



Communications Digest

Because Good Copywriting Should Grow on Trees!

Welcome Mid-November!

Although we've had several days of record-breaking warmth, here in Saskatoon, winter's breath will soon be upon us. While November's news has brought great losses, in the US presidential election and in the passing of beloved artist, Leonard Cohen, I'm nonetheless grateful to share with you this issue of "Communications Digest."

In last month's issue, I presented some tips on storytelling from American storytelling consultant, Geoffrey Berwind. I also featured Amy Ballon and Danielle Botterell on the impossibility of multi-tasking, when you really need to focus. And in "Word Nerd's Corner," I visited the case of "prioritize" vs. "priorize."

In this month's issue, I visit Dacher Keltner on how power can corrupt our business relationships (rather apropos for our American neighbours). I cite expert Josh Bernoff on why all companies *still* need good writing (but often *still* do not have it). And in "Word Nerd's Corner," I visit jargon that incenses me, when the noun "incentive" is turned into the verbs "incent" and "incentivize," (as Bryan Garner calmly explains).

Enjoy the last few days or weeks of autumn, before we have to endure the excesses of the holiday season!

Sincerely,
Elizabeth

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Article One: "The Power Paradox": How power can corrupt our business relationships (with Dacher Keltner). . .

Dacher Keltner, a professor of psychology at the University of California (Berkeley) has written powerfully about the need we business types have to manage ourselves and "not let power corrupt" us. His recent article, from the October, 2016 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, although aimed at Corporate America, can also supply to the work of freelancers.

Over 20 years of behavioural research, Keltner has found that while people usually gain power by values and actions that "advance the interests of others, such as empathy, collaboration, openness, fairness and sharing," that when those individuals "start to feel powerful or enjoy a position of privilege," those qualities get subordinated to "rude, selfish and unethical behaviour" (112). In other words: power tends to corrupt.

Keltner calls this reality "The power paradox" and has studied it in colleges, governments, sports teams, and other workplaces. I think it also applies to some of the stressful aspects of being a freelance writer and/or consultant.

Keltner cites his own exercise--the "Cookie Monster" story--where groups of three people visited a lab, were given a group writing task, in which one person was randomly assigned to a position of leadership. A half-hour into their work, Keltner placed a plate of four freshly baked cookies on a plate in each group--in front of everyone. In all groups, each member took a cookie, politely leaving the fourth one behind. To the question of who would take the fourth, "nearly always" it was the person who'd been named as leader. Keltner observes that the leaders were also more likely to eat with their mouths open, lips smacking and crumbs falling onto their clothes" (113).

Wealth and credentials have a similar outcome, so that drivers of the luxury vehicles yielded to pedestrians at a crosswalk only 54% of the time, otherwise ignoring the pedestrian and the law, while drivers of "economy" cars always yielded.

Well known abusers of power (Donald Trump, Leona Helmsley, Silvio Berlusconi) furnish extreme examples of behaviour that leaders at any level are susceptible to.

On a day-to-day basis, corporate leaders are three times as likely as those with lower levels of power to interrupt others, multitask during meetings, raise their voices and say insulting things to others in professional settings. Corruption undermines executives' reputations and opportunities for influence. (And what greater example of this do we need than the recent presidential election in the US?)

People newly moving into powerful roles are especially vulnerable. This misbehaviour, psychologist Dacher Keltner says, also creates stress and anxiety among their colleagues, decreasing "rigour and creativity" and "engagement and performance."

Freelancers may find this effect when working with a misbehaving client. For instance, consider a client who is never satisfied with a project and argues so much over details that the writer thinks they should "write it, themselves!" Or a writer may work with supervisor (e.g. editor) who suggests "fudging" details in an article, when evidence comes up short. Or there are those freelancers who don't claim all of their earnings when submitting taxes. A freelancer may also write something without adequate research, similar to the oft-cited case of the bored schoolchild who makes up a book on which to write a compulsory book review. Although these examples were not the focus of Keltner's research, self-employed freelancers and their clients can misuse power and control, and not only major corporations.

Whoever we are, we can we avoid "succumbing to the power paradox," Keltner says, through "awareness and action" (four tips, page 113):

(1) We can develop self-awareness to be attentive to the feelings that accompany gaining power and be conscious of any changes in our behaviour. (Power can lead one to speak too "expansively," be overly "energized," feel "omnipotent," seek rewards and be "immune to risk"). All of these states tend to precipitate "rash, rude, unethical actions" (113).

When we have power, it's important to reflect on our thoughts and emotions before making irrational decisions (so that joy and confidence do not become egomania). If we're working with someone subordinate to us who is not "adequate" for the job, we can deal with that without using "adversarial or confrontational" ways (113).

