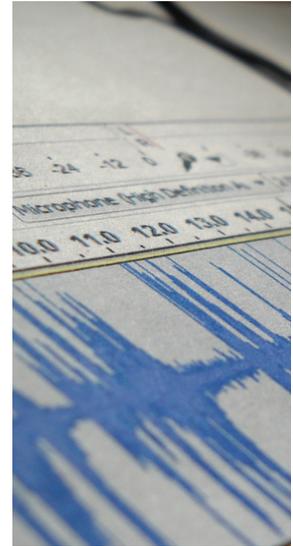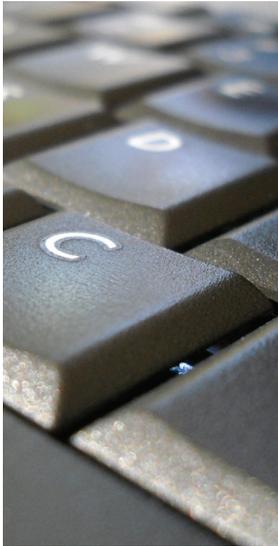# RedLine
Language Services LLC

Why Good Copy Is Good Business

An Overview of Best Practices for Written Communications

Is your marketing language clear?
Is it effective?

Insights | Tips

April 2012

Contents

Introduction

Good marketing collateral is good business. **If your company's web copy speaks to your target audience—and is well written, professionally edited, and visually appealing—you establish credibility with your prospective customers.** The reverse is true, too: poor copy alienates potential customers, prompting them to ask: *Why should I do business with such a company?*

If the claim that bad copy can hurt business seems far-fetched, consider the following:

- According to one 2012 LinkedIn poll, **80% of professionals think that good spelling, grammar, and layout are "essential" for online copy.**[1]

- In a 2012 LinkedIn poll that RedLine conducted, **59% of respondents said that poor writing on a company's website gives them a negative impression of that company and that they usually exit the website.**[2]

If professionals judge bad copy negatively, they may take their business elsewhere. **Any company with unprofessional web copy may be losing potential customers to its competitors.**

The recommendations and analyses contained herein apply not only to web copy, but also to other types of business documents, including newsletters, demonstration scripts, presentation slides, and sales brochures. While this white paper may be a resource for copywriters and editors, it is also for business owners who write their own collateral and need a simple "how-to" guide. The paper includes four main sections:

1. Recommendations for **planning to write**

2. Tips on **writing clear and meaningful copy**

3. Tips on **editing your content**

4. Appendices that include   a) **quantitative measurements for readability,**
                                     b) **our poll results,** and
                                     c) **our analysis of web copy samples**

We hope that you find this white paper useful in your business writing. Good luck!

[1] http://linkd.in/w4ZtKQ
[2] http://linkd.in/ws5DaN

Step 1: Plan Before You Write

Clear writing comes from clear thinking. Before you write, define the following: the **audience**, the **current problem**, the **proposed solution**, and a **success metric**.

Define the Audience

Effective writing speaks to its audience. However, if you don't know who's going to read your document or you don't meet your audience's needs, it is impossible to produce effective writing. **Effective writing is about the audience, not the writer.**

Copy that is written for a wide audience (e.g., visitors to a retail site) will look different from copy written for a very specific audience (e.g., IT professionals). Your readers' demographics, such as age, gender, and education level, may inform your writing. Above all, though, **it is crucial that you consider your readers' needs.**

Define the Problem

Ask yourself: *What problem will this piece of writing help my readers solve?*

- Do your clients need more product information?

- Do your clients leave your site because it's too wordy?

- Are your clients confused by the fine print in the user's agreement?

- Are your foreign clients having trouble understanding your English-only collateral?

Define the Solution

Ask yourself: *What would partially or completely solve the problem?*

- Do your clients need more product information? *Write more copy and write it clearly.*

- Do your clients leave your site because it's too wordy? *Delete and/or reorganize some text.*

- Are your clients confused by the fine print in the user's agreement? *Use plain language and have a lawyer OK it.*

- Are your foreign clients having trouble understanding your English-only collateral? *Have it translated into the relevant target language, e.g., Spanish.*

Define the Success Metric

How will you know that your efforts paid off? Customer feedback, website analytics, in-house metrics (e.g., fewer support tickets, increased productivity, etc.)—any tool by which you measure success—will tell you whether the text in your document actually helped the people who read it.

