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Commentary

Listening to a commercial doggerel on the radio the other day, I suddenly realized how difficult it is to do good things with words. Certainly this is no revolutionary epiphany. As professional writers and editors, we all suffer when we work with words. But the subject-matter experts with whom we work never seem to suffer enough to satisfy me. They write quickly, confidently. They make bold edits. They bequeath advice to improve us, such as this aphorism I received not long ago: “Fewer, stronger words are better.”

Why? Why do lay writers do these things? Because they are language experts. Practically everyone is. People are instinctive language users, and the habitual use of language induces a comfort and ease that leads to a rhetorical confidence I find myself coveting. For most language users, language is like a cotton shirt that goes undetected by the senses. On the other hand, the language shirt worn by professional writers bears not only a jagged tag that incessantly digs at the skin but also the packing needles that dig even deeper. We are hyper-aware of language. We wear it uncomfortably. We twitch and shrug and fidget, while the lay writer relaxes, hardly aware of language at all, hardly aware of the difference between the language artifacts we create and the ones they create.

In a world where everyone is a “language expert,” technical communicators frequently suffer the depreciation of their delicate judgments and refined rhetorical strategies when well-meaning subject-matter experts insist upon the clumsy language that is the source of our employment. Here’s an example of that language—extreme, perhaps, to bluntly illustrate the point, but only bad enough to have earned me third place in the June 1996 COREComm Worst-Technical-Writing-Sample-of-the-Month Contest:

The dip in supply voltage to a PC power supply due to the momentary reactive drops in the supply circuit during the high rates of change in currents occurring in power system during commutation of a non-linear loads.

COREComm's light-hearted contest, which transforms a source of consternation into a source of pride (perhaps somewhat perverted), pokes fun at our word-induced grief. However, the penalty for clumsy language can range widely, from the inconsequential to the perilous. For example, the intended audience of the above excerpt, electrical engineers, probably worked through the sentence and created some sort of meaning, despite the absence of a verb. No significant harm done. However, in the third-quarter 1995 issue of the *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, Max Loges of Lamar University discloses a tale of woe initiated and perpetuated by inadequate communication skills. During the Civil War, as the tale goes, the inability of General Beauregard to clearly communicate his plans and objectives imperils his troops and ultimately leads to his demotion and banishment to the West after his crude language offends President Jefferson Davis. Ouch. Perhaps if General Beauregard had retained a professional editor to repair his faulty missives and reports, we would be referring to this soldier of misfortune as General Beauregard, eighteenth president of the United States of America.

If it has taught us anything, our experience with subject-matter experts has taught us that the quality of preverbal thought rarely indicates the quality of verbal expression, especially when that quality is measured against the prevailing standards of professional communication. Our inevitable dealings with subject-matter experts—who are sometimes intractable, sometimes willing to enter negotiations, sometimes indifferent—requires us to learn a skill not to be mentioned in the curricula of technical communication programs: the fine art of diplomacy and psychological troubleshooting.

Thus, to my point. The journals, magazines, and newsletters of technical and science communication are replete with articles crafted to help professional technical communicators better their relationships with subject-matter experts. These articles enable me to understand abstract principles of such relationships, but how do I act upon that knowledge in specific situations? What I need are examples of how people negotiate with subject-matter experts. Then, perhaps I can extrapolate those anecdotes to my personal travails. I'm talking about a system for recording and retrieving the personal experiences of people like me, in the sense that they are technical communicators, and unlike me, in the sense that they have figured out ways to successfully deal with subject-matter experts. I can imagine a Rolodex filled with problem/solution cards. When my boss presents me with a particular challenge, I consult my handy Rolodex. Ah, Susan from Boston had a similar problem, but her solution seems a bit too subversive for me. Here's Jim from Atlanta.

His solution seems applicable. This is much better than the Magic 8-Ball Web page, which has served as my personal advisor in pinches (see: www.mainstrike.com/mstservices/handy/mag8bal.html).

Now, all of this may seem extravagant, but I've seen such a system for cataloging problems and solutions. For example, every issue of *Technician News*, the newsletter of the Electronics Technicians Association, features TEK-TIPS, which are printed on the inside covers. Each of the four TEK-TIPS per page contains fields for a symptom, a cause, and a cure for misbehaving electronic appliances. Perhaps the PCS newsletter could feature TECHCOM-TIPS for misbehaving subject-matter experts. Is this too ambitious? Can't we all just get along? The magic eight ball says. . . "Better Not Tell You Now." Thanks a lot.

Biography of the Author

Bradford R. Connatser is a member of the Professional Communication Society of the IEEE and a senior member of the Society for Technical Communication. He is currently the publications manager for the EPRI Power Electronics Applications Center in Knoxville, Tennessee.