Keltner recommends building self-awareness by practicing "mindfulness" (such as the teachings of Nhat Thanh, in this newsletter's September issue). This practice can produce "focus and calm." Companies including Google, Facebook and Ford are only three companies who have recently developed this practice for their staff.

Someone who leads in a situation should asking themselves if they often interrupt others, check their phones when others speak, tell stories that embarrass others, or spend more money and take more risks than are wise, etc. Keltner teaches executives to practice empathy, gratitude and generosity--values that sustain "good leadership even in . . . cutthroat environments" (114). They may need a good friend who is willing to provide a "reality check" if their use of power veers into abuse.

(2) Empathy can be expressed in facial expressions, tones of voice and the capacity to listen--not merely to respond, but to appreciate another person's experience.

(3) Gratitude can be shown by thanking those who work with/for one. Keltner notes that "thank you" messages increase engagement and productivity in those who receive them.

(4) For generosity, we can share the "fourth cookie" when in a group of three (like the setting of Keltner's experiment), by contributing new ideas for others' projects, for which we will not receive credit. Donating to charities at work, or offering five minutes of your day to someone to whom you outsource work, all increase respect in our working relationships.

Keltner advises us that we can outsmart the "power paradox" with self-awareness and by small actions of empathy, gratitude and generosity, in our relationships or workplaces. Forging quality bonds with clients by these practices will almost always bring goodness back to us. And we can thank clients who show such ethical commitment toward us.

How can power be used responsibly in your office or practice? Please reply on the "contact" page of my website. I'd be delighted to continue this conversation!

Article Two: "Ask an Expert" Josh Bernoff on how bad writing (still) destroys a company's productivity

In the *Harvard Business Review*, writer Josh Bernoff reported recently that of 547 American businesspeople surveyed in early 2016, "81% of them agreed that poorly written material [one-third of which is email] wastes a lot of their time." The causes of such ineffective writing were reported to be excess length, poor organization, unclear style and an excessive reliance on jargon and imprecise language.

In many corporations (in both the US and Canada), entry level employees get limited training in how to write in a "brief, clearly and incisive way." Bernoff writes that they quickly submerged in "first-draft emails from their managers, poorly edited reports and jargon-filled employee manuals." So their own untutored, "flabby" writing raises no eyebrows: "The whole organization drowns in productivity-draining blather."

So why should we care? As a freelancer, I spend my days writing and editing business copy outsourced from such busy companies, to make it succinct, precise and easy to follow. But some prospects do not recognize that their communications are in trouble and may not be willing to invest money in improving them. Too many companies still think that bad writing is "good enough."

Bernoff shares four reasons why good writing matters and why clients are wise to get their communications documents in order . . .

(1) "Vague writing dilutes leadership":

Bernoff cites CEO of Yahoo, Marissa Mayer, in an email she wrote to employees after it was sold to Verizon: ". . . our incredibly loyal and dedicated employee base has stepped up to every challenge along the way . . . The teams here have not only built incredible products and technologies, but have built Yahoo into one of the most iconic and universally well-liked companies in the world . . . I'm incredibly proud of everything that we've achieved . . ."

Mayer relies on the colloquial and imprecise term "incredibly" or "incredible" three times in this short passage and several more, in the original document. "Happy, vacuous" language, Bernoff

writes, won't inspire workers or make their roles clear at the new Verizon. He reports that "Yahoo has suffered from dithering management focus for a decade." Mayer's writing demonstrates that.

Bernoff suggests that all levels of employees should communicate in every email message exactly what they want to say in the subject line or title and first two sentences. Since people reading emails skip to the key facts, he recommends that people skip the filler that only wastes readers' time: "Make it easy for readers to accomplish the goals you set out for them."

(2) "Clarity" in your marketing materials "tells customers—and workers—that they can trust you":

So your marketers and PR people always should write well. Focus on "what works, rather than concealing what doesn't." Focus particularly on your reader and what they most need to know.

(3) "Fuzzy writing allows fuzzy thinking":

Use well-organized paragraphs, written in the active voice, to explain what's happening, what ought to happen and what people need to do. Weak style (including imprecise verbs and the passive voice) reflects unconsidered gaps in thinking.

Bernoff gives this example of this bafflegab:

"[These] are issues that will need to be closely monitored in order to ensure the public sector is protected from extensive financial commitments."

Who is supposed to monitor expenses and what constitutes "extensive financial commitments?" Exactly who is identified in "the public sector?" and so on.

Clear writing forces its writers to think through what they really mean and the arguments that they can use to support it.

(4) "A culture of clear writing makes managers more productive":

All levels of an organization or business need to write clearly. The entry level worker will find instructions on what to do easier to understand.

