers Leave More Comments?

This isn't a rigorous analysis, but we reflected on our own blog reading habits and extrapolated six possible reasons why blog readers may be reluctant to leave comments.

- **Limited by time constraints.** Every professional has too much to do, and leaving comments is just one more item on the to-do list.

- **Not feeling part of the community.** Some blogs seem to have a tightknit sense of community, with a core of frequent commenters who are on friendly and even personal terms. To other readers, this *close* sense of community can seem like a *closed* sense of community, and joining the conversation can feel like butting into a lively conversation at a party.

- **Reluctant to ask for advice or information.** Some blog readers are comfortable using the comment function to ask for information or advice, but we suspect many others are not and would rather dig around to find answers on their own.

- **Having nothing substantial to add.** Most of the time, we'd be willing to speculate, most readers conclude that they don't have anything useful to add. More broadly, blog posts that are clear, complete, and noncontroversial probably won't attract a lot of in-depth comments simply because there isn't much for anybody to add.

- **Unmotivated by a sense of reward.** Even when readers might have something to add, many probably consider the potential reward (such as peer recognition or promotion for one's own blog) and conclude it's not worth the trouble.

- **Sensing that the conversational peak is over.** When posts do generate a healthy comment stream, this often seems to peak after a couple of days. After that, many readers who might be motivated to comment probably sense that the show has moved on and there is no point in contributing.

Given how many reasons there are not to leave comments, ramping up comment volume is clearly a challenge. If nothing else, bloggers need to adopt a realistic stance when it comes to getting comments.

Can Readers Be Engaged Without Leaving Comments?

Evidence suggests that bloggers can accomplish communication goals without it showing up in comment volume. For instance, we've purchased books, courses, and other products from bloggers without leaving comments on their posts. In these instances we're deeply engaged as readers and consumers, and they're accomplishing at least some of their business goals, without us being visible community members in the "social" sense.

A lack of comments might be troubling, in other words, but it doesn't necessarily signal a lack of engagement.

Bottom Line: Where Do Comments Fit in the Big Picture?

No single answer will fit every situation, but it seems appropriate to ask if the quest for comments can be overemphasized. At the very least, bloggers should figure out where comment volume falls in their hierarchy of goals. For example, are comments mostly "feel good" feedback, a real information source, an opportunity for readers to share their knowledge, or something else entirely?

Using the Cook's Source Copyright Infringement Episode for Class Discussions

You may have read about the recent episode of copyright infringement by *Cook's Source* magazine, in which the magazine's editor, Judith Griggs, justified her actions by asserting that the Web is "public domain," and therefore it is acceptable to reuse published material without permission. Moreover, Griggs claimed that this sort of usage occurs frequently, "especially on college campuses and [in] the workplace." (Source)

Here are three entertaining and thought-provoking writers who have commented on this story:

Monica Gaudio wrote the original material that was used without her permission.

Nick Mamatas, the source referred to above, helped spread the word about what happened.

Jonathan Bailey of PlagiarismToday wrote an insightful post about the story and clarified that Griggs' use appeared to be copyright infringement, rather than plagiarism, as most commenters are calling it, because *Cook's Source* apparently did mention Gaudio's name.

This episode makes for some eyebrow-raising reading on its own (the unauthorized usage is only part of the story), but it also points to several issues that make great discussion topics for the business communication course.

First, how many people actually believe that content on the Internet falls under the legal definition of being in the public domain? According to the U.S. Copyright Office, "A work of authorship is in the 'public domain' if it is no longer under copyright protection or if it failed to meet the requirements for copyright protection. Works in the public domain may be used freely without the permission of the former copyright owner." Have you ever polled your students on their understanding of this?

Second, even if material isn't legally in the public domain, how many people consider that its mere presence on the Internet makes it fair game? This might be called the "If you don't want someone to take it, don't put it online" defense.

Third, looking at the matter of delivering value of any kind via digital means, how many people would steal something in digital format but not steal an equivalent product in a different medium? Music is one of the most commonly discussed products in this regard, of course. How

many people who would never dare steal a tangible CD from a music store but not think twice about taking the very same music from an intangible online

As a thought experiment, ask your students to think into the future, when the rapidly developing field of three-dimensional printing could mean that a variety of products can be transmitted digitally and reproduced at home using low-cost printers. Say you like some designer dinnerware you saw in a store but don't want to pay the designer's price? Download the specifications file and "print" it yourself using cheap raw materials. Even for those who try to justify making copies of songs, books, and other media products, would they draw the line at reproducing more-tangible "stuff"? What if some day you could make unauthorized copies of furniture or cars?

