

Problems in the Field

## **Is this who we are?**

### **Making your documentation reflect your image**

Many organizations, institutions and companies seem to have problems conveying their institutional culture or their (desired) image in their documentation, quite often portraying themselves in exactly the wrong way/projecting an institutional image that does not match the profile that they actually defined for themselves.

These organizations, institutions and companies seem to have very little difficulty coming up with a construct that defines their culture and the image that they would like to portray. They all seem to have documentation that supports this view, including policy documents, vision statements, mission statements, other statements referring to values, codes of conduct, and the like. From these documents one can easily deduce the most important aspects of their institutional culture (defined, among other things, as a set of values, traditions, prescribed rules of conduct and typical actions).

The question however is whether they actually “live” the institutional culture and whether they portray their desired image. One of the instruments available would be their documentation, including their internal communication with co-workers and their external communication with clients.

What we have found in the Unit for Document Design at the Stellenbosch University (South Africa) is that these organizations, institutions and companies have great difficulties portraying their desired culture and image.

### **The case**

During the latter half of 2005 the registrar’s office of a well-known university in South Africa approached us to advise them on the quality of their corporate communication. In the briefing letter they specifically asked us to lead them in a reflective analysis of their corporate image (both real and desired) and to analyze their written communication in order to determine to what extent the desired image (and, for that matter, their desired institutional culture) is reflected in their documentation.

In what could be considered an unprecedented initiative, 60 staff members declared themselves willing to participate in three workshops of approximately 20 participants each. The three workshops were constructed in exactly the same way. In all three cases we asked them to answer the same set of questions:

1. What is the institutional culture of the university? What image would the university like to project?
2. What image and/or culture does it actually project?
3. What image does the documentation of the university project?

4. Is there any particular tension between the answers to the first three questions?

They provided us with an extensive set of examples representative of the range of documents that they produce in the different sections of the Registrar's Office. This set of examples included internal communication with staff and external communication with the clients of the university (in most case students or prospective students). After intensive discussion of the questions the material was analyzed in the workshop and participants were asked to suggest changes where they felt the need.

The group came up with answers such as the following to the questions listed above (Given the limited space, I will not list all the answers). The answers provided here follow from an incredibly high level of consensus among the members of the whole group. Given the size of the group and the responsible manner in which they applied themselves during the discussions, one can safely say that these answers are representative of a widely held set of opinions and that they need to be taken seriously.

1. There are a number of policy and other official documents actually stating what kind of institution this particular university would like to be (referred to as the desired culture and image). The group had a high level of consensus that they would like to identify with these features and values: people-orientated in general and student-centred in particular, focusing on the needs of the people associated with it; professional; scientific; sensitive to a diversity of people and ideas; an active role player in South African society; open; participatory management; quality; fairness; service-orientated; respectful.
2. The answers to the second question were rather disturbing: The group agreed that the institution was still a very top-down type of structure where there is still a great distance between management, staff and students. What they found missing was a truly well-defined people-orientation. They all reflected on the fact that the university focused more on procedures and policies and less on their clients. The administration still seemed to act as if students were the enemy. They had a strong suspicion that they were not projecting the desired image and culture.
3. A perusal of the documentation lead the group to the conclusion that in too many cases the style was still "burocratese". Given the choice between topic-focus, writer-focus or reader-focus, the tendency was to opt for a stronger topic-focused approach to communication. The writing in the documents was highly formal and tended toward an unsympathetic look and feel, with too little attention to the needs, the attitudes and the values of the receiver of the communication.
4. There was a high level of agreement that the documentation did not reflect the desired image or institutional culture defined as the answer to the first question.

To demonstrate the points made in the above answers I will present two examples of documentation, the one a notice distributed to students who are at the point of graduating and the other a letter conveying bad news to students.

## Example 1

The first example is a fragment of a notice sent to final year students who will be graduating in the near future. The fragment presented here is the introductory page of this particular notice. I have changed names in order to protect the identity of the respective role players.

### NOTICE

<b>DEGREES, DIPLOMAS AND CERTIFICATES – APRIL 2005</b>
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**Please note: This notice is sent to all final year students and does not serve as proof that a qualification will be awarded.**

#### A. Place, dates and times

In April 2005 degrees and diplomas will be awarded in the XYZ Centre at ABC Stadium on the dates and times indicated here:

<b>1. Wednesday 13 APRIL (16:30)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; Arts</li><li>&gt; Theology</li><li>&gt; Education</li><li>&gt; Health Sciences</li><li>&gt; Law</li></ul>
<b>2. Thursday 14 APRIL (16:30)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; Economic Science</li><li>&gt; Natural Sciences</li><li>&gt; Agricultural Sciences</li><li>&gt; Engineering</li><li>&gt; Honorary degrees</li></ul>

#### B. Procedure and guests

- 1. Graduate and diploma candidates must report at the venue exactly two hours before the respective graduation ceremonies so that they can be allocated their positions in the student procession. People who arrive late will not be allowed to participate in the ceremony because the procession has to be set up in a very specific way and students will receive specific information regarding their actions on the podium during the award ceremony.**
- 2. Doctoral candidates must report at the club room of the stadium exactly 1½ hours before the beginning of their respective ceremonies.**

3. Handicapped candidates who cannot move across the podium during the award ceremony must contact Ms. Stanford (tel. (021) 888 7548) before **31 March** so that special arrangements can be made ...

