

Dougherty Dialectic

Survey Results: Professional Communicators Evaluate Quality of Corporate Writing

Research Context

Today, large institutions generate more written PR content than ever: Press releases, sustainability reports, corporate website copy, blogs, and content for social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Research Objective

Against this backdrop of massive volume increase in written communications, we asked “insiders”—public relations, public affairs, government relations and corporate communications professionals— “to rate the quality of writing generated by PR people within big institutions.”

Methodology

- An invitation to participate in a short survey was sent to members of more than a dozen communications- and advocacy-related LinkedIn professional groups. (See Appendix for details.)
- The survey was fielded October 17, 2012 to November 9, 2012
- A 10-question survey was administered online
- A total of 60 interviews were conducted
- 100% of respondents who started the survey completed it

Executive Summary

Seasoned communications professionals were more likely to express their opinions about the quality of corporate writing than their younger colleagues.

- More than 3 in 4 respondents (78% of the sample) were older than 41. Only one respondent in 10 (10.2%) was under age 30.

Unlike their junior-level colleagues and subordinates, mid-level and senior-level communicators are more likely to have to manage—and edit—writing generated by entry level staffers.

- The overwhelming majority of respondents (95%) said they were responsible for commissioning and/or editing the work of other writers inside or outside their organizations.
- More than four in 10 respondents (42.6%) self-identified as mid-level professionals, and more than half of the sample (53.7%) self-identified as senior management level professionals.

Communications professionals—especially seasoned ones—said that the quality of writing generated by large business institutions is substandard.

- Nearly seven in 10 respondents (69%) judged most written business content as boring and laden with jargon and cliché. Alternatively, persuasive writing that inspires audiences to adopt specific behaviors is a rarity, respondents said, with barely more than 1 in 10 (12.1%) agreeing that most written business content inspires readers to take specific action on content.

Though a large majority believes the writing is substandard, respondents were divided on the inherent relevance and usefulness of the actual message content.

- When asked if they believe the press releases, sustainability reports, corporate website copy, and content for social media sites generated by large institutions is relevant and useful, opinions were divided. Nearly six in 10 respondents (58.3%) said the content was; more than four in 10 (41.7%) said the content was not.

Respondents' evaluation of the inherent value and usefulness of what they read on blogs, tweets and other social media was mixed.

- The largest percentage of the respondents (35%) said about half of what they read in social media is valuable and useful. But one in four respondents (25%) said that only one in ten of the blogs, tweets and other social media postings are valuable and useful.

Too many large institutions confuse joining the conversation in social media with being an interesting conversationalist in social media.

- The sheer volume of media content has compromised the ability to distinguish between good, impactful content and mere content, said nearly seven in 10 (68.3%) respondents.
- When asked which is the better social media communications strategy for a large company or institution, nearly eight in 10 (78%) of respondents said institutions should communicate only when there is something compelling to say - even if that means the individual or institution will be part of fewer conversations. Alternatively, more than two in 10 (22%) respondents said it was better to communicate consistently - even if an individual or institution doesn't have something particularly compelling to add to the discussion.

- Despite the majority of respondents' wishes that companies should communicate only when they have something relevant to say, two thirds of the respondents (66.7%) agreed that the "social media proliferation has created an environment where everyone is talking but nobody is listening."

Young P.R. writers are not being sufficiently mentored and trained.

- Nearly nine in 10 respondents (88.3%) said young writers in big organizations and PR firms do not receive adequate apprenticeship and editorial guidance from senior writers in their companies.

Summary

Whether it is due to pressure to become more transparent or a determination to "join the conversation," most large corporations have today adopted a "You Can't Communicate Too Much" strategy—and it does not appear this communications approach will be abandoned anytime soon.

Unfortunately, the urgent desire for writers to communicate too often overshadows readers' desire that a writer should have something useful to say.

Paradoxically, while most corporate communicators recognize and understand the tenets of quality written communication, they lament that these tenets are frequently undermined and violated.

Part of the problem today may be that writers are not receiving the training and mentorship at the same time they are expected to generate more content than ever before. If this gap is not closed, corporate communicators increasingly run the risk of sounding like bores at a cocktail party: speakers who drone on and on and on as the eyes of their audience glaze over.

