No, business writing doesn't need to stink

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Put something in plain language and if the basic idea is fatuous, its stupidity has nowhere to hide.
By Megan Hustad, contributor

FORTUNE -- It's hard to say exactly when I first decided that everyone in business should study the art of copywriting, but it was probably upon being presented with yet another PowerPoint deck four times as long as it needed to be and wholly unpersuasive. The rhetorical power of these documents are typically so underwhelming that I began to wonder if anyone had plotted sales of Microsoft Office against the Dow Jones.

Browsing through *The Copy Book: How Some of the Best Advertising Writers in the World Write Their Advertising* convinced me. Released by art book publisher Taschen late last year, *The Copy Book* is an inadvertent how-to for crafting business communications. Lesson one: Keep it short.

This premium placed on brevity seems hypocritical when you first glance at the ads reproduced in the book. Many hark back to the age of long copy, when a full-page magazine ad might run to 400 words, or just over half the length of an average op-ed column. A great deal longer than a Tweet, in other words. But the copywriters' process for arriving at 400 words was so rigorous that one could argue it represented a higher valuation of the reader's time. (And by the time someone has **Tweeted 18 times a day**, well, there goes concision.)

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To a person, the copywriters quoted in the book stress that the process emerged because they lived in perpetual fear of losing their reader. Steve Hayden, creator of Apple's (**AAPL**) "1984" ad, remarked that the truth of an easily distracted, borderline hostile audience was drilled into him from his earliest days in the business: "Four percent of the readership will slog through 70% of body copy no matter how bad it is. Your job is to beat those odds."

They subjected the words to intense scrutiny and imagined an audience predisposed more toward contempt than admiration. Tony Brignull, former head of copywriting at Collett Dickenson Pearce, claims that if he had doubts about copy he was working on, he'd ask himself "would I walk up to a stranger at a drinks party and say these words to her? If she's interested, amused, engaged, I write on. If she starts looking over my shoulder or reaching for the peanuts I start again." Steve Harrison remarks in the book that a background in direct mail helped him understand the importance of hooking people from word one: "We set out to write headlines that elicited the response 'bloody hell, that's interesting, tell me more.'" (Lesson two: Be interesting.)

Surprisingly, many of these copywriters are remarkably unsentimental about language. "In a sense I am not interested in words," comments David Abbott. "Words, for me, are the servants of the argument and on the whole I like them to be plain, simple and familiar." Alfredo Marcantonio put his distrust of flourishes more succinctly: "Beware of adjectives," he warns. "They don't always do what you think."

The typical Microsoft Office document is less cluttered with adjectives than abstractions and Unnecessary Capitalizations placed there out of fear that the work won't be taken seriously without them. But the reliance on jargon and catchphrases — *move the needle* is my current favorite — betrays a different insecurity than that of the copywriter worried over losing his reader to a bowl of peanuts. The authors of overlong PowerPoint decks seem to worry most that they won't be considered smart, and so they have to keep typing, in increasingly puffed-up language.

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The ad man would say they should worry more about not being boring. There's some strategic insight in the excess length, however. If you extract the jargon and corporate-speak abstractions, what's left may not be all that impressive. If the basic idea is fatuous, its stupidity has nowhere to hide once phrased in plain language.

But if the point sounds unremarkable once put in plain English, maybe that's a signal to keep working and reworking. Not just the text, but also the idea -- because there's no separating the two.

How many times they go over a text is a theme the contributors to *The Copy Book* keep coming back to. Says David Abbott: "I might rework a headline 50 or 60 times to get the thought and balance exactly right." They took a chopping block to any portion of the work that wasn't accomplishing much.

So why is a similar process not in place in most workplaces? Some blame the disappearance of secretaries and the revision process they enabled along with it. "Used to be that you'd dictate a letter to your secretary and she'd type it up and show you a copy, and you'd look it over and mark it with changes," one longtime litigation attorney I spoke to said. "Maybe in that interim you reconsidered some things you thought you wanted to say but on further reflection didn't. Now everyone

just fires off an email."

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Others blame the increasing amounts of time spent reporting on what we've been doing all day at the expense of actually doing it.

So it's refreshing, in this era of swollen documents, to come across such strong endorsements of saying less. "When you get your copy to the point where you're really, really happy with it," Jim Durfee advised, "cut it by a third." Tony Cox edits his copy down "until I end up with the nub of the thing." Adrian Holmes suggested looking at a page as a visual object and asking if any paragraphs *looked* excessively heavy, in which case, words got deleted.

Which points to a paradox at the heart of copywriting: A copywriter knows how limited the chances are of anyone reading his or her work, let alone read it all the way to the end. But the fact that the work was likely to be disrespected only spurred them to improve it.

Today, a great deal of media attention is paid to people whose indiscreet post or impolitic YouTube video makes life difficult for them. It's news because it's the exception. The majority of content produced today is ignored. There's too much of it and not enough time. We're left with an argument for more process, fewer pages. Concludes *The Copy Book's* John Bevins: "Copywriting has taught me that [our work] enriches or impoverishes not just us, but society itself." When we borrow someone's attention, "we should strive to give something more valuable back."

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