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Writer's Edge

By Ingrid Sapona

Welcome to Writer's Edge — a column by Ingrid Sapona, owner of Good with Words. In her column, Ingrid will write about ways of improving your communication skills. Many of you already know Ingrid — she's been working with the CICBV and CBVs for more than 10 years and is the creator and presenter of the popular seminar: Valuation Reports and Opinions: Your Stock In Trade — Are they as clear as can be?

Ingrid welcomes your feedback, questions, and suggestions for topics you'd be interested in reading about. Drop Ingrid a line at: ingrid@goodwithwords.com, or at 416-259-3399.

Applying Storytelling Techniques to Report Writing

Most business writing is about imparting information. Unfortunately, many business writers don't take time to consider the different techniques they might employ to communicate business information, or what the best technique might be in a given situation. As a result, lots of business writing ends up more like an "information dump" — a bit more structured than the ingredient list on the side of a cereal box, but not much more interesting or reader-focused.

Though CICBV Standard No. 110 defines a valuation report simply as "any written communication containing a conclusion as to the value...", thankfully, most business valuers don't approach valuation reports as pure information dumps. But, many don't consider what the best approach is — they simply start writing or follow their firm's standard format.

Though it may sound unusual, I recommend approaching a valuation as a story. According to the dictionary, a story is an account of incidents or events. Applying this definition, a valuation report is just an account of the things the valuator reviewed and the valuator's analysis that leads him or her to a conclusion as to something's value. Consciously applying a story structure will guarantee you don't just dump information on the reader.

Components of a story

A story's basic framework is simple: it has a beginning, middle, and end. Valuations fit nicely into this framework. For example, the beginning might be about what's being valued and the reason the report was prepared; the middle might be about what the valuator reviewed, how comprehensive the review was, and the valuator's analysis; and the end likely contains the valuator's conclusion as to the value.

There's more to a good story than just a beginning, middle, and end

Once you have the story's framework you can focus on the art of storytelling, which is deciding how much detail the audience needs to make sense of the story. Business writers often decide to leave information out for the wrong reasons: for fear of boring readers who may be familiar with the topic, or because they believe the document is too long. Whenever you omit information you risk confusing and frustrating the reader. So, unless you're writing a mystery, don't leave the reader guessing about anything.

A good storyteller is concise and unafraid to include details some readers may know if the information helps round out the story. After all, those familiar with the story will feel comfortable skipping information they know. Instead of worrying about the ultimate length, focus on ensuring that every reader completely understands the story after just one reading.

Another storytelling technique business writers don't use enough is inclusion of simple connecting or linking phrases. Things like: "as a result", "in addition", "even so", "in fact", "in other words", "in such situations", "of course", and so on, are useful because they help the story flow and cue the reader about where the story is going.

Conclusion

If you craft valuation reports like a story and apply storytelling techniques, your reports will be more reader-focused and your professional reputation will be enhanced because people will more fully understand your analysis and appreciate your skills.