

The Knowledge Bank at The Ohio State University

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LANGUAGE—A BUSINESS TOOL

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LANGUAGE is not only an essential and most effective business tool, but it differs from all other business tools in that it is a handle that fits all these other tools.

In weighing the value of language in its application to business success, it is well in the very beginning to realize that business English occupies a very distinct place in the field of literature. Its purpose is to sell goods, confidence, good will, conviction and prestige. To achieve this success, something more than conviction is necessary—persuasion is also necessary—and the proper combination of conviction and persuasion is the balancing of the appeals to the recipient's reasoning and emotional natures.

The purely literary writers—especially those distinguished writers who write more for the joy of self-expression than for the specific purpose of making money—write to amuse, to entertain, or to instruct. These writers realize, that in a very large sense, the response from the readers will be intangible, but the business letter must be of

a kind to bring forth a prompt, definite and favorable reaction. Usually the business letter is directed to a particular firm or person and is characterized by a special appeal to fit a particular case. It must be written with directness, and with brevity, when possible. If the nature of the message is such as to prohibit brevity, the message must at any rate possess the element of conciseness, in order to be of the best character.

An ample vocabulary, with trained judgment as to the choice of words, is a big asset to the letter writer, but it should be realized from the start that ideas occupy the supreme place in every written message; hence, the necessity of associating with one's study of language all the thought materials that go into the making of effective business composition.

Every business letter writer to be successful must have a fair insight into the outstanding phases of human nature; in other words, he should understand the fundamentals of psychology pertaining to the action of the human mind in

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They keep things a-boomin',

Wherever they go;

They start deserts bloomin'

And make cities grow!

Brave knights with their blue-prints,

And magical pen;

They give the world new tints—

The engineer men!

They build all the "thrive" ones—

And build them to stay;

Their job's to make live ones—

No matter how hopeless a project may seem,

And to keep them that way!

Wherever's a hope-ray, they're glimpsing the gleam;

They corner the "glimmer," and ere they are through,

Do they put the job "over"? I'll tell you they do!

No matter how run down a village may be,

In vision, a blossoming city they see;

Progressive and prosperous, thriving and gay—

And it is their business to make it that way!

They're always a-bustle,

With "ginger" and "snap";

Their job's to put hustle

In towns on the map!

They're "bombing the trenches,"

In sunshine and rain;

There's always hard drives

And objectives to gain.

Brave knights with their lances—

Town builders, true blue—

They rout "circumstances"—

I'll tell you they do!

—James Edward Hungerford.

considering business transactions. For example: If the object of the letter is to make a sale, something should be known of the reader's personality, his present needs and the dominant phases of his temperament as included in the general classification of desires and buying instincts from which the incentive or motive to buy emanates and is the strongest. The classifications of these fundamental desires or human instincts are:

1. Duty
2. Necessity
3. Avarice
4. Love
5. Hatred
6. Jealousy
7. Vanity
8. Ambition
9. Generosity

It goes without saying that the successful letter writer is one who very thoroughly understands the subject about which he is writing, which would include, to no small extent, not only manufacturing processes and the application of his own products; but also those of competitors. If the appeal is to the mass rather than to the individual, he should know something of mass psychology. Usually the letter or advertisement is directed to the masses at large, or to the particular class or classes of the masses, or to the individual. In each case the message would have to be modified to suit the particular situation.

Besides an intimate knowledge of one's particular goods and that of competing goods, and a general insight into human nature, the successful letter writer is one who has no small knowledge of the Laws of Economics as applied to advertising, and also to letter and report writing.

It was Disraeli who said, in substance, that usually the greatest opportunity of success was with the best informed man. Therefore, the successful business letter writer should not be without cultural education if his letters are to possess originality and that atmosphere of appeal rarely found in the writings of the man of greatly restricted general culture.

