

"Look's" Friendly Fulfillment

Business Letter Writing In-Service Training

Con D. Lindstrom and Lillian O. Feinberg

Does it make sense for a company to spend money for training in practical business letter writing? *Look Magazine* Subscription Division thinks it does. Every other Tuesday 7,500,000 subscribers receive their copies of *Look*; at the same time they may be receiving a series of renewal or billing notices. With these contacts it is natural to expect subscriber correspondence.

To handle this correspondence promptly and efficiently, replying with a letter that tells the subscriber pre-

cisely what he wants to know, is a job of the Fulfillment staff. To maintain an efficient operation with loyal employees is a job of the Fulfillment management. Competent communication is the common denominator for both jobs.

Composing a good letter—for mailing to a subscriber or inter-office use—requires training, training that eventually pays off in subscriber good will, employee satisfaction, and reduced costs. Thus to help the employees responsible for composing, proofing or

Con D. Lindstrom

Employee Training Director, Subscription Division of Cowles Communications, Inc., Des Moines, Iowa. B.A., University of Iowa. After one year of public school teaching, joined Cowles Communications, Fulfillment Department, Subscription Division. Served as Service Manager, Order Entry Manager, Assistant Fulfillment Manager and Contract Services Fulfillment Manager. Board, Iowa Chapter, ASTD.

Mrs. Leonard Feinberg

Director of "Look's" letter writing class. Assistant Professor of English, Iowa State University, specializing in business communications. Former newspaper reporter and advertising copywriter. Has written for radio, television, "Exchange", the United States Advisory Commission on International Educational and Cultural Affairs publication, "Woman's Day". With her husband, co-author of "Unified Exercises", English grammar and workbook. A.B., English, University of Illinois; M.S., Technical Journalism, Iowa State University.

typing subscriber correspondence to break away from the usual and sometimes trite business style and expression—to help them to be specific, to be positive, to project the warmth and friendliness of *Look*—the operations manager and training director instigated this program.

Participants

The participants were chosen from a complete list of secretaries, stenographers, and line managers assigned to the production departments in the Des Moines Subscription Division. After pinpointing some trouble spots, the department manager involved, the operations manager, and the training director made up the final list.

Twenty-two men and women were invited to take part. All of those selected accepted the offer enthusiastically as an additional opportunity for personal development.

Organization

Fortunately, *Look Magazine* had available the services of the Iowa State University Extension Division in nearby Ames, Iowa. Working with the Division and the Department of English, *Look* was able to arrange a twenty-hour course at a charge of approximately \$55 per student (plus, of course, the student's time spent away from his or her productive job).

The instructor had practical business experience as well as teaching experience, specifically in letter-writing, and agreed to meet the group for ten two-hour sessions in a *Look* classroom in the Des Moines office. The class met from 2:30 to 4:30 every Thursday afternoon.

Curriculum

Both theoretical and practical material, utilizing actual *Look* correspondence—inter-office memos, letters of

complaint, collections, renewals—a sampling of the daily mail—served as the basis for the course.

Students were introduced to the *communication process* and *semantic principles*; reviewed *style*—how to write interestingly, clearly and inconspicuously; reminded of the ever-present need for *good will*, apparent through the tone and service attitude of their letters; and shown the need for *persuasion*, how to motivate the reader to respond favorably to the message. *Look* letters in three basic categories—neutral, disappointing, and persuasive—were written, revised and polished. Some of the office form letters and form paragraphs immediately replaced those in previous use—an unexpected bonus for the course. Inter-office communications were analyzed and criticized—an area of particular concern for the production manager.

Students were required to do homework: *Look* letter problems (handed out on Xeroxed sheets); programmed exercises for expression; correction exercises for spelling and punctuation; and, in some cases, additional reading from a selection of books including the *Harbrace College Handbook of English*,¹ *Unified Exercises*,² *Effective Letters*,³ *Communicating Through Letters and Reports*,⁴ and *Writing Communications in Business*.⁵

One objective test and ten to fifteen rewritten letters constituted the feedback. Each week, the first fifty-five minutes would be utilized for discussion of homework and theory. After a ten-minute coffee break, the class would resume with current individual, departmental, and inter-office communication problems.