Write a Mission Statement

Now combine the above parameters into a "mission statement" for your writing. Consider the following examples:

· "Visitors to our site don't click past the home page: our **bounce rate is too high**. To **get better engagement**, we'll rewrite our home page content and we'll **use web analytics to track visitor retention rate** both pre- and post-rewrite to measure improvement."

· "Our support team fields too many calls from clients' **IT representatives** because **our software documentation does not answer their questions.** We want to **rewrite our documentation to include FAQs and a troubleshooting section**. We will **track the number of software-related support requests** going forward."

· "**Companies without full-time marketing staff may not know that their web copy and newsletters read poorly**. We will **distribute a white paper on best practices for business writing.** We will measure success by **tracking site click-throughs to the paper as well as feedback from readers.**"

The mission statement will help you frame your thinking and serve as a reminder to you during the writing process.

Step 2: Compose the Text

Tip: Focus on the needs of your audience.

Effective communication hinges on whether or not the recipient of a message 1) understands it and, in the case of business communications, 2) finds it helpful in some way. While most of the tips in this white paper speak to the first point, **focusing on your audience will help you increase the utility that your readers get from your document.**

> ❝ *The website is the first—and sometimes only—face that many existing and potential customers see. An effective website provides visitors with clear, meaningful content most likely to inspire them to act, and can include varied information, including product/ service benefits and customer testimonials. This information should be as straightforward as possible and easy to access.* ❞
>
> **Jonathan Gosberg, founder of Gosberg Public Relations LLC**

Consider the following example:

> *Our suite of software solutions uses state-of-the-art technology and cutting-edge design. We pride ourselves on our numerous awards for excellence given to us by various technology organizations and associations. Our world-class team has over 150 years of combined experience in the industry.*

The writer of this passage is focusing more on her company than on her clients. Instead, tell your readers about the benefits of your company's product or service:

> *Clients appreciate our state-of-the-art software for **both its performance and visual appeal.** Our awards for excellence from various technology organizations and our team's 150 years of combined experience mean one thing: **industry expertise to share with our clients.***

Will your customers save money or time? Will they receive high-quality service? Will they learn something? Will they enjoy the purchase experience?

Stating what's "in it" for your customers is one way to communicate to them that your company puts their needs first.

Tip: Use the appropriate word for the context.

The perfect word for the context is correct in both its meaning and its register, or degree of formality. While using the right word sounds obvious, doing so is not always easy. Certain types of writing (e.g., copy for a luxury hotel's website) require the use of low-frequency words—words that we don't normally use in conversation—to convey a certain image.

In the following example, the company needs, but doesn't yet have, evocative word choice:

> *Visitors to our hotel live like royalty, enjoying large, well-appointed rooms and spa*
> *facilities that are top-notch. The panoramic view from our rooftop pool is fantastic.*

Certain words in this excerpt fail to add to the "royalty" image—in fact, they almost negate it. Would royalty be more likely to live in a "large room" or a "palatial suite"? Would the view from the rooftop be "fantastic"? Or would it be "stunning" or "breathtaking"? Rewrite the passage as:

> *Visitors to our luxury hotel live like royalty, enjoying fully appointed, palatial suites and*
> *decadent spa facilities. Guests describe the panoramic view from our rooftop pool as "breathtaking."*

If conjuring a certain image is a goal, then the words in your copy must help achieve that goal.

Writers convey tone through word choice, and that tone can be positive, negative, or somewhere in between. For example:

> *After many refinements, R&D came up with a usable prototype.*

> *many* = unflattering in context
> *came up with* = sounds as if the action was not entirely purposeful
> *usable* = literally, "able to be used"—not exactly a ringing endorsement

Rewrite as:

> *After multiple refinements, R&D succeeded in designing a production-ready prototype.*

Tip: Use the active voice most of the time.

Writing in the active voice makes for easier reading. It usually has more "punch" and clarity than the passive voice. The passive voice sometimes (intentionally) obscures the doer of the action, which may be desirable depending upon the context. Table 1 summarizes these points.

	Explanation	Examples
active voice	The doer of the action comes first, followed by a verb and an object.	• The vendor filled the order. • Our boss canceled the meeting. • Researchers tested the tensile strength of 27 samples and found no anomalies.
passive voice	The doer of the action comes after the verb (or not at all).	• The order was filled by the vendor. • The meeting was canceled. • The tensile strength of 27 samples was tested and no anomalies were found.

