

The Economist

Lessons from Social Media that Can Improve Business Writing

by Julie Winkle Giulioni

Information overload has reached epidemic proportions in most organizations. Earlier this year, the McKinsey Global Institute reported that employees spend an average 28% of their time reading and responding to email, just one of the many forms of communication in business today. Longstanding culprits including the ubiquitous nature of content and technology have been joined by the tendency for remote and hybrid workplaces to compensate for lost facetime with additional written communication. The result is that your already overburdened employees, colleagues, and leaders are likely not absorbing the important information you are offering them.

Then there's social media. Love it or hate it – social media has forever changed how we share and consume content. As a population, we've been conditioned to expect a new communication cadence with a focus on shorter, chunked, and more visually supported messaging. That's why increasingly, those who want to get their points across in business writing today must take a page from the most popular platforms and adopt variations on evolving social media sensibilities.

Tips from Twitter

Launched just 15 years ago, Twitter quickly captured the imagination of those interested in microblogging and has grown to 186 million daily active users (38 million of whom are US-based.) The original 140-character count doubled to 280, but that's still just 40-70 words per tweet. Brevity is the essence of Twitter – and of good business writing. While your emails, reports, and other deliverables will likely require more words and characters than Twitter allows, there are several actions you can take to make your writing appropriately brief.

- Clarify and boil down the core points of your message. Use the question Ryan Laverty of Arist always asks: "What would this be incomplete without?" Include this content exclusively.

- Use the active voice. Make your high school English teacher proud by turning wordy, passive sentences into strong, clear, punchy, and shorter ones.
- Scrutinize your use of modifiers. Stripping back unnecessary flourishes gives your writing greater gravitas while also shortening it to the 'must read' necessities.
- Edit, edit, and edit again. Subsequent reviews will likely surface opportunities to trim extraneous words, phrases, and ideas so that your communication offers the clearest and most succinct message possible.

Although the hashtags that permeate social posts don't belong in business writing, consider crafting catchy, skim-able phrases that can underscore your key messages and make them even memorable (even without a #.)

Become an 'Influencer' with Insights from Instagram

With more than one billion active users globally, Instagram offers a platform for visual sharing – and lessons for taking one's written communication to the next level.

You've likely heard that 'a picture is worth a thousand words,' which suggests that images are an economic alternative to text. But well-chosen images don't just save your readers time; they are also capable of tapping emotions and enhancing clarity. Two-thirds of people understand information better when it's communicated visually. Pictures break up heavy text, making it less daunting and more readable. They can be more memorable than words. And in our increasingly global workplace, pictures can in some cases overcome language barriers.

Once you've made the commitment to incorporate more images into your business writing, you can become more effective and influential by leaning into some Instagram best practices.

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- Curate, curate, curate. There's little about Instagram pictures or stories that's not been thoughtfully considered to make the greatest impact. You can be equally intentional by deliberately selecting or creating the picture that tells the intended story. Maybe it's a illustration. Or a sample. Or a screen shot. Or an infographic the visualizes data in an easy-to-use fashion. Whatever the form, test it out in advance to ensure that it delivers the intended message.
- Resist redundancy. Well-chosen graphics will frequently stand on their own. But in cases where some additional context or information is required, be judicious in your use of words. Avoid the temptation to tell the whole story again in words. Include a clear and compelling caption, and text that builds upon rather than reiterates the visual message.
- Make them ask for more. Is there additional content that you believe some readers will find interesting but that's not necessary to reach your purpose in writing? Consider including a 'More' button that links to that next level of detail for those who are interested – and that keeps your primary audience fully engaged and focused.

Take a Cue from TikTok

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then how much is a video worth? TikTok would say about 1 billion monthly users and \$50–75 billion. The success of this video creation and sharing platform highlights the benefits and engagement potential of video. It's:

- Preferred: Most people would choose watching a short video over reading comparable text.
- Immediate: Video can be quickly generated and shared to address contemporary issues.
- Cost-effective: It's not necessary to hire videographers and editors. Consumer-grade tools are available and social media has trained us to accept lower-quality phone video.

If you want to capture and retain today's readers' attention, share information, and inspire action, you can enhance your results by incorporating short explanation, demonstration, tutorial, or other types of videos into your text. And just as TikTok videos inspire followers to emulate new dance moves or lip sync routines, you may find greater compliance and behavior change as a result of supplementing your writing with a well-place video.

There's no argument that people are overloaded, overwhelmed and burned out. The attention and focus of your readers may be compromised. But they still need the important information you have to share. Help readers get the most from your messages by adopting and adapting practices from the social media platforms they love. Make your writing shorter, more visual and engaging... and you just might see your topics trending in your organization.

*Julie Winkle Giulioni is a champion for workplace growth and development and helps leaders optimize talent and potential within their organizations. Named one of Inc. Magazine's top 100 leadership speakers, she's the co-author of the international bestseller, *Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go* and author of the *Nautilus* and *Axiom* business book award-winner, *Promotions Are So Yesterday*. Julie is a regular contributor to numerous business publications.*