At the conclusion of the ten weeks each student was awarded an official Iowa State University Extension certificate (suitable for framing), presented by the *Look* Operations Man-

ager in charge of the Des Moines operation.

Evaluation

At first diffident to volunteer sug-

gestions, the class gradually developed a group spirit and seemed to enjoy simplifying letters, vying for a combination of accuracy and warmth.

Original Form:

Dear Subscriber:

We have been unable to locate the subscription you mentioned.

Will you please forward the cancelled check which you sent us as your remittance? It will be returned to you promptly as soon as we make a satisfactory adjustment.

Will you also please help us by filling out the enclosed card? With this information, the postal inspectors can attempt to trace the lost subscription

Please use the enclosed postpaid envelope for your reply. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Revision:

Dear Mr. Jones:

You're right. I can find no subscription in your name for LOOK Magazine.

Please return the enclosed information card with your cancelled check so that I can properly process your subscription and return your check. Thank you for writing.

Sincerely,

or Original Form:

Dear _____:

After sending four copies of LOOK, we must suspend service on a subscription if payment is not received.

Just as soon as your payment comes in, we will be glad to resume service on your gift subscription(s) and extend the expiration date for any issues missed.

I hope you will send your payment now -- today if possible -- in the enclosed postpaid envelope. I am sure your thoughtfulness will be remembered many times in the months to come.

Cordially,

Revision:

Dear _____:

We will gladly resume sending your LOOK gift subscription as soon as we receive your payment. At that time the expiration date on your gift will be extended so that Mr. Jones may enjoy a full term

Enclosed is a postpaid envelope for your convenience in sending your payment. I am sure your thoughtfulness will be remembered in the months to come.

Cordially,

Once the students recognized the *practical* application of the principles they were being taught, the weekly sessions developed the spirit referred to. However, definite cleavages may have slowed progress: the group was

mixed. The initial class consisted of correspondence clerks, dictaphone operators, secretaries, and first-line managers. The managers and secretaries have more opportunity to put the information to use.

A correspondence typist can benefit but too often is typing form letters or choosing the correct form paragraph to type. It is the manager who must make the final evaluation of all letters leaving his department. Thus, as difficult as it is for some managers to see, their job must be and is largely creative. They must learn to adapt, to improvise. Good letter writing gives them a chance to exercise this creativity and have pleasure doing it.

The instructor emphasized the need for writing what could be done (positive approach), for being confident that the reader would accept a reasonable explanation (success conscious-