Table 1: A primer on voice.

Active voice conveys transparency, telling your readers who did what. Start with who's doing what in your sentence, and then simply alternate your subject to create variety:

· *Our company... / Our organization... / Our association... / Our firm... / Our facility...*

· *The IT / accounting / sales / communications department... / The operations division...*

· *Our clients... / Our customers... / Our suppliers... / Our vendors...*

> " *A good piece of writing earns a reader's trust. The reader who trusts the writer will see the argument through to the end. The passive voice can be especially detrimental to the writing—it is the grammatical equivalent of passing the buck. Aspiring to be formal and lofty by making grand general statements in the passive voice is not the way to build a relationship with readers. Active voice makes writing more accurate and precise.* "
>
> **Mara Naselli, editor and instructor at the University of Chicago Graham School**

The passive voice is useful when a writer wants to emphasize something other than the doer of the action:

> *Our laboratory is equipped with the latest microscopy technology for the preparation of samples.*

Here, readers understand that *the company* has done the equipping, and therefore the writer doesn't need to specify the doer. The focus is instead on the facility and its equipment.

Tip: Generally speaking, be specific.

Don't leave the reader to guess what your message is. Say what you mean. Specificity paints vivid pictures in people's minds as they read. Your writing will be much more effective if you precisely name an operation, describe a process, or explain a concept in detail. Consider:

> *ABC Inc. helps your business get to the next level. We go above and beyond to ensure your complete satisfaction. We pride ourselves on being doers, and we give 110% to our clients every step of the way.*

> *Copy must be concise and to the point, yet contain all of the information that your target needs. This is always difficult for companies that are too close to the process. Collateral needs to be simple and easy to read, while at the same time sparking a conversation between the target and the company to create a lasting relationship.*
>
> **Sean Wetherell, VP of Communications, Sound Post Recording Studios**

The language in this excerpt is positive but meaningless. The reader has no way of knowing what the company does. We can rewrite the passage so that **it is specific and therefore meaningful to readers:**

> *ABC Inc. helps your business serve an international clientele. Our translation support team is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week so that you get quick turnaround on your documents. As soon as our online system registers your project request, we begin translating your files.*

Specificity also sets you apart from competitors that rely on canned language and hackneyed expressions. Bernard Williams, attorney and Director of Operations at Mastery Charter School, tells the following story about avoiding clichés:

> *Early in my career as a business owner, a mentor taught me a valuable strategy to help me get rid of all of my clichéd "business-speak": Take your written copy and replace all instances of your company's name with the name of your biggest competitor. If the sentence is still true when it contains your competitor's name, it is a cliché. Instead, describe your company using statements that only your company can make. Such statements tend to be concrete, provable, and much more meaningful to a discerning customer.*

Specific language is clear language, and clarity is a priority in written communications.

Tip: Be brief.

Recall that effective business writing is about the audience—and your audience is busy. When writing copy for print materials, **keep it short**. When writing for the web, keep it even shorter.

Visitors to a website spend seconds on the home page, not minutes, so don't expect them to read every word on every page of your site. According to Dr. Jakob Neilsen, a web usability expert, many users make a decision to stay on a site or leave it within the first 10 seconds.[3]

> ❝ *Quality writing is essential to building and maintaining brand credibility, especially on the Web. I only have a few moments to capture the attention of a potential customer, communicate a compelling value proposition, and prompt an action that will lead to revenue generation.*
>
> *Brevity is increasingly important as messages are conveyed in fewer than 140 characters. Social media marketing amplifies writing mistakes by sharing them with the world in real time. Typos, poor writing, and confusing messages can damage my brand's reputation and bottom line.* ❞
>
> **Erin Bloom, Director, Aquent**

Consider the following example:

> *We urge all leaders to adopt the principles of community development as tools for analysis in evaluating community-related issues that arise in their neighborhoods, on the one hand, and, on the other, we urge business leaders and small business owners to mesh their community activism more completely with their professional lives, to volunteer their time unselfishly in their communities, and to push for higher standards of comportment in their work.* **(70 words)**

A shorter rewrite might look like this:

> *We urge all leaders to adopt community development principles as tools for analyzing neighborhood issues. We also urge business leaders and entrepreneurs to mesh their community activism with their professions, to volunteer in their communities, and to push for improved workplace behavior.* **(42 words)**

Bonus Tip: Break a long block of text into several shorter segments. Readers are able to digest content more easily if it appears in visually distinct pieces. Simply reorganizing the text—without even deleting a word—can make your copy more accessible.