It would be but to repeat what is taught in every text book on the subject, to mention clearness, conciseness, completeness, correctness, courtesy, character, originality, imagination, sympathy, coherence, emphasis and variety as the leading elements of strength in all effective writing, whether scientific, poetic, romantic, dramatic, historical, biographical or business.

Unless the business letter writer is richly endowed by nature, he cannot expect to be highly successful until he pays the price for success in the study of expression and all the materials of thought back of good expression. Possibly no illustration will better enforce this conception than to compare the pulling power of circular letters; those that are weak, those that are mediocre, and those that are strong. In the first instance, the results are usually nil; those of the second class hardly sufficient to justify the effort and expense; while the latter are highly profitable. The difference in results is not always due to the difference in the potential mentality of the writers, but rather to matters of good taste, pride of performance and to training.

No business house should tolerate the loose, careless, indifferent and poor letter writer, no matter whether the correspondence is internal or external, or whether or not it is merely routine or otherwise. If a correspondent cannot write a really strong letter he should, at least, write one that would not reflect discredit upon the house he serves because of its poverty of ideas, lack of style, and that incorrectness of speech which entails the faults of ambiguity, obscurity and vagueness.

It should be borne in mind that good expression alone is not sufficient to assure success; the quality of favorable *impression* is the one thing of all others that assures success. This impression is the spirit, or the personality of the message, and the success of the message is directly proportional to the features of attractiveness, and to the power to command, one, or both of which characterize all men and women who are acknowledged to have strong personality.

Because of the congestion of the curriculums of scientific studies, many of our technical and scientific colleges have neglected the teaching of language, assuming that their students had previously acquired this art in the preparatory and high schools. That this assumption is a mistaken one, is universally and conspicuously evident in the shortcomings of nearly all students entering the Graduate Students' courses of our larger business institutions. Until this defect is corrected by the colleges, it will be left to business institutions to complete the scholastic education of thousands of students graduating from our technical and scientific colleges. This is an expense and burden that should not be imposed upon business institutions; first, because it is not right, and second, because the work of academic training is foreign to the experience of the business man.

Also, the directing heads of large business institutions have, heretofore, been peculiarly blind to the value of expression in the efficient make-up of their employes. Often, when it is discovered that the graduates from some of our colleges are hardly fitted for the so-called higher phases of work, they have been "benevolently" assigned to the duties of correspondents, because it has been thought that the importance of skill in correspondence was not so great as that in engineering, selling, etc. However, business is awakening to the dignity and importance of efficient correspondence; and it is my prediction that within less than five years not less than ten thousand positions for competent correspondents will be open in the United States, at salaries ranging from three to five thousand dollars a year; and that hundreds of positions will be open to correspondence supervisors and advertisement writers at salaries ranging from five to twenty thousand dollars a year.

Both the directors of technical colleges and the managing directors of large business institutions are too often blind to the obvious: Each has failed, in large part, to realize that knowledge to be successfully applied in business means the ability to make successful contact with our fellow man. This successful contact is the power to influence. The power to influence is represented by

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strong personality. Strong personality is the mind and soul expression of the individual. No one can guess the stored-up ability that rests in the dark recesses of the mind, enshrouded in silence, or else given forth in awkward expression. Expression must carry with it the weight and finish of impression. These statements are simply axiomatic, and until training in expression is made more thorough by the colleges, and unless business employers demand that their messages to the buying public convey clearly the qualities of their products, their policies, their prestige and dignity, all else of virtue will be impaired through this one great fault of not understanding the "art of putting things."

The purpose in writing this and the preceding article was not an attempt to discuss language in its numerous phases, methods of teaching, etc., but to impress upon the minds of my readers the important place of language in the scheme of nature, and the opportunities that will soon be open to those possessing skill of expression; also, to the growing disadvantage that anyone not possessing, at least, fair skill in expression will have to confront in the very near future. When it is considered that every letter is a sales letter in that its purpose is favorably to influence the reader; and also, that every letter to be successful must be adapted to the reader in tone, style and ideas, the importance of this branch of study will be more clearly realized.