Messages should be seen as compound entities consisting of four constituent messages, namely

- *The referential message*, that is, the message conveying the actual content, the information regarding a certain theme or issue.
- *The appeal, relating* specifically to the goal (communicative and end goals) of the message, the effect that the writer would like the message to have.
- *The expressive message*, containing the information that projects the image of the sender, portraying in some direct or indirect ways the norms, values, etc. related to the sender.
- *The relational message*, reflecting the image that the sender has of the receiver of the message.

When it comes to the last two messages, not all documents afford one the opportunity to develop these messages fully, that is, not all messages are expressive or relational to the same extent. Where a message has a strong expressive or relational potential, however, it could be vital to utilize this potential in order to establish and sustain an image or institutional culture. After providing the group with this insight they conveyed the following points of view during the analytical part of the discussion (Again, I only list of few of the most important comments):

1. The context is the completion of at least three years of study and the awarding of a degree, diploma or certificate. It is a joyful occasion in the life of any student and the document therefore affords the opportunity to portray a student-centred approach.
2. The group agreed that the document is a typical example of a topic-focused, highly bureaucratic message focusing on the organization, the rules, the do's and the don'ts of the occasion. As such the document has a very inhumane feel to it and it does not portray the desired image and values defined earlier.
3. Specific textual features underscoring this evaluation included the following in the fragment presented here: The heading *Notice* creating a strong "officialese" look and feel; the warning that this is not to say that you have passed (as if students would not know this); the references to place and time without any preamble; the strong directive or commanding tone under section B ("talking down" to the reader); etc.

We then asked the groups to make suggestions to improve the text, taking into account what their own take on the desired image or institutional culture of the university was. For lack of space I mention only a few of the suggestions, relating them to the comments made above:

1. Do not use the heading *Notice*, but rather a heading that refers directly to the occasion. Many participants felt that the second heading (blocked text) would suffice.

2. Do not start the document with the warning, but rather lead in with a word of congratulation, reflecting on the special nature of the occasion (successful completion of study, results of years of hard work, etc.). The warning should be given a much less prominent position in the design of the document. It could be stated right at the end, or as a footnote at the bottom of the first page.
3. Change the almost blunt commanding style in section B to a more requesting style, keeping in mind that you are addressing senior students and their parents. These readers are not children and would not react favorably to the style being used at present.
4. Address the reader.

By making these adjustments the look and feel of the text are changed considerably, reflecting a positive client-focused attitude on the side of the university, an attitude that relates directly to the desired image and institutional culture defined earlier.

### Example 2

The second example – a typical example of a bad-news-letter – was not so much about look and feel, being a formal letter with a fixed format and a typical form letter type of content. Quite often these form letters have a limited content and a highly formal and bureaucratic style (a content-and-style-fits-all approach, if you like). In this case the problems were to be found primarily in the content itself, more specifically in the content load and the perspective presented in the content.

24 January 2005

Mr RR Sanders (14375575-2004)  
14 Patricia Street  
Scottsdale  
8300

Dear Mr Sanders

#### **APPLICATION FOR RE-ACCEPTANCE AS STUDENT**

1. It is with regret that I have to inform you that the Re-acceptance Committee turned down your application for re-acceptance for 2005.
2. The Committee made this decision after careful and sympathetic consideration of all the information provided. **The University considers the matter closed and will not respond to further requests for information on the matter.**
3. Should you wish to apply for re-acceptance in the future you must first study successfully in the same field at another tertiary institution.
4. It is in your own interest that you visit the Centre for Student Development so that they can help you with any personal problems or future planning. However, the responsibility for this lies with you. Take note that a visit to this Centre cannot lead to an appeal of the decision by the Committee.

I wish you all the best for the future.

Sincerely yours

Ms P Johnston

**REGISTRAR'S OFFICE**

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The context is the following: When a student fails a year more than once, the student has to apply for re-acceptance into the university. In many cases one could argue delinquency, but there are large numbers of students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds causing problems with their studies. To simply send these applicants a standard form letter would not be a good idea, given the variety of circumstances leading to the situation. To put it simply, a simple form letter would not be in accordance with the desired image and institutional culture referred to earlier.

In this particular case participants drew specific attention to the following problematical design features of the document:

1. It was a bad-news-letter without any buffer to soften the blow presented in the first line.
2. The letter refers to careful and sympathetic consideration of the relevant information (sic!) without stating what this information was or in what sense the consideration was sympathetic.
3. The advice presented in section 4 is presented in such a way that the sincerity of the message becomes questionable, to say the least.

In order to rework this letter so that it has a better fit with the desired image and institutional culture one would have to give more attention to the type, the amount and the perspective of the information presented, for instance by providing specific reasons for the decision, giving some indication of the process (showing in what sense it could be considered to be sympathetic, among other things), and presenting advice in such a way that it does not present itself as a feeble attempt to cushion the blow.

At the end of our experiment with this wonderfully honest group of people it became clear that we need to do more research with and for them. The process will therefore continue with a number of experiments in which different texts will be reworked and tested by means of reader-focused methods of quality assessment.

**The problem, then?**

More often than not, organizations, institutions and companies do seem to have a clear idea of the desired image and institutional culture that they would like to portray, but they seem to have difficulty realizing this image and culture in their actions towards and communication with others. To rectify this problem one needs specialist input by a document design specialist with knowledge of institutional culture and value-driven relational and expressive discourse. Idealistic though this may seem, this input should include training, advice and research.

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