Employment Communication: Four Essential Steps to Building a Personal Brand

If you teach employment communication and job search strategies as part of the business communication course, personal branding can be a great way to help students understand what they have to offer future employers and how to focus their communication efforts.

Even though personal branding is a hot topic these days, more than a few professionals have probably expressed the sentiment of “I don’t want to be a brand; I just want to be a good employee.” However, like it or not, personal branding affects everyone, in every profession.

The Automobile Analogy

Automobiles offer a great analogy to help students understand the importance and meaning of brand. Volvos, BMWs, and Cadillacs can all get you from Point A to Point B in safety, comfort, and style—but each brand emphasizes some attributes more than others to create a specific image in the minds of potential buyers. Common mental associations for these brands, for instance, are the safety emphasis of Volvo cars, the performance emphasis of BMW, and the luxury emphasis of Cadillac.

Employers think about potential employees in much the same way. Three candidates for a particular job might have all the basic skills required—they can all get an employer from Point Ato Point B—but the first might come across as a highly focused technical whiz, the second as a potential business leader, and the third as competent but unmotivated and uninspiring. The impressions an employer forms can help or hurt the job seeker, and they can range from spot-on to wildly inaccurate, so it’s vital for candidates to take control of their brand images.

If You Don't Brand Yourself, I'll Do It for You

Even though some people are reluctant to brand themselves or even disdainful of the whole idea, personal branding always takes place. The only question is who is in control. BMW could leave its brand image entirely up to others, letting drivers, mechanics, and journalists decide what "BMW" means. All these parties decide for themselves what "BMW" ultimately means to them, of course, but the company works constantly to shape that mental picture, through everything from its product advertising to the architectural nuances in its dealerships.

Similarly, if job seekers don't establish a clear brand image for themselves, interviewers and hiring managers will do it for them. A good place for students to start grasping this concept is to realize they have already established a personal brand with their professors, classmates, teammates, and others, based on how they've behaved and performed in the past. Now is the time to become more conscious of that brand and to consciously shape it for long-term professional success.

Helping Students Identify and Promote Their Personal Brands

To help students craft their personal brands during the job search, guide them through these four steps:

First, figure out the "story of you." Simply put, where have you been in life, and where are you going? Every good story has dramatic tension that pulls readers in and makes them wonder what will happen next. Where is your story going next?

Second, clarify your professional "theme." You want to be seen as something more than just an accountant, a supervisor, a salesperson. What will your brand theme be? Brilliant strategist? Hard-nosed, get-it-done tactician? Technical guru? Problem solver? Creative genius? Inspirational leader?

Third, reach out and connect. Major corporations spread the word about their brands with multimillion-dollar advertising campaigns. You can promote your brand for free or close to it. You can spread your brand message by networking—connecting with like-minded people, sharing information, demonstrating skills and knowledge, and helping others succeed.

Fourth, deliver on your brand's promise—every time, all the time. When you promote a brand, you make a promise, a promise that whoever buys that brand (as in, hires that employee) will get the benefits you are promoting. All of your planning and communication is of little value if you fail to deliver on the promises that your branding efforts make. Conversely, when you deliver quality results time after time, your talents and your professionalism will speak for you.

Personal Branding Resources

Here are some great resources on personal branding to share with students:
www.personalbrandingblog.com

http://altaeeblog.com
http://blog.brand-yourself.com
www.krishnade.com/blog
http://cuberules.com
www.jibberjobber.com/blog
http://theengagingbrand.typepad.com
http://blog.brand-yourself.com

The True Story of an Overlooked Mode of Business Communication

In the beginning, there was storytelling.

Humans have been telling stories for as long as they've been communicating. As individuals, stories are central to our experience of learning how to communicate. And much of the communication in contemporary life, from journalism to political discourse, relies on narrative structure.

In spite of its pervasive role in human affairs, though, storytelling is often overlooked as a mode of business communication. However, stories can be an effective way to organize business messages in a surprising number of scenarios, from recruiting and training employees to enticing investors and customers.

Advertisements are often mini-narratives, with the product or a user of the product playing the role of the hero. Entrepreneurs use stories to help investors see how their new ideas have the potential to affect people's lives (and therefore generate lots of sales and return on investment). Companies tell the story of their founding and early years, using their heritage as a way to explain who they are today.

Career-related stories, such as how someone found the opportunity to work on projects he or she is passionate about, can encourage skilled employees to consider joining a firm.

Business stories can be cautionary tales as well, dramatizing the consequences of career blunders, ethical mistakes, and strategic missteps.

