

On writing: Stu Opperman impacts PR

The most effective public relations professionals understand journalism, and what makes something newsworthy. They also appreciate that writing clearly and concisely is crucial to communicating with news editors and journalists. This is exactly why Stu Opperman is great at PR. I've known Stu for many years, and have often turned to him to review my writing. I know he will help make it clearer and more concise.



Stu Opperman, APR

An accredited public relations professional, Stu Opperman, APR, owns Impact Players, well-connected firm that positively impacts the business agenda of its clients and contacts. Prior to that, he worked for South Florida-based public relations firms and also had a career as an executive and on-air talent in radio.

Twitter: @stuoopperman

1. What role does writing play in your work and how important a skill is it?

Writing is the backbone of all that I do, whether it's media relations, crisis communications, content production, relationship, or audience building. Effectively communicating through the written word, in whatever format it takes, is how I most often accomplish internal and external objectives.

2. Does writing well still matter in a digital/text/emoji world?

It matters more than ever, since there will be diminishing numbers of people willing or able to write effectively as communication evolves. Those who have embraced or been enabled by the shortcuts will find they need individuals who possess actual writing skills, especially in situations where it is critical to be clear, persuasive, or motivating.

3. What's the best advice you've received or would give on how to improve writing skills?

Pay attention to effective writing and take note of how it's being done, and that's not just in books. There is plenty to be learned in short-form communications – articles, email, blog posts, Twitter, and even billboards.

4. What are your top writing resources or references (digital or paper-based)?

I'm a big fan of Stephen King's "On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft" (where he famously wrote that "the road to Hell is paved with adverbs"). Strunk and White's "Elements of Style" is a classic I continue to turn to on a regular basis.

5. Do you follow a style guide, and if so, which one?

For the media work I do, there is only one – the Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual.

6. What's your top writing/grammar/usage pet peeve?

The use of extraneous language that could be replaced by one word (“due to the fact that” should be “because”).

7. What's your favorite word and what's your least favorite?

My favorite word may be “repugnant,” not only because it's so descriptive but also because the speaker shows his or her distaste in the pronunciation of it. My least favorite are all the ones poor writers litter their copy with, especially in public relations, such as “unique,” “cutting edge,” and “state-of-the-art.” If everything is unique, then nothing is.

I agree with Stu that getting rid of extraneous words (and cliches) would go a long way in giving public relations writing more impact. For more writing insights, check back here on September 29.

Why is writing well a disappearing skill?

Sally Falkow writes today in her blog, The Proactive Report, that good writing should be considered a primary public relations skill. I agree (and I wrote about that in my post

Qualities of a PR Pro).

The question is not whether PR people should know how to write well, but why they don't. April Finnen (@AprilFin) , who writes the blog One Person Shop, said in a Twitter exchange with me:

"I think a big part of it is that good writing comes from good thinking, and that's becoming harder to find."

I answered:

Certainly true, but I do think many people just don't do enough reading either (maybe that's related to lack of thinking...)

To which April responded:

"Agree. If you can find a curious PR pro who reads everything, pretty safe bet they're a good writer."

In my opinion, writing well is disappearing because people are reading less. Why is this happening? It may be because they are not curious, not interested, not thinking, working too hard, or any number of other reasons.

If it is lack of curiosity or good thinking, as April says, how are these PR "pros" going to come up with strategies to drive a message?

I can't tell you how many PR people I have met who don't ever read books for pleasure or even a daily newspaper. How many PR firms offer grammar and writing courses for their associates? How many PR pros today were English majors in college? Fewer and fewer thanks to the devaluing of liberal arts education and the rise of career-focused majors. If all you studied in college was how to create a PR campaign, but you never read a classic novel, how are you going to appreciate the power of

language to convey meaning and emotion?

Do you have thoughts on why good writing is on the decline?
Please do share!

Write well or fail

On Monday, I came across a letter to the editor in the Washington Post that made me nod my head vigorously. The author, David Klinger was writing about the Scripps Spelling Bee coverage, and I think you should read his letter:

I have written for a federal agency throughout a 34-year career. I had to pass a spelling test before graduating from the University of North Carolina's journalism school. Yet I turn to the dictionary half a dozen times a day to check a word or reconfirm a spelling. That's the nature of good, careful writing.

Memorization of words like "thanatophidia" (which isn't even in my Webster's) or "bondieuserie" for the Scripps spelling bee is about as relevant to me – or to today's generation of texters and youthful online denizens – as a buggy whip.

Scripps included, we desperately need to acquaint the next generation with a few, basic English grammar skills that seem to have disappeared amid society's collective cyber-mania: complete sentences, subject-verb agreement, correct punctuation and that all-important axiom that "an apostrophe does not a plural make."

David Klinger, Martinsburg, W.Va.

Basic grammar skills are disappearing left and right. I see the use of apostrophes to make plurals ALL the time. People just don't get it. However, to those in the know, using grammar poorly makes you look dumb. There is no other way to describe it. In marketing and PR, which are communications-based disciplines, writing well is key. It is key because if your grammar, spelling or sentence structure don't add up, you

are probably not getting your thoughts through clearly. Over on the Journalistics blog, Jessica Love writes "The Write Stuff: Still the#1 PR Skill." Yes, it should be, but no, many PR practitioners don't have it. We can blame many things from a failing school system to an overreliance on short form messaging, but the responsibility to straighten out your writing skills lies with you. Write well, or fail to communicate.