[3] http://www.useit.com/alertbox/page-abandonment-time.html

Step 3: Edit the Text

Tip: Check for consistency.

Attention to detail reflects well on your company. Consistency in grammatical and stylistic conventions—split infinitives, the use of dashes, paragraph formatting, etc.—conveys professionalism to your readers. **More important than which convention you choose, however, is the consistency with which you apply the chosen convention**. Table 2 lists three examples.

Convention	Example
grammar/ usage	No serial comma • *Our shipping solutions offer you **speed, economy** and **care**.* Serial comma • *Our shipping solutions offer you **speed, economy,** and **care**.*
	Punctuation of certain abbreviations • *According to Mr. Zhang, **U.S.** investment in China has increased 3% over 2011 levels.* No punctuation • *According to Mr. Zhang, **US** investment in China has increased 3% over 2011 levels.*
formatting/ typographic	New paragraph = next line, indent *[...] continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.* ➝ ***Now** we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation, so conceived and so dedicated...* New paragraph = skip lines, no indent *[...] continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.* ***Now** we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation, so conceived and so dedicated...*

Table 2: Some examples of usage and formatting conventions.

While commercial "consistency checkers" are now available, they are unable to perform an editor's duties and are currently insufficient for flagging all inconsistencies in a document.

Tip: Check that phrases work as units.

In addition to choosing individual words carefully, **business writers must ensure that their phrases work as units**. Linguists call this natural co-occurrence of words *collocation*—that is, when a particular word is used, certain words go naturally with it while others do not.

Certain verbs, for example, co-occur with certain nouns. An organization may *set* or *achieve* a goal, for example, but it cannot *carry* a goal. *Set* and *achieve* frequently appear with *goal* in texts written by native English speakers, while *carry* does not.

Consider the following:

> *Our woodworkers are masters, having spent years* **honing their know-how** *with hand tools.*

While the meaning of the phrase is clear, one typically hones *skills*, not *know-how*:

> *Our woodworkers are masters, having spent years* **honing their skills** *with hand tools.*

And:

> *We deliver* **personable service** *to our patrons night after night.*

Again, the meaning of the phrase is clear; however, *personable* typically describes people (those who are friendly, affable, agreeable, etc.), not *service*:

> *Our* **personable staff** *delivers great service to our patrons night after night.*

Tip: Check that sentence length varies.

Sentence length usually affects text complexity (see **Appendix A**). For high readability, write shorter rather than longer sentences. Comprehension increases when sentences are short—but a paragraph containing only short sentences can read awkwardly (Table 3a). **To avoid "choppy" text and comprehension problems, vary the length of your sentences** (see Table 3b).

	Sample sentence	Readability data
Sample 1 (short only)	*The Cultural Council of Smithville was founded in 1973. It began as a nonprofit. At the time, it raised money for cultural organizations. It also provided them with marketing support. In 1978, it staged the Gala. This was a fundraiser for the Cultural Council. It also raised money for Smithville University's fine arts program. Since then, the Cultural Council has been improving Smithville's cultural fabric. It does this through financial and strategic support. In addition, it does this through its advocacy programs. Last, the Cultural Council provides education and information to Smithville residents.*	• 11 sentences (s) • 93 words (w) • low = 5 w • high = 11 w • average = 8.5 w/s • Flesch Reading Ease[4] = 44.5 • Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level = 9.1
Sample 2 (long only)	*Founded as a nonprofit, the Cultural Council of Smithville was born in 1973, raising money for cultural organizations and providing them with marketing support. In 1978, it staged the Gala, a fundraiser for both the Cultural Council and Smithville University's fine arts program, and since then it has been improving Smithville's cultural fabric. It does this through financial and strategic support as well as education, information, and advocacy programs that it provides to Smithville residents.*	• 3 sentences • 75 words • low = 22 w • high = 29 w • average = 25.0 w/s • Flesch Reading Ease = 24.6 • Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level = 16.0

Table 3a: Composed of short sentences only, Sample 1 is easy to understand but frustrating to read. Composed of long sentences only, Sample 2 is difficult to read (low reading ease, elevated grade level).

	Sample sentence	Readability data
Sample 3 (varied)	*The nonprofit Cultural Council of Smithville was founded in 1973. At the time, it raised money for cultural organizations and provided them with marketing support. In 1978, it staged the Gala, a fundraiser for both the Cultural Council and Smithville University's fine arts program. Since then, the Cultural Council has been improving Smithville's cultural fabric through financial and strategic support as well as advocacy programs. The Cultural Council also provides education and information to Smithville residents.*	• 5 sentences • 76 words • low = 10 w • high = 21 w • average = 15.2 w/s • Flesch Reading Ease = 27.7 • Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level = 13.1

Table 3b: Sample 3 is "just right," striking a balance between two extremes, as it is more interesting to read than Sample 1 and less difficult to read than Sample 2.

[4] See Appendix A for an explanation of the readability metrics referenced in Tables 3a and 3b.

Tip: Reread the text.

Good writers know that the best text is the product of writing and editing. **Think of writing as a manufacturing process and editing as quality control.** Would you feel comfortable sending your company's product out the door without quality control?

There are two easy ways to improve the quality of your text after you have written it (see Table 4). Ideally, a colleague is able to read the copy and give you feedback. If a colleague is unavailable, read the text aloud.

Quality control process	Description
Have a colleague read the text.	• Ask a colleague to read the text. • Have your colleague use some type of document mark-up (in Word or Adobe), and ask him or her to: - mark any passages in which the meaning is unclear. - mark any passages that do not sound natural or flow well. - mark any passages that contain terminology or formatting inconsistencies. - mark any factual errors.
Read the text aloud.	• If possible, find a quiet place in which to read the text aloud. • If no quiet place is available, mouth the words to yourself as you read the text. • The process of reading aloud often reveals errors in word choice or phrasing that are more difficult to detect when reading silently.

Table 4: The "second read": performing quality control on a text.

Tip: Use spell-check and grammar-check tools...twice.

Prior to the invention of spell-check software, writers and editors were fully responsible for avoiding or correcting errors before a text went to press. Now, **even people who do not consider themselves good spellers are able to avoid embarrassing mistakes.**

Spell-check tools have their limitations, however: they cannot flag a correctly spelled English word used in the wrong context (though some grammar-check tools can, if the part of speech is problematic). See Table 5 for words that a spell-check tool would not detect.

Text not flagged by spell-check tool	Text revised by human editor
• The antique dinette **seat** shown here dates to the 1930s. • **Conversation** programs designed to protect wildlife have been in place since the organization's founding. • The city's bond issue produced over $53 **billion** in savings.	• The antique dinette **set** shown here dates to the 1930s. • **Conservation** programs designed to protect wildlife have been in place since the organization's founding. • The city's bond issue produced over $53 **million** in savings.

Table 5: The limitations of spell-check tools.

> " Using spell-check and grammar-check tools is fundamental, and there is no excuse for not using the tools that your word-processing program gives you. If you know that spelling is your Achilles heel, take advantage of this low-effort way to clean up egregious errors before the world sees them. "
>
> **Alan Headbloom, principal at Headbloom Cross-Cultural Communication**

Still, the advantages of using spell- and grammar-check tools far outweigh any limitations they have. Run these tools twice:

1. once when you have finished writing your text (to check all copy)

2. once when you have finished editing your text (to check all copy introduced during the editing phase)

If any new copy is introduced during a second round of edits, run the spell- and grammar-check tools again.

While they are not perfect, **spell-checkers offer content producers a highly efficient means of detecting most errors before distributing content.**

Conclusion

We have provided insights into the effect that copy—both good and bad—can have on a company's customers. We have also provided tips designed to help anyone involved in the copywriting process create better marketing collateral.

Whether you are planning, writing, or editing, it is our hope that you use this white paper as a resource. Print out key pages as reminders while you write, or reference this paper as you edit.

While this document is not an exhaustive list of writing or editing tips, it will greatly improve the quality of your copy if you choose to use it. Running spell-check alone may save your company embarrassment when welcoming discerning readers to your website.

Well-written copy can be very powerful, but you still need to combine your polished marketing collateral with other components required for a successful business: a quality product or service, expert advice, a good rapport with clients, etc. When you consider that a website is often your customers' first glimpse of your company, doesn't it make sense to make the text on that website as meaningful, clear, and concise as possible? Writing good web copy (or polishing existing copy) is within every company's reach and can only improve the first impression that it makes on potential customers.

