

Poor grammar and business reputation

A survey

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***I guarantee that bad grammar will make you lose money.***

What impression does the sentence above give you? I imagine words like unprofessional and sloppy spring to mind. What if I told you that it was real copy from a company offering business advice and copywriting services? Are you likely to hire them? The copy goes on to give some reasons why 'you should listen too' them, but I doubt that many people ever get to the reasons.

The ways in which language is used, and misused, is central to our work so I wanted to find out just how much poor spelling and grammar would affect public perception of businesses. To do so, I asked people from various backgrounds and countries the following questions:

*1) Would poor grammar and spelling errors in promotional material affect your choice to use, purchase or endorse products and services?*

*2) Would the industry matter?*

The results were pretty conclusive: almost everybody said that poor grammar and spelling would not only negatively affect their view of the business in question, it would make them actively avoid it.

Consider those negative opinions in monetary terms and the implications are obvious.

## **Grammar matters**

A slapdash approach to the language used in your promotional material, which obviously includes your website, suggests a slapdash approach to other areas of your business.

One respondent pointed out that his 'opinion of a company drops immediately as soon' as he notices a grammatical error. Consider that wording: *immediately*. As the old adage goes, you don't get a second chance to make a first impression, and the effects of grammatical errors are immediate and lasting.

'Typos and poor grammar are a big red flag for me,' wrote another respondent, 'I am an editor for a tech blog, and if I receive a poorly written press release I automatically assume the company sending it is less than professional.' I couldn't agree more.

This is your public image, and it pays to get it right. Almost every respondent agreed.

'I have a high regard for good grammar usage, and I lose respect for a company when they don't pay attention to it,' wrote a New York-based business consultant.

The problem runs deeper than spelling mistakes creating an unfavourable impression, as people can interpret errors in many ways. 'Bad grammar or bad spelling is an indication of carelessness,' wrote a respondent from Canada. 'A second error indicates unprofessional people and problems will probably occur if I get involved with them.'

Many people had similar things to say, including an advertising executive from Germany, who said that 'if a company lacks attention to detail in their promotional material, it speaks volumes...about their attention to detail in other areas, like quality control or customer service.'

What you write may often be your first contact with a potential customer, so it absolutely pays to ensure there are no mistakes.

## **It's all Greek to me**

Some people were willing to make allowances for those writing in a foreign language, but the overwhelming majority wasn't.

The overall consensus was if you're writing in a language other than your native tongue, it's even more important to ensure you get it right.

Some disagreed, of course. One respondent commented that if 'the original website is not in English and they offer an English translation of said site, then I will be more likely to cut them some slack as...a second language...may involve considerable expense to have grammatically checked.'

I don't agree. If you're going to create a website in a foreign language, you're doing so in the hope of generating business from the market in which that language is used, therefore you should show an equal amount of respect to the language and the people who use it.

To put less emphasis on a foreign language is almost like telling people that you value their language less than you value your own. Is that really the message you want to send?

One respondent was a professional editor from the US who pursued an MA in Spain, where she had to complete all of her coursework and a research paper in Spanish. 'No one was cutting me any breaks for being a non-native speaker,' she explained, 'and in a professional environment I wouldn't expect them to.'

## **The industry doesn't matter**

Most people said it didn't matter whether it was an individual selling hand-made pillow cases or a company specialising in editing and proofreading – inattention to grammar indicated inattention across the board.

'If they can't take the time for a spell check or some editing, they probably won't take time for their customers. Even if you think it doesn't matter, subconsciously it would,' concluded one respondent. Another went further, saying that 'regardless of industry, grammar and spelling are important when reviewing a website. It shows a certain amount of intellect, professionalism, attention to detail, and often, grammar is how we discern the phishing sites from real ones. Typos are one thing, blatant misuse or ignorance is another entirely.'

I'll conclude this section with a response that I think best sums up my opinion, submitted by a marketing manager in the UK: 'Professionalism is professionalism no matter the industry. If you're

not going to take pride in one aspect of your business what makes you think people are going to believe you take pride in the others?'

Poor grammar can demonstrably affect public perception of you and your business. Left unattended, it will cost you money.

### **A selection of quotes from the survey:**

*I give no credit to any source that doesn't bother to proofread their material, no matter how much I am interested in their product or whatever it is what they are selling/promoting.*

*Any time I see poor spelling or grammar, my opinion of the business in question drops. I automatically assume they don't know any better, and why would you want to broadcast your ignorance to the world?*

*I have to admit I will stop reading a website if I notice grammatical errors, and I actually become much more critical about the opinions of the site. That is how much it bothers me.*

*I have a high regard for good grammar usage, and I lose respect for a company when they don't pay attention to it.*

*Bad grammar or bad spelling is an indication of carelessness. A second error indicates unprofessional people and problems will probably occur if I get involved with them.*

*If a company lacks attention to detail in their promotional material, it speaks volumes to me about their attention to detail in other areas.*

*Virus-ridden/phishing/spam emails almost always have misspelled words and bad punctuation. Would you respond to those?*

*If they are skimping on grammar, I wonder what else they are skimping on. The industry is irrelevant.*

*Grammar and spelling errors are lazy, unprofessional and inexcusable.*

*If you're going to go to the trouble to publish something, go to the trouble to check it.*

*Poor spelling makes one question the writer; Do they not care? Are they lazy? Regardless of what industry, this is the company's representation.*

*If you have any questions or comments, or anything we can help you with, please get in touch:*

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