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[\[Go To Full Text\]](#) [\[Tips\]](#)**Title:** Effective *business communications*: It's not just for the...**Subject(s):** [BUSINESS communication](#)**Source:** [Executive Speeches, Oct/Nov96, Vol. 11 Issue 2, p9, 5p](#)**Author(s):** [Parnell, Charles L.](#)**Abstract:** Presents a speech which was presented to the Milwaukee Area Technical College on May 11, 1996, by Charles L. Parnell, an executive speechwriter at Miller Brewing Company, which dealt with effective *business communications*. Skills required for success in the *business* environment; Importance of effective *business communications*; Reason the quality of correspondence must be impeccable; Effects of poor *writing* skills on *communication*; Information on effective *writing* skills.**AN:** 9610120289**ISSN:** 0888-4110**Note:** PCC does not subscribe to this journal.**Full Text Word Count:** 3743**Database:** MasterFILE Premier**Print:** Click here to mark for print.[\[Go To Citation\]](#)

EFFECTIVE *BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS*: IT'S NOT JUST FOR THE *COMMUNICATIONS* DEPARTMENT

Thank you, Mary Anne. I would like to begin by congratulating each of you on your decision to attend Milwaukee Area Technical College. I know... as working adults... who are very busy with all the other things in your lives--your jobs... your families... and other obligations--this takes a lot of scarce time and extra effort... but I'm sure that in the long-run you will be glad you took this step.

Someone once said that the music they play at commencement exercises is significant. For computer science majors, they play High Hopes. For liberal arts majors--such as I was--they play Baby, It's Cold Outside.

I hope that when all of you graduate from MATC, they will be playing High Hopes... or something equally encouraging.

I would add that Miller Brewing Company has a long tradition of working with MATC to help promote educational programs. In fact, on Tuesday of this past week Miller presented scholarships to 33 MATC graduates... in our unique Tools for Success program.

Many people are surprised to learn that 90% of vocational school graduates are required to have the tools for their craft or trade... before they can get a job. And some of these tools can cost thousands of dollars.

Miller's Tools for Success program provides those tools.

I was asked to talk with you about *business writing*

Watson, a consultant, speaker, author and trainer in *business communications*, who has several pages on the

Worldwide Web... dealing with **business communications**.

Before coming to talk with you, I ran an Internet search to see what I might find under the heading "**Business Writing**." I found some interesting material in Jane's Worldwide Web pages and also some good tips from the Purdue University On-Line **Writing Lab**.

There are samples of this material in the handout.

While there are many skills required for success in today's **business** environment, most of them can be grouped under two headings:

1. The information and trends specific to your skill, trade, craft or profession, and
2. The ability to communicate your expertise to others.

Many people... in preparing for today's competitive **business** environment pay most of their attention to the technical knowledge pertaining to their profession and overlook the second set of skills--their ability to communicate.

My objective is to validate what Mary Anne has already told you... that effective **communication** is essential in **business**... both for organizations and for individuals... and this **communication** needs to score a bull's-eye with the first message.

I will talk about the importance of effective **business communications** in three arenas:

1. **Business** in general
2. At Miller Brewing Company specifically, and
3. How important it can be to each of you personally.

Let's begin with the importance of effective **communication** in the broader world of **business**.

Business writing is fast becoming a survival skill in our high-technology, service-oriented marketplace.

Today's successful sales people and **business**
as they do in person.

writing...

One reason the quality of your correspondence must be impeccable is the information explosion. The amount of paper crossing a person's desk has increased 600% in the past ten years and this means everything you write goes into competition for the reader's attention with all the other reading material received that day, and with all the other competing demands on that person's limited time.

The cost of an average **business** letter is estimated at more than \$10. At that price, a letter must get the job done right--the first time.

If it doesn't, you've not only wasted the first \$10, but you will probably spend more money in trying to clear up the confusion and much much more if the misunderstanding leads to litigation.

So poor **writing** can cost you and your organization time and money, while tarnishing the professional image you would like to convey.

Some recent changes in the pattern of **business communication** include an increased number of faxes and

internal memos as well as e-mail.

The reliance on **business** letters is down and this has lulled many executives into a false sense of security about their **writing**.

Many offices no longer have secretaries type letters, check them for spelling and punctuation and arrange the page layout. In short, a kind of safety net for executives with poor **writing** skills... a kind of filter or screen to catch these errors... can no longer be taken for granted.