Customers may decide to take their business elsewhere for any reason. Don't let that reason be poorly written copy.

Appendix A: Readability and Search Engine Optimization

Along with its spell- and grammar-check tools, Microsoft Word offers a pair of readability scores designed to help a document's author determine the reading difficulty of the text: the Flesch Reading Ease score and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score.

Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Readability

The **Flesch Reading Ease** test calculates a score from 0.0 to 100.0, with higher scores indicating easier texts. The formula used to calculate the score takes into account average sentence length and average number of syllables per word.[5]

The **Flesch-Kincaid Readability Test** converts the Reading Ease score to a U.S. grade level: unlike the Reading Ease score, a higher number here indicates a more difficult text. A text with a score of 11.0, for example, indicates that a high school junior (grade 11) could understand it. Scores higher than 12.0 indicate years of education beyond high school, i.e., a score of 14.5 indicates that a college student could understand the text in question.[6]

Limitations of Scoring Metrics

Language by its nature is often not conducive to quantitative measurement. Computers can calculate total word count, average words per sentence, average syllables per word, etc.—but any number of passages could render a given score less meaningful.

The essence of Flesch-Kincaid is that longer words and sentences are more difficult to understand than shorter words and sentences. In some cases, however, shorter words and sentences may be more difficult to understand, especially if specialized terminology appears:

Communication methods have greatly improved over time, owing to constant innovation and an exponential increase in computing capabilities.*
*Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level = 18.3 (supposedly harder to understand)

Germans identified Mark as a tourist because he could not produce a velar fricative.**
**Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level = 10.0 (supposedly easier to understand)

---

[5] http://www.utexas.edu/disability/ai/resource/readability/manual/flesch-calculate-English.html
[6] *Ibid.*

SEO: Writing for Humans or Computers?

Creators of good web copy write for a human audience, but they also consider best practices for search engine optimization (SEO). **Text written for humans and text written for computers do not have to be mutually exclusive.**

However, RedLine's position is that content should primarily reflect the needs of the audience. That audience, remember, is composed of people, not computers. A well-written home page, for example, is one that quickly and clearly gives readers the information they need. If readers make their decision to stay or leave a website within seconds, it makes sense to write clear, concise copy that does not contain an overabundance of SEO keywords (many of which may not be relevant or even clear to readers).

Indeed, the unethical practice of "keyword stuffing," although designed to increase site traffic, can be counterproductive for companies, organizations, and bloggers. Copy that contains too many keywords (which search engines use to find a site) and not enough "real" language (which humans prefer) can create a very frustrating user experience.[7]

This paper is not a primer on best practices for SEO. We recommend that you consult with your web designer or SEO vendor to determine which keywords are necessary to include on your site, then have a language services provider incorporate those keywords naturally into the web copy. The final copy should help your site's search ranking and, more importantly, provide a positive user experience for the reader. **Visitors to your site—not search engines—are your prospective customers.**

[7] http://support.google.com/webmasters/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=66358

Appendix B: LinkedIn Poll—March 24, 2012

RedLine asked the question *Does poor writing (grammar, spelling, style) on a company's website give you a negative impression of that company?* (See Figure B1.) We posted our poll in several LinkedIn groups: LinkEds and Writers (approximately 35,000 members at time of writing), the Penn State Alumni Association (39K members), and Linked Up Grand Rapids (10K members).

Of the 433 people who voted, as many as 90% (estimated) were from LinkEds and Writers, a group for editors and writers; we did not track the origin group of individual responses. It is not surprising that editors and writers would a) vote on such a poll and b) vote overwhelmingly for "Yes, and I usually exit the website." This group may not represent the population as a whole, *but the implication is clear: bad copy can drive away potential customers.*

