

# Complicated language costs companies money

With International Plain Language Day, which happened on Monday 13 October, it is a good time for companies to reflect on how many millions bad communication is costing them.

Letters and annual reports that go straight to the dustbin, emails that are never opened, thousands of customer queries and complaints, legal costs, angry and frustrated customers.



Sarah Slabbert

## Confusing language

At all levels, companies say that they "put the customer first", yet South African consumers are frustrated daily by bad communication. Endless minutes of music while you are reassured that you are "a valued customer", incomprehensible e-toll bills, letters that still make no sense after you have read them for the umpteenth time, sales agents who rattle on and on without caring to listen. The list is never-ending.

"Complicated and confusing language ultimately alienates your audience. Whether it's an internal email to employees that makes no sense, advertising that only 50% of consumers will grasp, or contract terms that the vast majority of the general public won't comprehend, companies are missing valuable opportunities to interact meaningfully with their audiences.

In a time where transparency is considered essential for good customer relations, plain language is a strategic tool for business growth. It can win customers over, nurture respect and encourage loyalty.

People who get lost in trying to figure out the meaning of messages are quite simply lost to the business cause. Customers want to understand the documents that you ask them to sign. And they expect to understand communication that is supposed to give them information or instructions. Unintelligible documents undermine customers' confidence in you and your products," says Sarah Slabbert from the Plain Language Institute.

## Communicating to consumers

"Consumers are more aware of their right to have information in language that is clear and to the point, and if they don't get it, they will move on to the next company that does communicate clearly. Low customer retention is evident in competitive industries like short-term insurance and mobile services, where people switch providers because they feel like they have been misled, misunderstood or failed in some way.

On the flip side, companies that provide clear, useful information can attract customers by making it easier for them to make informed decisions more quickly, and with certainty. This can only be good for business," says Dr Slabbert.

The world over, there are numerous examples of companies achieving success from simplifying the language in their documentation. In Canada, Citibank has experienced a marked decrease in lawsuits since it simplified its documents. Royal Insurance of Canada had a 38% increase in sales when plain language was used in homeowners' insurance policies (from 59 million to 79 million). In Australia, the Capita Insurance Company did a study of errors made on 17 different application forms. It calculated that it cost the company \$551,465 each year to correct those errors and decided to amalgamate and streamline its forms into one plain language version. That process cost the company less than \$100,000 yet reduced the error rate dramatically. After the changes, the company spent \$15,441 each year to correct errors - only 2% of what it was spending previously.\*



Photo via 123RF

## Plain language initiatives

In South Africa, plain language initiatives are slowly making customer communication clearer and simpler. The bills of some of the Metro municipalities, some insurance policies, some cell phone contracts and SARS tax forms are examples.

The Professional Editors' Group (PEG), mindful of international and local research and the great need for plain language practitioners in Southern Africa, has championed the cause of plain language among its members for a number of years and has provided them with much-needed training in this area. "The association will be marking International Plain Language Day on 13 October through specially commissioned articles. It will continue to espouse the cause of plain language as a means of making it easier for authors to communicate effectively with their audiences," says Isabelle Delvare, chairperson of PEG.

Despite the positive developments mentioned, however, complicated text still litters a wide range of contracts, agreements and policy documents in South Africa. Until plain language becomes the norm in business communication, companies will continue to waste money and lose customers because they aren't making themselves clear.

### *References*

\*Plain Language Service Cost and Time Benefits, see [www.pls.cpha.ca](http://www.pls.cpha.ca).

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>