About Dougherty Dialectic, LLC

Dougherty Dialectic is a writing services and training firm that supports Fortune 500 corporations, PR firms, trade associations, law firms and elected officials. Founded by communications strategist Jack Dougherty, the firm formulates high-touch, high-stakes written content: Executive speech writing, Op-Eds, position papers, and advocacy content for regulatory audiences, elected officials and legal audiences.

Jack has for more than 20 years worked at the intersection of business, politics, news media and advocacy. Either as an in-house employee or consultant, he has counseled top executives at many of the world's most admired companies, among them: Anheuser-Busch, Coca-Cola, Capital One, Darden Restaurants, GAP Inc., GE, Google, McDonalds, Motorola, Nike, Pfizer, the US Chamber of Commerce, Washington Mutual and the Wm. J. Wrigley Company. The firm's writing seminar, *WordCamp*®, teaches corporate writers how to "think story," develop relevant content, master pacing, progression and construction, and "sell" with every sentence. See www.doughertydialectic.com for details.

Detailed Findings

1. How old are you?

Age	Response Percent
30 or Under	10.2%
Age 31 to 40	11.9%
Age 41 to 50	30.5%
Age 50+	47.5%

59 respondents answered this question; 1 skipped the question.

2. What is your professional level?

Entry Level	3.7%
Mid Level	42.6%
Senior Management	53.7%

54 respondents answered this question; 6 skipped the question.

3. Are you responsible for commissioning and/or editing the work of other writers inside or outside your organization?

Yes	95.0%
No	5.0%

All 60 respondents answered this question

4. Big companies generate more written PR content than ever: Press releases, sustainability reports, corporate website copy, and content for social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. In general, do you think the written content generated by large institutions is relevant and useful?

Yes	58.3%
No	41.7%

All 60 respondents answered this question

5. Choose the answer which you feel best describes the written content generated by large business organizations:

In general, most written business content conveys business information accurately, competently and effectively.	19%
In general, most written business content is boring and laden with jargon and cliché.	69%
In general, most written business content inspires readers to take specific action on content (e.g., buy a product, forward a link, contact the company, etc.)	12.1%

58 respondents answered this question; 2 skipped the question.

6. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? "Because of the proliferation of social media, writers have lost the ability to distinguish between good, impactful content and mere content."

Agree	68.3%
Disagree	31.7%

All 60 respondents answered this question

7. Which is the better social media communications strategy for a large company or institution?

To communicate consistently to "be part of the conversation" - even if an individual or institution doesn't always have something particularly compelling to add to the discussion.	22.0%
To communicate only when there is something compelling to say - even if that means the individual or institution will be part of fewer conversations.	78.0%

59 respondents answered this question; 1 skipped the question.

8. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? "The proliferation of social media has created an environment where everyone is talking, but nobody is listening."

Agree	66.7%
Disagree	33.3%

All 60 respondents answered this question

9. Do you feel young writers in big organizations and PR firms receive adequate apprenticeship and editorial guidance from senior writers in their companies?

Yes	11.7%
No	88.3%

All 60 respondents answered this question

10. How much of what you read on blogs, tweets and other social media has inherent value/usefulness?

100%	1.7%
90%	1.7%
75%	20.0%
50%	35.0%
25%	16.7%
10%	25.0%
0%	0%

All 60 respondents answered this question

Appendix

Invitations were sent to the following organizations to participate in the survey.

- C-Suite Communicators
- CIPR Corporate + Financial Group
- Communication Professionals
- Corporate Communication
- Corporate Communication Centre
- Corporate Communications & Reputation
- Corporate Communications Network
- Crisis Communication, Internal Communication
- International Association of Business Communicators (IABC)
- International Public Relations & Communications Group
- IPRA - International Public Relations Association
- Issues Management Professionals
- National Summit on Strategic Communications
- Online Reputation Management (ORM)
- Network of PR Professionals,
- Public Relations and Communications Professionals
- Public Relations
- Corporate and Media professionals from around the world
- Quintilian - Speechwriters Group
- Reputation Institute
- SMCC - Social Media in a Corporate Context
- Special Public Communications Group
- U.S. Government Relations & Public Affairs
- Washington Speechwriters Roundtable