Jane Watson tells of how a senior executive recently told her, "No one in my company writes anymore. We just send e-mails."

Think about that for a moment.

I assume they write the e-mails and that someone reads them. The fact is that e-mail still requires the sender to organize and convey his or her thoughts clearly and concisely using the rules of good **business writing**.

Remember that computers are a two-edged sword. They can turn what was once considered a first draft into a superficially good-looking document.

This is where writers sometimes fall into a trap. They assume that since the document has nice margins, no erasures or misspelled words, then the content must be okay too... so they send it out... to the detriment of themselves and their organizations... without checking to see if it is too wordy, has an inappropriate tone or merely describes features instead of benefits.

Even with e-mail, when the reader scans a document... he or she is subconsciously building an image of a conscientious, capable, energetic professional... or a bored... poorly organized drone... marking time in an antiquated company.

Good **writing** attracts customers and clients--while bad **writing** drives them away. There have been many cases in **business**, where eager, enterprising salespeople have practically done somersaults in order to win an account, only to lose it because of poor correspondence which might have even been sent out by some other department in the company.

So, while the importance of effective **communications** has increased--along with the volume of **communications**... the potential for making embarrassing mistakes and careless errors in **communication** has also increased. There are more mines out in the minefield. Our job is to learn how to avoid stepping on them.

To further illustrate the importance of effective **business communication**, let me give you a few examples from my own company, Miller Brewing.

In order to operate and conduct our **business**, we have to communicate effectively to several audiences... and I would point out that some of these audiences are not mutually exclusive. Some people may fit into more than one category, as you will understand when I explain them:

One audience is the general public, which can be subdivided into people who support us... people who oppose our products or our specific brands... and a large number of people who may not fit into either category, but whose opinions we respect and value.

It's important that our **communications** to the general public be factual and in the proper tone. We want to be good corporate citizens and respected in all the communities where we do **business**. We want the legislative climate to be favorable to our ability to sell our products in a responsible manner to consumers of legal age.

A second very important audience for us is the government--federal, state, and local--since we are impacted by regulations and taxes imposed at all these levels.

As one of the most heavily taxed and regulated industries in America, we have to continually keep an open dialogue with our elected representatives and the many officials who regulate our industry in order to preserve a climate favorable for *business*.

After all, there are some members of the public--opponents of our industry--who are constantly lobbying to have our products taxed more heavily and regulated more tightly so we have to carry out our own educational and public relations campaigns to bring the facts as we see them to the attention of the public and our government officials.

Another important audience for us is our customers, and this includes several groups.

For example, our distributors--independent wholesalers, who take our products to the retail market--are an essential audience. We must constantly communicate with them... ensuring they know our policies... that they realize they are part of a winning team... and we must listen to them... because they are close to the ultimate consumers... the beer drinkers.. and can give us valuable insights into changing consumer tastes.

A second set of customers is retailers. While we don't sell our products directly to retailers--but go through our wholesaler distributors--we still have many contacts with them providing valuable marketing information, assisting them in increasing the efficiencies of their operations and listening to their advice about what is working best in the marketplace.

A third customer is the consumer--the beer drinker in a bar or restaurant--or a person who buys a six-pack at the supermarket or convenience store. We must advertise and promote our products in such a way that these consumers... when they buy a Miller product... feel they are making a mainstream choice... that they are dealing with a reputable, innovative, high-quality company... and that Miller is a brand they are proud to drink in the company of their best friends.

We feel a strong responsibility to encourage consumers to enjoy our products in moderation. Our efforts include cooperation with other brewers, distributors, and retailers to promote the theme: "Think When You Drink." We have produced television commercials with special emphasis on this message during the holidays.

We have produced a guide to responsible event planning. We underwrite designated driver programs and free transportation programs here in Milwaukee, in Chicago, and in communities throughout the United States.

Yet another audience is the local communities where we do *business*, such as Milwaukee. We want to be... and be perceived as... a good corporate citizen.

At Miller, we've made it part of our mission that our *business* programs must make good social sense, and our social programs must make good *business* sense.

That's why in recent years our support has extended to many local educational, entertainment and arts programs, such as:

Summerfest--the largest music and entertainment festival in the country. We also sponsor the many ethnic festivals, such as German Fest, Polish Fest, Italian Fest, Irish Fest, and many others.

