

- Only 74% of U.S. high school students now obtain a diploma
- Of 63 cancer patients, only 27% could understand any of 30 analyzed pamphlets of the American Cancer Society and the National Cancer Society
- In an Arizona study of people aged 60+, the average reading level was at the fifth grade level
- In a Kansas study of 644 people aged 13-63, nearly half read below the ninth grade level, 22% at or below fourth grade level, and 13% below fourth grade level

Geary offers **six suggestions to improve readability** – remembering that communication, not education, is the pr professional's goal:

1. **Find out reading capabilities of intended audiences before writing copy.** The healthcare profession has done more research on this than any other, and it's available.
2. **Write different types and levels of materials** for different target audiences; use readability formulas in word processors as a guide.
3. **Create substitution lists** for often-used hard words; use easier words instead.
4. **Do simple pretesting** on a sample of the intended audience. Soon it will become "second nature" to match wording with the audience's reading capabilities.
5. **Establish standards** and stick to them. For example, a readability level above sixth grade and/or a poor score on a pretest marks the draft for rejection and rework.
6. **Keep up with the research on readability**, including design elements to improve readability.

(More from Davidgeary@aol.com)

In 1979, the **Plain English Campaign** became a fulltime movement in England. Founder Chrissie Maher took up the battle for crystal-clear language after seeing two elderly women die because they couldn't understand an application form for housing benefits. Campaign's website is replete with **info and tips on message design, layout and clear language.** It no longer recommends the FOG index, popular in the 80s. Instead, it judges "plain English" by successful passage through 35 technical tests **and** independent testing on the public. "You cannot give a score for plain English – either it is crystal clear or it isn't. **There is no substitute for testing a document on real people.**"

Campaign's website also **offers tips for clear websites.** Among them: "When a visitor comes to your site, it should be clear straight away a) who the site belongs to; b) what purpose the site serves; and c) how to contact the people behind the site. If you are tempted to put only an e-mail address and no phone number or postal address, remember that a) you may be asked for these details regularly through e-mails, so you will waste your time replying; and b) having a phone number and 'real-life' address will reassure visitors that you are a genuine organization." (More from Plain English Campaign at www.plainenglish.co.uk)

PREPARING FOR PARENT COMPANY FILING, LAIDLAW COMPANIES OFFER LESSON IN PERCEPTION MANAGEMENT, ISSUES ANTICIPATION

Sometimes the victory for pr is in the event that never happened. Such was the case for the Laidlaw companies when parent company, Laidlaw, Inc. (Ontario) filed Chapter 11 last June. "What could have been a disaster turned into a non-event," Marijo Rymer, vp-com'n of Laidlaw subsidiary American Medical Response (AMR - Aurora, Colorado), told *pr*. Though the filing did not name the subsidiaries – a group of transit companies and an emergency room contractor – practitioners at the subsidiaries realized the **need to distance their companies from the action.** They also saw that stakeholders would be best served by **advanced, intensive communication.**

STRESSFUL TIMES

For Bill Koch, vp-com'n of Laidlaw Educational Services (LES - Naperville, Ill.), a school business service, the year and a half prior to the filing was a nail biter. "The situation required us to communicate the fact that the filing was going to affect the parent, not the operating companies," he told *pr*. "This was difficult." And he faced these special challenges:

- **LES shares the name "Laidlaw."** "It's all over our buses. There was the opportunity for an enormous perception problem." It would have been natural for vendors (tire companies, service centers, etc.) and customers (school boards) to think that the filing was also representative of the subsidiaries. Vendors could worry about how a company filing for Chapter 11 would pay invoices. "They needed reassurance." As for school boards: "They didn't want the children to be without buses, and rightfully so. We had to assure them that everything as far as we knew would be fine. If and when Laidlaw filed Chapter 11, they would be on the proprietary list to get information asap."
- **Gag rule.** Though Koch knew that early and intensive communication was integral, no public statement could be made prior to the filing. "We spent a lot of time getting it together, researching how other companies had done it." This exercise resulted in lots of legal advice, but not any meat as to how to devise a communication plan.
- **Not a done deal.** In other words, **there were no guarantees.** "Though we weren't to be named in the filing, there was always the possibility that the plan could be changed and we could be included." This caused anxiety until the day the filing was announced.

As for AMR (an ambulance transit service), Rymer says the need to start planning a response was evident nearly a year before the event. "They filed in June 2001, but it was apparent in September of 2000 that they would have to file for restructuring purposes." Like Koch, Rymer worked with her communication staff on how to communicate with customers, clients and employees without violating confidentiality issues.

Rymer and her team developed a series of **talking points for managers to take to employees.** "Our goal was to make this 'old news' by the time it finally happened." Also, "the message was that this filing was about a debt owed by Laidlaw Inc. We were not liable for that debt."



