

Death By Committee Writing

If you've ever had to revise a website to incorporate new information from staff members who had no role in developing it, been forced to squeeze the CEO's latest brainstorm into a newsletter story at the last minute, or gritted your teeth while an executive rewrote the new brochure for no apparent reason, you're not alone.

You've suffered an affliction experienced by communicators everywhere: we call it "death by committee writing." It's a condition guaranteed to make producing publications an arduous, conflict-ridden process that drives you crazy. It also tends to result in communications that are unfocused, dull to read, and scattershot in their messaging—and thus fail to engage the target audience, effectively sabotaging your communications strategy.

Committee = Chaos Committee writing is an inherently anti-strategy, pro-chaos process. It reduces effectiveness and blots out creativity because content gets pulled this way and that until it sometimes doesn't even resemble what you had in mind when you started out. Writing quality suffers, key points grow fuzzy, messages are lost—and no one wins, least of all the poor reader.

Committee writing also wastes time and duplicates effort. And because the most active (or meddlesome) staff members get their way more often, you wind up with an unbalanced—even inaccurate—representation of your organization.

Prevention Is Key You can avoid death by committee writing, however—and you don't have to run a project as a dictatorship to do it. Quite the contrary: one of the best ways to prevent the problem is to encourage key people to get involved early in the process—before you set a course. Work with them to establish a foundation: why you're writing the piece, how it supports your communications strategy, what messages it will deliver, and what you want it to achieve. Develop a clear process that defines everyone's role, sets expectations, and provides firm deadlines.

As you get further along, limit participation. Not everybody needs to see a piece before it's published—keep in mind that those you show it to will assume license to make changes. One person should have final say over copy revisions (ideally, the person who directs communications, not necessarily the person with the highest rank).

Reviewers Need Guidelines Death by committee writing often occurs at the copy review stage when reviewers are content experts who don't know the goals of the piece because they weren't involved at the outset or have forgotten early discussions. Avoid this breakdown by giving reviewers guidelines that summarize goals and messaging and specify what they should comment on. (Yes, some will ignore the guidelines, which is why it's so important for one person to have final authority.)

Take these preventive actions against death by committee writing, and your reviewers are likely to help your strategy, not hinder it. And you'll have clear, cogent copy that people will actually read. ▶

From Complexity to Clarity

Communicating about complicated programs and services can be like trying to explain the theory of relativity to your dog: you'll get alert, cocked-head attention for maybe a minute, then prospects get bored or baffled and go lie down.

Companies often make the mistake of thinking their communications should cover every aspect of their offering. Not so. The more technical, multileveled, or conceptual the product or service is, the more important clarity and focus become.

You can't effectively sell five things at once—boil down the value proposition to one or two elements. And stick to the salient points for the audience: nontechnical buyers

don't need the geeky details of your technology; people who are just getting to know you don't need every detail about how your services work. If you're clear about the ultimate benefit, people won't need a backgrounder to understand what you're talking about.

If you know this already, you also know that nailing the ultimate benefit is often the trickiest part. When your head is crammed with details, it can take many rounds of "And what's the value of that?" to move from talking about features to talking about benefits. This is difficult work for insiders. Yes, it's in our self-interest to say so, but it's still true: if you've internalized all there is to know about something, it's quite a feat to get into the mindset of someone who knows nothing. Often the best strategy is, get help. ▶