Milwaukee Brewers

Milwaukee Bucks

The Miller Lite Ride for the Arts: This is Miller's largest community relations effort and the largest fund raising event for the United Performing Arts Fund which is the beneficiary of the ride. In a typical year, more than 15,000 riders participate in this event, which raises nearly \$300,000 for UPAF... and the more than 20 performing arts groups it supports.

Wisconsin State Fair

Miller Lite Pro Beach Volleyball Tour

Great Circus Parade

Second Harvest of Wisconsin

Great TV Auction: Our sponsorship ensures continued success and broadcasting by Milwaukee's public television station.

Milwaukee River clean-up program

Milwaukee Public Museum

Milwaukee Public Library

United Cerebral Palsy Associations

In addition, Miller contributes several million dollars to local and state charitable organizations.

A very important audience is our own employees.

It's important that we effectively communicate to them that they are valued, that they have a viable career to look forward to, and that they have joined a winning team.

It's important to keep them informed and ensure they won't be the last to learn about things that impact their jobs and lives.

The objectives of employee *communications* at Miller are to:

Contribute to employee performance and productivity,

Heighten employee commitment to Miller, and

Work toward improved job satisfaction.

Another audience is prospective employees. We have to communicate to them that joining Miller will be a good career move and that beer is an exciting, fun industry.

The final audience I would mention is the media. Obviously this has to be done very skillfully and accurately... and how we communicate with the media has a multiplied effect on all our other audiences... through the media.

This gives you an idea of the many publics we must communicate with frequently and effectively... and I would add that much of this *communication* must... of necessity... be done by people other than just those in the *communications* department.

Now I would like to turn to the most vital part of my presentation: How important *communication* is to each of

you.

In this information age, the need for effective **communication** will increase... the penalty for poor **communication** will increase... and the rewards for effective **communication** will increase.

Even though many of you may not be planning a career as a professional writer or speaker, you will find that having an ability to communicate effectively is one of the most important tools you can add to your kit.

Your ability to communicate may even be the determining factor as to whether you get a job... or the specific job you wanted.

It's not unusual for employers to receive hundreds of resumes for one job opening. Many resumes receive less than 10 seconds of scrutiny before being filed in the circular file. How well your resume is written will often be the factor that makes it stand out from the others.

And then, once you get your job, you will find yourself needing to write memos, letters, summaries of complex issues, recommendations for solving problems and many other kinds of documents.

No matter what your specialty, the ability to communicate, both orally and in **writing**, will help you do it better. Clear **communication** will prevent a lot of wasted effort misunderstandings, hurt feelings and lawsuits.

Always ask: who will read or hear this? Will they understand it? Will they be offended by it?

A software salesman recently lost a big sale when he assured a group of executives that this was no "Mickey Mouse system."

The biggest problem with that expression was that he was addressing a group of executives from Walt Disney Studios.

In **business**, you will serve on teams... or committees... or task forces. If you can write simply and clearly, you will be a valued member, helping keep your organization on track and helping articulate its solutions to tasks.

A short one-page memo, or an interesting presentation with visual support can help you persuade your boss or members of a team that your recommended solution to a problem will work.

Very often, the person who is willing to take the initiative to write down his or her ideas in an orderly manner will be the one determining the outcome of a meeting or an organization.

Peter Drucker, one of the world's most senior and respected authorities on management and **business**, has said, that as soon as you take one step up the career ladder your effectiveness depends on your ability to communicate your thoughts in **writing** and in speaking.

A good example of how **business writing** skills were essential to a group of executives comes from the recent history of National Semiconductor, one of the world's leading chip-makers.

In 1991, this company was on the verge of bankruptcy. They had just lost \$161 million the previous year and their cash on hand was down to three days of receivables.

To turn this desperate situation around, the Board of Directors brought in Gil Amelio as the new president. Within three years, he had led National Semiconductor to its highest earnings ever. It would take an hour to explain all the things he did to turn that company around but there is one thing I will tell you about because it is related to our subject today.

One of the first things he did was require each division head to provide him with a statement of his or her value proposition--the chief value they offered their customers over the competition. In other words: "Why should your customer buy from you instead of from the competition?"

Their jobs and careers hinged on how well they accomplished this task and, by the way, they had to answer this question in 25 words or less.

As Dr. Samuel Johnson said during the 18th century, "Depend upon it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonder. fully."