When the filing was announced, LES hit the ground running. “All was launched within two hours of the filing.” Components:

- 1. **Toll-free hotlines** – “separate for different stakeholders” – included updated news and info, opportunities for callers to leave questions
- 2. **Website**, independent of that associated with parent, included e-mail answer center with mailboxes for key publics – employees, customers and vendors – to leave questions
- 3. **Communication toolkits** detailing communications plan for executive team and communication team
- 4. **Face-to-face communications** whenever possible for both employees and customers, with **leave-behind fact sheets**
- 5. **Phone conversations** between the CEO and the customer
- 6. **Letters** from the CEO to the employees
- 7. **Forums** with Q&A sessions
- 8. **Talking points** for managers on how to answer employees concerns; also points for talking to the media
- 9. **Conference calls** from the CEO to the leadership team, i.e., regional leaders
- 10. **Vendor relations** included face-to-face communication in regions where it was feasible, follow-up calls, letters, directives to the website

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING HELPFUL

At LES, Koch said his goal involved building human relationships. “We wanted to use face-to-face communication as much as possible to reassure them (publics) that to the best of our knowledge operations would continue seamlessly.” Like AMR, Koch’s group began planning months in advance of the filing. In five operating regions, 35 managers retooled, practicing public speaking, reviewing talking points, reworking message strategies and devising methods for addressing the media. LES also prepared communication material: “We put together letters, talking points, fact sheets, ‘leave behinds,’ news releases all confirming that the filing would not impact local operations.”

Koch says the **outcome was that nothing happened** – “the desired result.” “We only received a handful of calls over several weeks. No operational disruptions of kids getting to or from school, no changes in service. That was our goal.” Rymer’s strategy was also a success. “We had two or three very brief local newspaper mentions of the filing and one negative one, from a competitor. It was a wonderful non event.”

OLYMPIC GAMES REMAIN ATTRACTIVE TO CORPORATE SPONSORS; THE SCANDALS OF 1999 HAVE FADED

The Olympic Games retain their halo as the scandal of 1999 – when some members of the International Olympic Committee were accused of accepting bribes in return for their vote to choose Salt Lake City as the Olympic site – is barely mentioned. Corporate sponsorship has continued and even John Hancock Financial Services, whose president and CEO David D’Alessandro threatened to drop its sponsorship in response to the scandal, decided to renew – but only after an ethics clause was added giving the company the right to withdraw at any time should another scandal arise. Olympic organizers raised \$859 million in sponsorship revenue from 64 corporate sponsors and suppliers.

GLOBALIZATION HELPS

The benefits of sponsorship have become even greater in the era of globalization. For companies like Eastman Kodak, Visa and John Hancock that paid between \$50 million and \$60 million for worldwide rights, “The Olympic rings give you instant credibility all over the world,” said Steve Burgay of Hancock. “There’s a halo effect that enhances and differentiates your brand.” The halo includes high valence attributes of fair play, trustworthiness, honor, peace and friendship – all qualities that most commercial brands like to be associated with. The Olympic Games’ most loyal sponsor, Eastman Kodak, which extended its relationship with the Games through 2008, says the Olympics provide a unique medium to show off Kodak’s new products to the world.

Viewership of NBC’s prime-time coverage of the Olympics exceeded expectations. During the first 15 days of its coverage, NBC received an average Nielsen rating of 19.2 (one rating point equals 1.06 million households) – higher than the average of 16.5 and 17.0 it had promised advertisers. The biggest viewers were women from ages 18 to 44. NBC will likely make a profit of about \$75 million on the games. It took in \$740 million in advertising revenue. In 1995, it paid \$3.5 billion for the American broadcast rights to the Olympic Games from 2000 to 2008.

OPEN OFFICE LANDSCAPING IMPROVES COMMUNICATIONS

Small-scale, team-oriented offices with few Dilbert-like panels are more effective work environments than private, closed offices. That’s because they more readily **foster communication, cohesiveness and organizational learning among co-workers** without undermining their ability to concentrate, finds a Cornell University study. Data from 229 professionals at eight small firms were analyzed by professors Franklin Becker and William Sims. Results are published in a report, “Offices That Work: Balancing Communication, Flexibility and Cost,” which is available as a pdf file at <http://iwsp.human.cornell.edu>.

“Considering that lower and middle managers spend 27-87% of their time in oral communication – most of it face-to-face – and that upper-level managers spend even more of their time in this way, **team-oriented offices make good business sense**,” concludes Becker.

“Surprisingly, one-person closed offices, often preferred by workers and seen as the Shangri-la of office designs, were not universally viewed as the best or most effective work environment,” notes Becker. Younger workers reported a stronger preference for **team-oriented offices because they provide greater access to colleagues from whom they felt they could learn**. This office style also shifts thinking to the *team’s* productivity rather than one’s *own* productivity. Older respondents, however, found it more difficult to concentrate in open offices, possibly because over a number of years they had become more comfortable with traditional offices, explains Becker.

ARE YOUR WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS BEING UNDERSTOOD?

20% of adult Americans read at or below fifth grade level, and another 27% are thought to have significant reading challenges, so nearly half may not understand or may have trouble understanding most written material, writes David Geary in *Public Relations Quarterly* (Vol.8, No.4, Winter 2001). Geary reports these stats: