

A Style of Your Own?

By Ingrid Sapona

Many firms spend a fair bit of money developing a brand identity. Their brand might include a logo, a website design, a colour palette that they use when they create presentations or printed matter, perhaps even a motto or catch-phrase they use to convey the service level they aspire to. Often overlooked in the branding exercise, however, is creation of a style sheet for the firm's written communications.

What is a Style Sheet?

A style sheet is a reference that provides standards for writing and design of written communications. Style sheets help ensure uniformity across documents, helping reinforce the brand. They also free writers to concentrate their energy on content, rather than spend time having to make basic design, grammatical, and spelling decisions. For example, the style guide could specify things like:

- whether to use percent, per cent, or %
- whether it's acceptable to use personal pronouns (I and we)
- whether to put periods in certain abbreviations, for example, U.S. vs. US
- whether to spell out the phrase "for example" or use "e.g." (and, if "e.g." is used, whether it should be italicized)

A style sheet can also help speed the editing and formatting process. Though ideally writers will apply the style guidelines as they write, if they don't – or if they miss some – they can easily be applied at the editing stage, with no need for discussion.

What to Include in Your Style Sheet

A style sheet need not be dozens of pages long to be useful. Indeed, an attempt to provide a rule for every possible spelling, grammar, and design question a writer might have is daunting. More importantly, if the sheet includes too many rules, the reality is it is more likely to go un-used. (There's a reason I refer to them as style sheets instead of style manuals. There are many excellent, comprehensive style manuals on the market, for example, the Chicago Manual of Style and the Canadian Press Stylebook. If your organization feels the need for a full-out style manual, I recommend adopting one of these instead!)

In terms of what to include, I suggest you think in terms of addressing key themes, such as:

- **Common spelling issues** – things like per cent vs. percent, whether to spell versus or use the abbreviation vs. or v., whether to allow use of "e.g.", "i.e.", "etc.", or whether their plain language translation should be used instead ("for example", "that is", and "so on")
- **Grammar decisions** – things like use of personal pronouns, and use of plural "they" instead of he or she
- **Punctuation decisions** – things like use of contractions, use of series comma, and whether or when to use a comma or semi-colon between items in a series
- **Heading styles** – consider both the number of levels of headings and how they will be formatted in terms of fonts/colours, and what to capitalize
- **Formatting styles** – formatting of bullet lists, what symbols to use on bullet lists, whether to use right and left justified text, whether to use end notes or footnotes, a date style, how many decimal places numbers should normally have and whether a zero should always be included in decimals that do not include a whole number (for example: 0.75 instead of .75)
- **Policy Issues** – things like applying principles of gender neutrality

If your organization has templates, whether for information that's posted on-line, or for standard publications, you may find that some of the issues you cover in your style sheet are already addressed by the template. Some of the issues may also be addressed by your brand guidelines. If so, great – that means you're on the right track!

Conclusion

I urge all my clients that produce regular communications aimed at specific audiences, for example, client newsletters and bulletins, to create a style sheet. Once you have drafted your style sheet, circulate it to those who will have to use it (for example, writers, editors, and support staff who may be responsible for final formatting). Encourage feedback on it and make changes as necessary – at the outset and over time. The more the style sheet is used, the more valuable it will become as a tool for writers and as a means for reinforcing your brand.

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 call 416-259-3399.

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