Does poor writing (grammar, spelling, style) on a company's website give you a negative impression of that company?
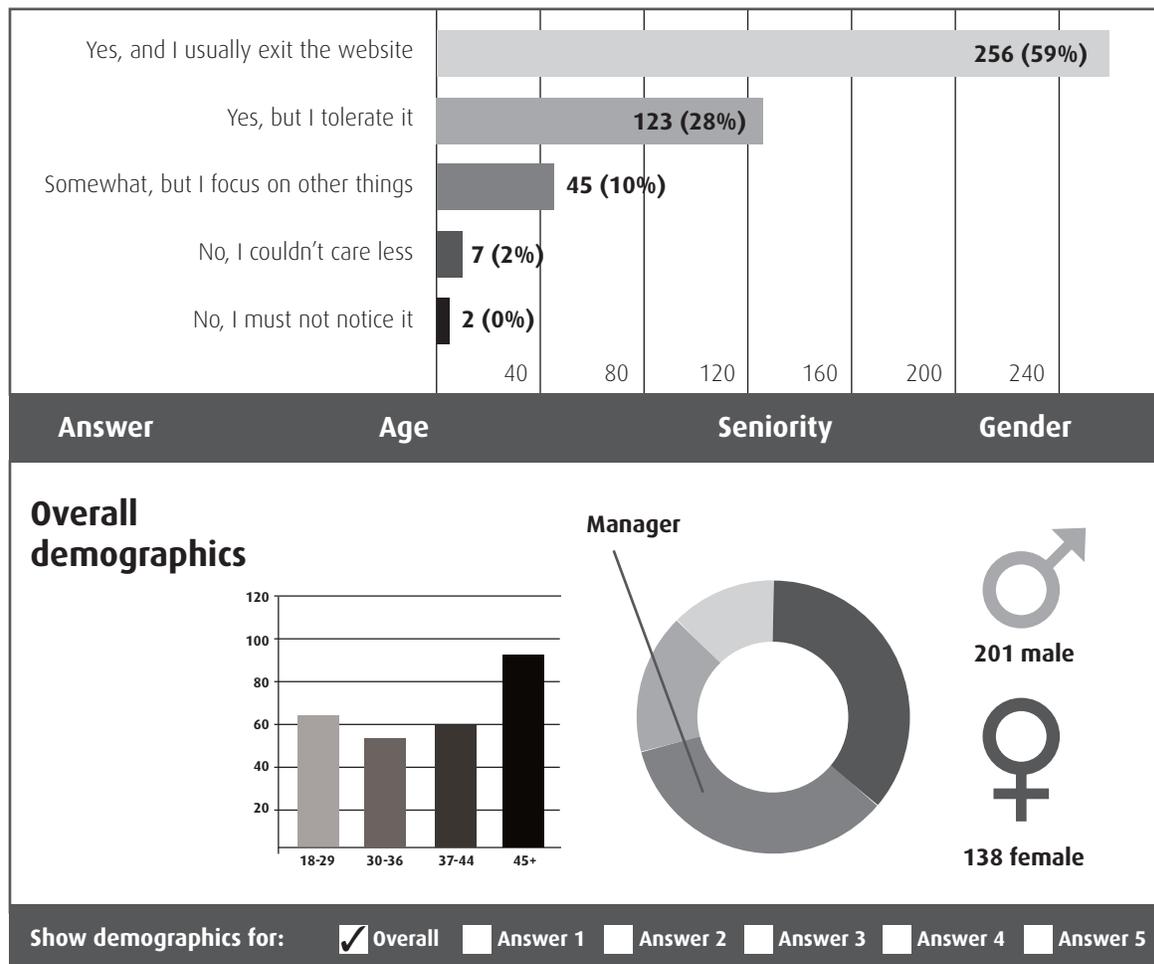

Figure B1: RedLine poll on LinkedIn: *Does poor writing (grammar, spelling, style) on a company's website give you a negative impression of that company?* (March 24, 2012).

Appendix C: Analysis of Web Copy Samples

In early 2012, RedLine conducted an analysis of the web copy of 39 different companies and organizations from both blue-collar and white-collar industries. See below for a partial list of industries represented in the sample.

- wood products
- hospitality
- veterinary medicine
- landscaping

- biomedical research
- accounting
- chemical manufacturing

- real estate
- recruiting/staffing
- publishing

We chose the 39 companies in question more or less at random; they ran the gamut from sole proprietorships to large corporations. We then selected a sample of text from each website—typically from the home or about page—and operated under the assumption that any section of text from a given site is representative of that site's copy as a whole. Each excerpt informed our appraisal of the general quality of web copy in the business world. Table C1 and Figure C1 summarize our findings.