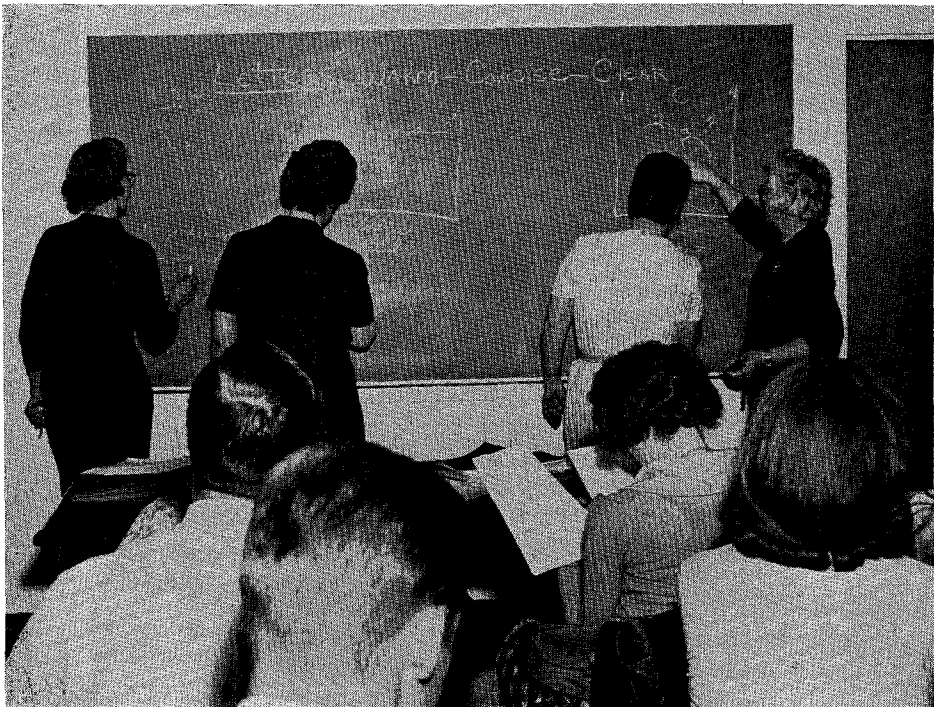
ness), and for communicating this attitude simply, clearly, and directly in all correspondence. The students' evaluation of the course (in inter-office memo form) showed that they had received the message and had suggestions for making the next class an even better one.

"In my daily correspondence to subscribers I find that trite phrases are being omitted and that I answer what the reader wants to know.

". . . it is much easier for me to sit down and write a letter now than it was before. I understand what is important and what isn't . . . We need to spend more time on letter endings.

"All dictators, typists, etc., should be in one class . . . another class should be for 'special' correspondence writers and people in managerial capacities.

"Correct punctuation could have been covered more thoroughly.



Business Writing Class at *Look* magazine.

"I think that the class periods should have been shorter: for example, one hour twice a week.

"Our class would have been more interesting if each one of us had a different letter to do each time . . . I have learned the principles and techniques of writing effective business letters. Some of these principles are making our letters clear, concise, forceful, well-organized, natural, friendly, courteous, and personal. I have also learned how to begin and end a letter without using a cliché.

"Our classes in letter writing will soon come to a close, so I thought you would like to know what these classes have done for me. It would take too much time to go into detail, so I will just touch on the high points.

"Learning to say no the positive way comes first. This to me was an important lesson. Stressing brevity, conciseness, tempered with warmth would be next in line. The three types of letters was a very informative lesson. Using simple words and non-hackneyed expressions is a lesson that comes in my mind with each letter I write.

"Having been indoctrinated so thoroughly with positive thinking, I can only think of the good derived, and at the moment, could suggest no changes.

"The entire course was interesting as

well as beneficial and I feel should be a part of *Look's* program."

Conclusion

Future classes will take into consideration the following:

1. They will continue to be conducted as in-plant training sessions. Offering training classes on company time emphasizes the company's interest in employee development.

2. The classroom activities to daily job duties should be more closely related. The atmosphere should be one of a workshop rather than an unrelated classroom.

3. In the *Look* production atmosphere, a stenographer or typist does not always have the opportunity to create letters. Line managers and secretarial personnel stand to benefit more—immediately—from the training.

4. Close follow-up must be an integral part of the program to stimulate the continued use of good letter writing practices. The use of a "Letter of the Month" or some other such recognition might be considered.

As one student wrote, "Our letters speak for the company and every effort must be taken to make them as perfect as possible."

References

1. John C. Hodges. *Harbrace College Handbook*, Harcourt, Brace and Co.
2. Leonard and Lillian Feinberg. *Unified Exercises*, Oxford University Press.
3. *Effective Letters*, McGraw-Hill and New York Life Insurance Co. McGraw-Hill.
4. J. H. Menning and C. W. Wilkinson. *Communication Through Letters and Reports*, Richard D. Irwin, Inc.
5. Nelda R. Lawrence. *Writing Communications in Business*, Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Tell advertisers that you saw it in the
Training and Development Journal!
