

Spotlight: Desktop word processing, email, and the Internet have dramatically altered the process of business correspondence. In most ways, the introduction of these technologies has improved the process of business correspondence. What was once an arduous, costly process available to only a few individuals, is now a simple, low cost activity practised by most people. Unfortunately, the very qualities that are laudable in these technologies also present the greatest challenge to effective utilisation of the tools.

Before the introduction of these technologies, all business correspondence went through a self-correcting mechanism. The process of dictation, followed by typing, then editing and the final draft, usually ensured that the intended message was communicated. As well, the people tasked with generating the day-to-day correspondence for the enterprise were trained in written English. The combination of having at least two people reviewing the language along with the time that it took to create documents resulted in generally strong correspondence.

Email—the most common form of business correspondence today—is a scourge for many businesses. People's days are consumed "doing email" as inboxes fill faster than they can be emptied. Not only does the sheer volume create a challenge, but also the composition of most email is so poor that the message is obscured or lost. When email is compared with other forms of correspondence, it may appear that a trade-off has been made between immediacy and intelligibility. This may be a fact today and this fact is not inherent to the medium of email.

As always, it is not the tool but rather the manner in which it is wielded that determines its effectiveness. Skilfully manipulating the English language takes training and practise. In the past, any person involved with business correspondence was trained to perform that task. Today, it is rare to find a person with formal training in written English. It is an odd situation when the skill to use a word processing tool is valued more than the ability to generate good business correspondence with that tool.

Before sending another email, posting another web page, or transmitting another facsimile, pause before clicking send. Make that pause long enough to thoroughly review your written words ensuring that they are intelligible and that they convey a message that is true to your intention. Beyond being a representation of your thoughts and feelings, your words are a gift of information. When you are certain that you would be pleased to be the recipient of such a gift, only then give yourself permission to send forth your missive.

Musings: Online banking is a tool that I utilise extensively. Recently, the ability to pay business taxes was added to the suite of features available from my financial institution. As I investigated this new feature, I discovered that if I used it, I would incur an account surcharge. This did not sit well with me so I clicked on the *Contact Us* page and sent off an enquiry.

I requested an explanation of why there is a surcharge to pay business taxes while there is not a similar surcharge to pay personal taxes. Within a day, I received an email response from an *Internet Correspondence Representative* who informed me that "the fee charged is based on having the convenience of being able to pay the bill electronically".

In the way that the response was formatted, I am fairly certain that it is a stock answer pre-formulated in anticipation of many such queries. There are several reasons why this is the wrong answer, but most importantly, my question regarding the inconsistency in the application of surcharges is left unanswered. I rarely interact with any person from this enterprise (electronically or in person) so when I do, the impact of that interaction influences my satisfaction level for a long time. Right now, I am feeling a little less satisfied and therefore more likely to entertain advances from others wanting my business.

I am still pausing while I contemplate how, if at all, I will pursue this further. Until then, I continue to pay my business taxes in person at the branch where there is no surcharge and where the cost to the financial institution to process my business taxes is more than ten times the cost of an online transaction.

Facts & Figures: Why is a dog man's best friend? According to recent research, the reason is that dogs are superbly sensitive to social cues from people. The research indicates that domestic dogs, unlike any other animal tested, have the ability to understand people's intentions. As for cats, they refused to take part in the research.

Just For Fun: In an effort to adapt its postal managers to an increasingly competitive market, the Swiss government hired blues music expert Walter Liniger to teach the postal workers how to play the blues harmonica. The intention of the exercise is to use the blues to relieve job stress.

Links: Useit.com is *the* place to visit for advice on electronic communications. For some tips on how to tame this beast and make peace with your email inbox, check out the following article: www.useit.com/alertbox/20040105.html.