Rubric category	Description	No. of companies in category/sample size (percentage)
Excellent	Flawless in mechanics; text reads extremely well. Meaning is very clear; language is specific and concise; no unnecessary wording; no problems with register, style, or word choice.	0/39 (0%)
Good	No typographical/grammar errors; the text reads well. Meaning is clear; text is fairly specific and concise; uses appropriate register.	8/39 (21%)
Average	Does not contain major typos or grammar errors; has inappropriate register, word choice, hyperbole; does not speak to audience.	25/39 (64%)
Poor	Contains major and minor grammatical errors, spelling errors, punct/cap problems, incorrect usage, and/or is internally inconsistent; text is unclear, wordy, or clumsy.	6/39 (15%)

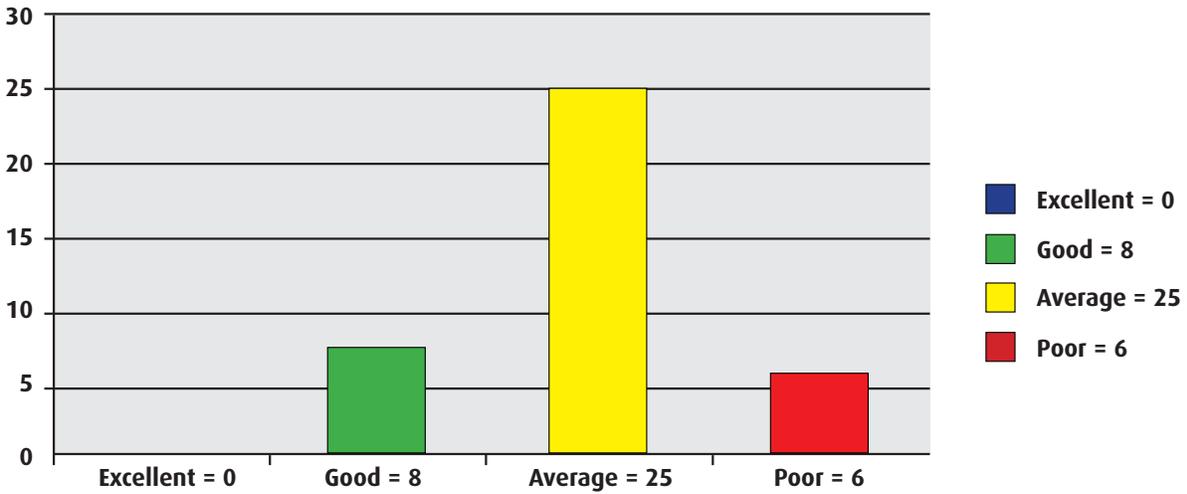Table C1: Rubric categories and summary of findings for RedLine's 2012 analysis of web copy.

Figure C1: Quality of 39 company websites by rubric category per RedLine's 2012 analysis.
(See Table C1 for rubric category descriptions.)

The implications of our analysis are worrisome, at least for the companies with web copy that we rated as **Average** or **Poor**—three-fourths (79%) of our sample. These companies are almost certainly making a bad impression on their would-be customers and may very well be losing business as a result.

Companies with web copy that we rated as **Good**, however, have reason to feel proud: prospective customers undoubtedly perceive these companies as more professional and are more likely to do business with them, all else being equal, than with their competitors.

Note that we did not rate a single company in our sample as having **Excellent** web copy. This does not mean that we did not find *any* elements of **Excellent** copy; it simply means that no sample text satisfied *all* of our criteria for an **Excellent** rating.

Writing is a process, one that ideally involves multiple parties and multiple stages. The company that rushes or ignores this process is doing its clients a disservice—and may be hurting its own bottom line.

About

Based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, **RedLine Language Services LLC** offers writing, editing, translation, and transcription services to businesses, government entities, and individual clients.

RedLine was founded on the principle that good copy is good business. We believe that any organization can benefit from clean, clear, and concise copy and/or documentation.

Matthew Kushinka has been using language professionally for nine years, having worked as a copyeditor, proofreader, language teacher, language tester, and translator. Multiple authors of nonfiction trade books have acknowledged Matthew for his editing expertise.

He has worked as a Speaking Proficiency Tester for the FBI and earned top scores on the U.S. government's Defense Language Proficiency Test for French in reading and listening. He has done graduate coursework in translation (French-to-English) as well as TESOL at the Monterey Institute of International Studies. Matthew is a member of the American Translators Association and the National Language Service Corps.

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For more information:

RedLine Language Services
Grand Rapids, Michigan
(616) 855-4044

www.redlinels.com