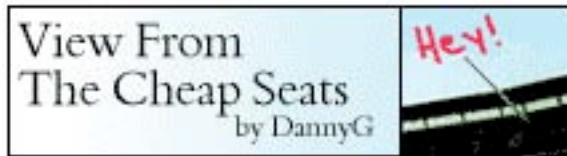


# VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS

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12/06/06

## **Righting the Writing**

*When clients insist on bad copy—by writing it themselves*

I once had a client who e-mailed me some copy—not for any specific ad, just some would-be headlines and paragraphs to stick in somewhere. Looking at the e-mail header closely, I realized she forwarded me something her college-aged son had written.

The copy was bad. Freshman Advertising 101-level bad. I couldn't really use it anywhere. And I knew she'd resent me if I told her how bad it was. I also knew that later, when she re-wrote a radio spot having sat on it for 4 months after I'd originally presented it, that I couldn't win.

Of all the things in the advertising business, nothing irks me more than having an ad or a piece of copy sent back to me by the client, re-written. Because inevitably, the result is a half-assed, watered-down, cliché-ridden mess.

I don't mean asking for changes such as modifying an odd word or sentence, adding appropriate technical info, or moving some paragraphs around. On the whole, those are OK. I'm talking about instances when the client looked at what I wrote, opened up a new Word document, and began re-typing.

Clearly, it's the one bugaboo that writers have to put up with more than art directors. Because clients can often ask for idiotic suggestions in designs or layouts, but they can't whip out Quark or Photoshop and make it happen. Everyone, however, knows how to use a word processor.

Now, we all know that advertising, marketing and business communications in general do not conform to the grammatical rules a high school English teacher would enforce. Writing effectively or provocatively for a commercial art such as advertising takes a different perspective on the use of words and language.

But in the last twelve years or so, we've seen a massive sea change in the use of English. The Internet, e-mail, blogs, IMs, and text messaging have led to an explosion in writing—bad writing. For instance, some people misspell words on purpose. Apparently, it's just cool to do it. Ya know?

A whole generation that grew up with digital communications is changing the standards that typify conversational English, and continue to do so as they assume positions on America's corporate ladder. So inevitably, the carelessness and callousness creeps into business writing. E-mails become shorter, less formal and punctuation-free. Microsoft Word can spell-check but can't tell the difference between "there's" and "theirs" when it counts. Speed is essential, so we click "send" without reading what we're sending.

Along with the bad grammar comes inane content. When clients write, they talk to themselves. They'll substitute the word "solution" when they can't define what it is a company actually makes or does. They'll take simple phrases and obfuscate language so as to inhibit undue legal or professional consequences. In other words, they prefer copy that covers their asses.

Clients feel an instinctive need to make their own mark on advertising they approve, and sometimes that includes writing the ads. They do it to try to prove their worth, and they do it because they think it's fun—anytime you do someone else's job without consequence or measurement or having to live up to standards, it's fun. But if you can't assemble a clear, coherent paragraph that passes some amount of grammatical muster, what business do you have telling professional communicators how to do it?

How did advertising get to this point? It's simple. We don't present ads in person anymore. We e-mail the copy in Word docs for client approval. We'll send the copy again and again and again if the client needs to approve every change. And once clients get in the habit of making endless bad changes, there's no turning back.

I suppose mediocre writing is a by-product of our modern life, where everything needs to be done immediately, and you can make a thousand tweaks in Word before you ever decide you've got it right. I once had an instructor at the Creative Circus who was a writer and a passionate linguist. We were discussing some copy I'd written that needed re-writing. "What did writers do before computers?" I asked in jest. "They did more thinking before they wrote anything," he replied. Good answer.

We all need to do a little more thinking. The advertising industry has quite a few problems, but we'd be better off if our clients thought more about doing their jobs better instead of trying to do ours. Then, consumers may decide the writing might be worth reading.

Ya know?