As you can well imagine, this **writing** assignment got some executives' minds concentrated as never before on what they were doing... how they were doing it... why they were doing it... and how they could do it in a more profitable manner.

This is clearly a case of using clear **writing** to help drive clear thinking which led to the revitalization of a major company and savings thousands of jobs that would have been lost had it gone out of **business**.

You may say, "Okay. I agree that effective **business writing** is important, no matter what field I intend to go into, but how do I develop this skill?"

There is no simple cook book solution. This course is a great way to start but I'm sure Mary Anne would agree that in the time available she can only touch on some of the highlights.

Building on what you are learning in this course, you should pay attention to examples of good **writing**, and notice examples of poor **writing**. Make it a part of your daily life to pay attention to good and bad **writing** when you see it.

You can be sure that you will see plenty of both, especially the bad **writing** and you won't have any trouble recognizing it.

For any letter, memo, or other document, there is usually one main message you are trying to get across. Make sure you state it clearly, and let everything else support it.

I will tell you what I believe is one of the real secrets to effective **writing**... and all effective **communication**... and that is to think through what it is you are trying to say and make sure you understand it thoroughly before you start to write about it.

Effective **writing** is caused by clear, logical thinking, while a great deal of vague, fuzzy **writing** is caused by vague, fuzzy thinking.

One key suggestion I would offer, is to try to get your main point across in 30 seconds.

Remember the previous example I gave of answering a vital question in 25 words or less.

Thirty seconds is about the length of the average human attention span. This means you should:

Have a single objective.

Know the reader or listener.

Know what they want from you.

Know what approach will work best.

Ask for the order.

In your handout, I've included a reference to an excellent book that develops these ideas. It's called, not surprisingly, *How to Get Your Point Across in 30 Seconds--or Less* by Milo Frank.

Now I'd like to say a few words on the technical side of *writing*.

Use your dictionary to double check any doubtful words that might sound like the right word or remind you of the right word but may not be the right word.

For example, we don't want to make mistakes such as these from the Wisconsin and Texas legislatures:

"This is a good health bill. Take it from one who has survived a terminal heart attack."

"I cannot tell you how grateful I am--I am filled with humidity."

As long as I am in the senate, there will not be a nuclear suppository in northern Wisconsin."

If you use word processing, use the spell checker. It will pick up the little typographical errors that can slip into your *writing* especially when you are busy and on the run as most of us are in today's fast-paced world.

There are some excellent books on *business writing*. Buy one or two and use them.

Revision is vital. Few writers are so talented that they can express themselves clearly, completely and effectively in a rough draft or a first draft.

Only by revising your document will you eliminate the many weaknesses that are present in almost all first drafts... that will be noticed by others... and could keep it from having the impact you want.

I suggest you print it out and take a good look at it. Editing on a computer screen is not the same as seeing it on paper.

Obvious errors that are easily seen on paper will sometimes escape you, if you try to do all your editing on the screen. Mark your changes on the paper copy and then key them in.

Keep in mind the following questions, when reviewing your work:

What does my reader want or need to know in order to understand my message?

Does my letter or memo answer all the questions my reader has asked or questions he or she may have in mind?

What is my purpose in *writing* this document?

Does my letter or memo provide all this needed information?

Have I included only the material essential to my reader's purpose and understanding?

What do I want my reader to do when he or she finishes reading my letter or report?

If you use the Internet, you can do a search on "*Business Writing*" and find a number of interesting sites with helpful hints such as Jane Watson's pages... The Purdue University *Writing* Lab... and many others.

My concluding message is that words truly are power. Weak *writing* skills cost companies both money and time. Just as when you receive a poorly written letter or report from a *business* you think they must not be very proficient or skilled... so too others judge the professional image of your *business* by the quality of your correspondence.

No matter what craft, trade or profession you go into, you are increasingly going to need to be able to use words to:

Provide people with needed information

Seek immediate action

Create good will

Convince people of something

Persuade them to do something

Clarify some point

Instruct someone, or

Get customers to buy a product, try a service or send the check.

Best wishes to all of you, as you complete your studies. I hope all of you will have a tremendously successful career in whatever field you have chosen and that you will always be able to use effective *business communication* as one of your own tools for success.

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By Charles L. Parnell

Charles L. Parnell is executive speechwriter at Miller Brewing Company. His remarks were delivered to the Milwaukee Area Technical College on May 11, 1996.

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