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What Little Signals Are Your Proposals and Letters Giving Your Clients?

by Kathy Ellis, Business Lab Marketing Coach

What your letter looks like affects what it "says." Fifteen years ago, a quick look in the phone book under the listing TYPESETTER would have yielded hundreds of listings—today you will find only a handful. Why? Because you and/or someone in your office is now doing the typesetting for all of your correspondence.

We do not call it typesetting when we do it internally. Sometimes we refer to it as desktop publishing depending upon how extravagant it is, but for the most part, we simply say "type up that proposal."

Consistency and Graphic Standards. In today's PC environment, most everyone in your office can take the role of typographer. Unfortunately, that usually means that with each new person and proposal may come a minor change to the "look" of your company's documents. Fonts may change, type sizes may change, etc. Before you know it, your proposals and letters may begin to look unprofessional, inconsistent and unorganized.

Tip From The Business Lab: Select a family of fonts to use in ALL written correspondence. The font selection should be based on your corporate identity—i.e., your logo, the font used on your letterhead, etc. Never use more than three different fonts in one document. Post the font choices near everyone's computer and ask them to only use these fonts when corresponding in writing. You may have to purchase fonts if they are not automatically on your system, however, this small investment will pay a nice return.

Keep in mind how the correspondence you're typesetting will be used. In this fax, we're using the Helvetica Neue family because Helvetica (and Times) are "recognized" by many fax machines, so they fax more clearly.

Here are some other tips that will help you look your best.

Visual Signals. Visual signals are any design and type elements that determine how well your message is grasped by the reader. For example, an indent is a signal. It says to the reader, "start here." The quote marks you just read added another voice to that sentence. The typefaces you use, the white space above a headline, where you place your margins, the choice of paper, colors, etc.—All of these can work to enhance or confuse your message. We respond to all of these visual signals subconsciously.

Decide What to Emphasize—Judiciously! Words that are ALL CAPS or *italics* are hard to read. When set in

lowercase letters, our eyes actually see words as shapes. We do not spell out the letters t-h-e when we read "the," because our brain has learned to recognize its distinctive shape. Never set more than a sentence in all caps. And never set script faces in all caps, *THIS* does not work well, does it? Italics can be used in short passages, perhaps a few paragraphs, but only if it is being used as a sidebar to the main story, which should be set in a "roman" or "normal" typeface.

Make Bulleted Lists Easy to Read.

- Select bullets of the proper weight, this one is too heavy. The following bullets are about as light as you will want to go.
- Use your paragraph setting to make a "hanging indent." The item above has a poor hanging indent, notice how the word "heavy" and "will" below it do not left align with the word "Select?"
- Always put a space between the bullet and the first word. Notice how awkward this bulleted item is without the space?
- Do not use bullets to start indented paragraphs.

Justifying Text. Left justified text is easier to read for long passages than justified text. When justified, the spaces between letters and words are stretched or squeezed line-by-line by your word processor, like this paragraph is. That can make reading long passages tedious. However, justified copy is less casual than left justified copy, so many companies prefer it for business correspondence. When professionally typeset, justified text is carefully looked at, line by line, to avoid overly large gaps between words. In this paragraph, we have intentionally left the word processor's default justification settings.

More Information? If you would like to learn more about the little signals you may be sending your customers or prospects, please send an E-mail to ideas@thebusinesslab.com or fax a note on your letterhead to 281-517-0789.

Author's Note: Kathy Ellis is a Marketing Coach and the owner of The Business Lab, a full service marketing and graphic design company. We specialize in relationship marketing programs including database marketing, company brochures, client newsletters and promotional marketing materials for our clients. We share with you our FREE newsletter to showcase powerful marketing tips, techniques and ideas to help you improve your business. The Business Lab is based in Houston, TX at 281-517-0998 or by E-mail at kathy@thebusinesslab.com