

Get to the Point Fast

Here's a too-common example of fuzzy writing – and an easy fix.

By Max T. Russell

Get to the point. We've all heard that advice a thousand times, yet it can seem difficult to obey. It's actually quite easy with the written word. I'm going to show you an example of terrible communication I received this week and how easily it could've been fixed, if someone had made getting to the point a priority.

The local energy company sent me a "time-sensitive notice" to say . . . to say, uh, that, well, I had to read it several times. My wife read it first and left me a note: "Read this. Is this okay with you?"

So I read it. It started by saying the company was going to replace our electric meter with a smart one. That sounded fine. Then came information about our usage and the benefits: We wouldn't have to pay as many estimated bills. But that wasn't enticing because, if the average monthly usage is in our budget, we don't care about estimations.

I looked for more benefits as I read. Nothing but a few paragraphs explaining that the installer would be wearing picture ID from the energy company, would do the installation whether or not we were home, and other details about installation.

I had now read two-thirds of the notice and was ready to text my wife, "Sure, this is a harmless postcard. They're going to replace our meter." But then I read her note again: "Read this. Is it okay with you?" She was obviously concerned.

I continued reading. Copyright date of the notice. Company website for more information. And then the trouble spot: "Don't want the new meter?" Hmm, maybe I didn't. Maybe I shouldn't. What did the company want me to do? Were they selling me something? The paragraph mentioned a setup fee that could be waived. But there was a \$17.50 monthly meter reading fee if we opted out. But that fee could be waived too.

What in the world was the purpose of this time-sensitive communication?

I read on. If I had questions, I could call or e-mail. So I called. I asked what the point of the notice was. The man said it was about installing the new smart meter. I said I couldn't understand what was involved and what my responsibility would be. He said he would transfer my call.

“What in the world was the purpose of this time-sensitive communication?”



When he transferred me to a woman in another department, I asked her what the point of the notice was. Was it just to get me to permit the installation? She said yes, that's all it was. No, I didn't have any other responsibilities. She also told me she'd received 100 other calls asking what the notice was saying. "It's not you," she said.

No, it wasn't. The people who wrote and approved the notice were the problem. They had a simple request, but they buried it under a lot of hot air – distracting and confusing information.

What did the company need to say? Try this: "We want to replace your old electric meter with a better one that provides us with information that should help you and us be smarter about energy usage. For one thing, we won't have to estimate as many bills. Unless you tell us you don't want the new meter, an installer wearing a picture ID from our company will replace your old meter with the new kind. Call us if you have any questions now or later."

That's getting to the point. You can do that every time you send a message in an e-mail, a flyer, a video, or in any other format. Simply say what you want to say. **S**

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Make It Easy

If you want people to respond, you need to make it easy for them to understand what your message is. Find more pointers at NonprofitWorld.org:

Keep the Main Thing Up Front (Vol. 36, No. 1)

Truth Is Better than Hype (Vol. 35, No. 1)

Cynicism Rx: Authentic Communication (Vol. 24, No. 6)

How Jargon Undermines Communication (Vol. 27, No. 2)

What the Heck Are You Trying to Say? (Vol. 34, No. 2)