Whether one's purpose is to inspire, persuade, teach, or warn, chances are narrative technique can make the message more interesting, personal, and memorable. As the business media landscape continues to evolve and fragment, storytelling is likely to become evenmore important

as a way to stand out from the clutter and chaos of competing messages. In fact, we're adding significant coverage of storytelling to the newest editions of our textbooks, including a variety of student activities and cases.

Have you discussed storytelling in your business communication classes? We'd love to hear any stories you have to tell. Go to http://boveeandthillbusinesscommunicationblog.com, search for this topic, and write your comments.

How Do You Manage the Backchannel in Your Classroom?

The terminology might be new, but it's been going on for about as long as mobile digital gadgets have been around. If you've stood in front of a class any time in the past five years or so, it's been happening right in front of you.

The Backchannel: A Communication Revolution

The new name for this old phenomenon is the *backchannel*, which presentation expert Cliff Atkinson defines as "a line of communication created by people in an audience to connect with others inside or outside the room, with or without the knowledge of the speaker."

A backchannel appears whenever people start a parallel, digital conversation, which can be done with e-mail, IM, text messaging, live-blogging, Twitter, and whatever innovation comes along next. The backchannel is revolutionizing business presentations, so much so that systems such as BackNoise have been launched specifically to enable backchannels. Many conferences now publish a Twitter hashtag and encourage attendees to use this tag when they tweet during presentations so that interested parties can easily participate in the conversation.

The Risks and Rewards of the Backchannel

The backchannel presents both risks and rewards for business presenters. On the negative side, for example, listeners can research your claims the instant you make them and spread the word quickly if they think your information is shaky. The backchannel also gives contrary audience members more leverage, which can lead to presentations spinning out of control.

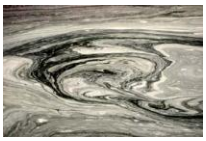
On the plus side, listeners who are excited about your message can build support for it, expandon it, and spread it to a much larger audience in a matter of seconds. You can also get valuable feedback during and after presentations. Some presenters even schedule "Twitter breaks" to catch up on comments and questions from the audience.

The Backchannel in the Classroom: What's Your Stance?

In business settings, the secret to succeeding with the backchannel is to embrace the concept, rather than trying to ignore it or fight it. The backchannel is going to happen whether the presenter likes it or not.

In a classroom setting, however, an instructor obviously has at least some degree of control. What is your stance in the classroom? Do you encourage, tolerate, or prohibit electronic communication during lectures? Have you tried to integrate the backchannel during student presentations?

BP's "Gulf of Mexico Response" Website Links to Parody Twitter Account



We can only assume that BP's website has been hacked. As of October 7, 2010, the "Contacts" page in the "Gulf of Mexico Response" section of BP's website links to a parody Twitter account, @Oil_Spill_2010. The downloadable PDF (see link above) has current captures of the BP webpage, the parody Twitter account, and BP's real Twitter account.

This is not the first Twitter parody account associated with the spill, either. Another spoof account, @BPGlobalPR, currently has 188,000 followers—ten times more than BP's own Twitter account.

Aside from the matter of tighter website security to prevent hacked links, this situation highlights the challenge of responding to negative information in a social media environment. Here are some related questions to discuss with your students:

- Are parody efforts an effective form of protest communication?
- Are such parodies ethical from the perspective of all stakeholders?
- In general, how should a company respond to social media attacks on its reputation, particularly in the case of a Twitter account such as @BPGlobalPR, which has a much

larger following than the company's own account?

- Should BP engage @BPGlobalPR directly (by having a company representative respond to its tweets) or indirectly (relying on its own PR efforts to counter the negative information)?

- How should a company respond if someone is spreading demonstrably false information about its products, operations, or executives?

Download 213035

Hall of Fame: Ignite Media Demonstrates Strong Paragraphs and Effective Transitions

Download this PowerPoint file

This blog post from Ignite Media demonstrates several strong writing techniques, including unified, coherent paragraphs and effective transitions.

We have annotated a copy of the post that you can share with you students via PowerPoint.

Have Your Students Judge Their Promotional Skills Using Real-Life Test Results

As George Bernard Shaw famously put it, the single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place. One of the great promises of online business communication is

the relative ease with which companies can test to see how well their communication efforts are working.

Online marketing expert Anne Holland's Which Test Won? offers a wonderful opportunity for promotional writers to test their acumen by predicting the relative performance of dozens of pairs of actual split-tested web communications.

The site's archives, 75 Past Tests, can be a great teaching resource. Present each A/B pair to your students and ask them to vote on which version generated a larger response in real-life testing. Holland provides the answer to each test and offers insightful commentary on the test procedures and outcomes.

