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"Putting it in writing"

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When we send personal correspondence to others—be it a letter, fax or e-mail—we often forget how important image and appearance are. After all, when the communication is received, there is no "personal" contact accompanying it to act as a counterbalance. In other words, when you send somebody a letter, and it arrives and is read, it stands alone, without anyone to explain, clarify or strengthen it. Therefore, it had better stand well.

Considerations such as appropriate and graphically pleasing stationery, correct names and titles, spelling, accurate facts and the like are all of the utmost importance. Anything less reflects a sloppy, "don't care" attitude—one that's likely to indicate to the recipient that that's the way all your business is conducted.

This is not to imply that every piece of correspondence coming out of your office need be routed through a secretary for typing, particularly in this age when virtually everyone has a computer with word processing software and e-mail on their desk. (Don't over-rely on spellcheck. It has its limitations.) The fact is that it is perfectly acceptable at times, and even preferable, to use handwritten correspondence, especially if a prompt reply is an overriding concern. When time is of the essence, there's nothing wrong with legibly scribbling a response right on the same paper on which the query was received, then faxing it back.

Another very effective example of handwritten communication is the "clip." Tearing out a magazine or newspaper article that you feel would be of interest to a client, co-worker or business associate, penning "Jim—Thought you'd appreciate this. Jack", then mailing it is a wonderful means of staying in touch with people and letting them know you're thinking of them. You want such communication to be personal, and to send it in the form of a secretarial-typed memo almost defeats its purpose. It's no longer a personal gesture, but rather a corporate action.

Poorly written, poorly organized, unclear communications are, unfortunately, seen more than one cares to admit. As a general rule—be it a fax, letter or e-mail—be crisp, clear, complete, timely, to the point, and precise as to the response required for follow-up. The correspondence should also reflect the correct tone, one based on the nature of the relationship between the individuals. If it's someone you've never met before, an overly friendly tone is inappropriate, as much as a formal tone would be to someone with whom you're friendly.

If it's at all possible, avoid impersonal correspondence. With the advent of word processing and the ability to personalize letters, it's pretty easy to sidestep this. There are, however, sometimes limitations (usually economic) that necessitate non-personalized correspondence. In that situation it may be helpful to acknowledge that it's a form letter. Turn it around to your advantage with a statement such as, "We're sorry for this somewhat impersonal communication, but it allows us to focus our time and resources toward really important matters, like servicing our customers."

Lastly, remember that the goal of correspondence is to communicate. Many people who do that well

verbally suddenly become verbose and use "\$5 words" they'd never think of using when speaking when forced to commit to paper. The most effective business communicators write as if they were talking. Try it; you'll find writing a much less intimidating task.

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