"Senior managers," Bernoff writes, won't have to "waste time rooting through their subordinates' fuzzy writing," so that they can "spend effort changing the culture to one that prizes brevity, clarity and directness."

Good writing, he rightly concludes, makes *everyone* more productive and can turn each workday into something "a lot less annoying."

If you know that the layers of "fuzzy" writing are impeding the progress of your organization or business and you don't know how to correct them, please contact a qualified freelancer like me. (We can help!)

I will show you how to clarify your thinking and express the most salient aspects of it, concisely and effectively.

Please respond on the “contact” page of my website (www.elizabethshih.com/contact). I’d be delighted to extend this conversation.

WORD NERD'S CORNER: The case of "incent" and "incentivise" (with Bryan Garner)



Are you incensed by the case of "incent" and "incentivize?"

With the recent, heated mayoral contest in Saskatoon and with the shocking results of the recent American presidential election, I have been listening even more closely than usual to the language of the news. The result is that I’ve heard as much (if not more) bafflegab and jargon as ever!

Many parties and candidates have been violators. But then again, even wordsmiths like American etymologist Bryan Garner (not to mention me) sometimes make mistakes.

From a recent issue of his usage blog, Bryan Garner presented a recent case of jargon used in business and government: the practice of making the verbs, “to incentivize,” and “to incent.”

Garner observes that these neologisms date from the mid-1970s, but only recently have become vogue, especially in American business jargon and politics . . .

Consider these three examples:

(1) **“Together, the programs represent the most aggressive *incentivizing* to date by Honda.”** “Subaru, BMW Are Now Offering Consumer-Incentive Programs,” *Atlanta J.-Const.*, 15 Mar. 1991, § S, at 6.

Garner suggests this possible revision: *“Together, the programs provide the best incentives that Honda has ever offered.”* Isn’t that much clearer and precise than the first example?

(2) **“And you know, we shouldn’t incent all the wrong behaviors. Right now, what we’re doing is incenting young girls to leave home, to not marry the person they’re . . . having a child with because they won’t get the welfare check if they’re married.”** Jack Thomas, “Ann Romney’s Sweetheart Deal,” *Boston Globe*, 20 Oct. 1994, at 61.

Garner suggests this possible revision: *"And you know, we shouldn't provide incentives for all the wrong behaviours. Right now, what we're doing is encouraging young girls to leave home, to not marry . . ."* Don't these revisions allow the reader to focus on the topic of the sentences, rather than on the jargon?

(3) **"Today it is management—usually incentivized by stock options and the like—that seeks to be recognized by institutional shareholders."** Benjamin Mark Cole, "New Economic Pressures Force Banks to Cut Costs, Consolidate," *L.A. Bus. J.*, 24 Mar. 1997, at 29.

Garner suggests this possible revision: "Today it is management--usually having stock options and other incentives--that seeks to be recognized by institutional shareholders." What responsibility "management" and "shareholders" hold are much clearer, with this revision.

The trouble with neologisms like "incentivize" and "incent" is that they obscure (while seeming to simplify) who the active *subject* of the verb is, who the *object* of that verb is and what *significance* that action or state holds for the remainder of the sentences in which they appear. The result is linguistic fog that can be exploited to serve the needs of unscrupulous people (e.g. American President-Elect Donald Trump and others). Taken that far, the jargon can itself **incense** us (to use a proper verb)!

Have you been bothered (or incensed) by hearing about people or organizations "incentivizing" services? Please send me your thoughts or other linguistic bugbears through the "Contact" page of my website. I'd be delighted to extend this conversation.

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Thanks again this month to fellow women of the Freelancers' Roundtable Group, so capably convened by veteran writer Ashleigh Mattern, Katherine Duncombe, who shared time and expertise with me, despite a very heavy schedule (Thank you, Katherine!), Julie Barnes, who shares best practices monthly, and Leanne Bellamy, whose life and family always inspire me. . . . And a shout-out to newcomer Amy Rederburg!

This group's support and friendship are great. We plan to add additional meetings to include Friday networking events, for those interested, in downtown Saskatoon.

ABOUT US

Since 2011, Elizabeth Shih Communications has provided B2B communications and marketing services on the Prairies and across Canada.

Do you need help writing your "marcom" materials?

Please contact me through my website, via the CASL-compliant email form, on the right-hand side of each page (www.elizabethshih.com).

After I have received your permission, I'll be pleased to discuss projects with you!

I specialize in entrepreneurial storytelling, especially using articles, case studies and eNewsletters to chronicle the lives of entrepreneurs who succeed against the odds, promoting their products and services and contributing to their communities.

For more information, please visit my website for more information (www.elizabethshih.com)