Avoiding "Death by PowerPoint" with Free-Form Slide Designs

Download this PowerPoint file

Anyone who has suffered through a barrage of bullet points in a tedious presentation is likely to welcome the more creative style of slide design advocated by presentation specialists such as Nancy Duarte and Garr Reynolds.

Structured versus Free-Form

The PowerPoint slides you can download from the link above show the difference between conventional, bullet point-intensive designs (which we refer to as *structured slides*) and the new, more visually oriented designs (which we refer to in our texts as *free-form slides*).

The two structured slides (Slides 1 and 2) follow the same format throughout the presentation. In fact, they're based directly on the templates built into PowerPoint, which tend to feature lots and lots of bullet points.

In contrast, the two free-form slides (Slides 3 and 4) don't follow a rigid structure. Of course, free-form designs should not change randomly from one slide to the next. They should still be unified by design elements such as color and font selections.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Structured Slides

Although some commentators would like to banish structured slides to permanent oblivion in favor of free-form designs, both design strategies have advantages and disadvantages that need to be considered for each presentation opportunity.

Structured slides have the significant advantage of being easy to create; you simply choose an overall design scheme for the presentation, select a template for a new slide, and start typing. If you're in a schedule crunch, going the structured route might save the day because at least you'll have something ready to show.

Download 205760.ppt

When Self-Expression and Professional Standards Clash: Body Art in the Workplace

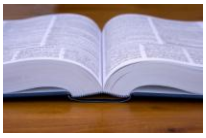
Generational differences abound in the workplace, but few are quite as visible as *body art*: tattoos, piercings (other than ear lobes), and hair dyes in unconventional colors. According to survey data from the Pew Research Center, people younger than 40 are much more inclined than those over 40 to display some form of body art. For example, people 26 to 40 years old are four times more likely to have tattoos than people who are 41 to 64 years old.

With such profound differences, it's no surprise that body art has become a contentious issue in many workplaces, between employees wanting to express themselves and employers wanting to maintain particular standards of professional appearance. As employment law attorney Danielle S. Urban writes in *Workforce Management*, the issue gets even more complicated when religious symbolism is involved.

Who is likely to win this battle? Will the body art aficionados who continue to join the workforce and who are now rising up the managerial ranks force a change in what is considered acceptable appearance in the workplace? Or will they be forced to cover up in order to meet traditional standards?

Have your students expressed any opinions about their right to display body art in the workplace?

APA, MLA, Chicago: Your Thoughts on Citation Formats



The release of the 16th edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style* and the recent revisions to the APA and MLA guidelines prompted us to wonder how instructors are using citation style guides in today's business communication courses. If you have a moment, we'd appreciate your feedback on a couple of points.

First, which citation format do you use in your class?

Second, how much importance do you place on strict adherence to the guidelines? Clear and complete attribution is always vital, of course, and helping students learn to cite correctly is an important responsibility in any writing class. However, we're curious about how much latitude you give students who cite clearly and completely but don't follow the guidelines exactly.

When Free Speech Isn't Quite So Free: Legal Hazards in Online Communication

Millions of bloggers, tweeters, and forum posters appreciate the free-wheeling nature of online communication, but a growing number are learning that free speech sometimes has a steep price. As Santa Clara University's Eric Goldman emphasizes in this helpful overview article, "Most people have no idea of the liability they face when they publish something online."

Anonymity is no safeguard, either. Even anonymous posters have been sued for negative remarks after the websites on which they left comments were forced to reveal their identities.

These legal and ethical issues in online communication offer intriguing and sometimes troubling examples to discuss with students. To find cases to cover in class, a good place to start is the "Legal Threats Database" maintained by the Citizen Media Law Project.

Helping Students Adapt Their Writing Skills to Wiki Collaboration

The widespread adoption of wikis in both business and higher education is a testament to the collaborative value of wiki technology. However, wiki collaboration does require a broader set of skills than traditional business communication requires. It also requires a different approach to communication, one in which the authorial "me" is superseded by the collaborative "us."

Evaluating, editing, and revising the work of other writers

Before getting your students started on wiki projects, it's a good idea to offer some coaching in evaluating, editing, and revising the work of other writers. These tips are helpful in a variety of communication situations, of course, but they're essential for wiki collaboration.
Before making substantive changes to an article, students should consider the following questions:

What is the purpose of this article? Editing or revising without knowing what the writer hoped to accomplish runs the risk of making the piece less effective, not more.
Who is the target audience?
What information does the audience need?
Does the article provide accurate, relevant, and complete information in a well-organized way?
Does the writing demonstrate the "you" attitude toward the audience?
Is the level and tone of the writing appropriate for the audience?
Can the readability be improved?
Is the writing clear? If not, how can it be improved?
Is the writing as concise as it could be?

Adapting to the wiki environment

Students can improve their wiki collaboration skills by keeping these points in mind:*

Let go of traditional expectations of authorship, including individual recognition and control.
Understand the expectations for adding new pages. For instance, is it acceptable to add pages that are still rough or incomplete, or does the community expect new pages to be close to final quality?
Find and follow the wiki's guidelines for helping new contributors integrate their work into the group's ongoing effort.
Encourage all team members to improve each other's work.

Learn how to use page templates and other formatting options to make sure your content's format matches the rest of the wiki.
Use the separate editing and discussion capabilities appropriately.
Take advantage of the sandbox, if available (this is a "safe," nonpublished section of the wiki where team members can practice editing and writing).

Using the Bovée/Thill wiki simulator

You can give your students the opportunity to develop wiki skills in a secure, confidential environment. The unique Bovée/Thill wiki simulator lets students practice evaluating and revising wiki articles using a real, live wiki editor. Unlike a conventional wiki, however, this system saves each student's work separately and privately so that you can evaluate his or her ability to assess an article with numerous built-in flaws and make the corrections needed to improve readability and achieve the "you" attitude.

Here are two wiki exercises that use the simulation, a simpler one-paragraph article and a more-challenging full-page article.
http://businesscommunicationnetwork.com/wiki/?asn=3
http://businesscommunicationnetwork.com/wiki/?asn=1

Also, you may find this report from the University of Delaware on wiki usage in higher education helpful as you plan and manage wiki projects. It offers some thoughtful advice on grading strategies, wiki etiquette, and other important considerations.
http://www.udel.edu/sakai/training/printable/wiki/Wikis_in_Higher_Education_UD.pdf

We would enjoy hearing your thoughts and experiences on wiki usage in business communication courses.

*Adapted from "Codex: Guidelines," WordPress website [accessed 13 July 2010] http://wordpress.org; Michael Shanks, "Wiki Guidelines," Traumwerk website [accessed 13 July 2010] http://metamedia.stanford.edu/projects/traumwerk/home; "Help," Wikimedia Meta Wiki [accessed 13 July 2010] http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Help:Contents.

Hall of Shame: How Not to Tell Customers That You've Made Your Software Easier to Understand

We'd be willing to bet that database software generates the highest profanity-to-mouseclicks ratio of any category of personal computer software. Database concepts in general are fairly complicated, and the powerful software that lets users create and manage databases can add layers of operational complexity.

Any news about improvements in usability is good news, but Microsoft tripped when it tried to explain that ready-made templates in its Access database software help hide the complexity. The introductory screen for an online Access training course begins with this assertion: "If you think databases are hard to understand, you're not up to date."

In other words, "The reason you're stupid is that you insist on wasting your time worrying about your actual job, life, family, and so on, rather than following the brilliant innovations being made by database software designers." Or more simply, "If you're dumb, it's your fault."

We exaggerate the effects here, but not by much. Blaming the customer for not understanding the product is bad enough, but Microsoft takes the extra step of implying that it is the customer's responsibility to keep up with what the company is doing.

Rather than insulting the customer and dredging up negative associations about database software, the promotional copy could've said something along the lines of "New ready-made templates make it easy to harness the power of Microsoft Access." This puts the burden of complexity on the product, where it belongs, but it also moves the conversation in a positive direction by talking about solutions to a problem. And nowhere does it criticize the customer for not being smart or up to date.

On the plus side, Microsoft does provide us with a great example of a situation in which using the word *you* does not equate to demonstrating the "you" attitude.

What Is the Best Strategy to Prevent Cheating?

This recent article from the *New York Times* addresses the challenge of preventing cheating on homework projects and tests. The use of technology to check assignments for plagiarism and to monitor students during exams certainly seems to be growing. However, not all instructors or institutions buy into this approach, with some advocating the less-adversarial approach of instilling an atmosphere of honor and trust.

This is not a simple either/or question, to be sure, but in terms of overall emphasis, do you lean toward fostering an environment of trust or relying on monitoring systems to prevent cheating? Is the honor system realistic, even if it is the preferred strategy?

Hall of Fame: FreshBooks Demonstrates Audience Focus in Multiple Ways

This blog post from the developers of the FreshBooks online business accounting system demonstrates audience focus in multiple ways, starting with the effort behind the message. Every business worries about how quickly customers will pay their bills, so FreshBooks analyzed the customer data it had on hand to see which payment terms and invoice messages generated the quickest responses. This alone is remarkable customer service; the audience-focused presentation of the information makes it that much better.

We have annotated a copy of the post that you can share with your students (on two PowerPoint slides).

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