

Write away: John Moscatelli, APR, Fellow PRSA, on the evolution of language

Despite the prevalence of acronyms and 140-character limits, John Moscatelli, APR, Fellow PRSA, isn't worried about the future of language. He believes that language evolves — and it's the job of PR professionals to keep up with the times.

This past Dec. 3, Moscatelli received the Frank X. Long Award for Excellence in Public Relations Writing at the Philadelphia Chapter's annual "Pepperpot" Achievement Awards ceremony. An accomplished speech and script writer, Moscatelli is the senior vice president and chief operating officer of Anne Klein Communications Group LLC.

Before entering the agency world, Moscatelli served as a U.S. Air Force public affairs officer. Among his assignments, he worked as the Defense Department's on-scene spokesman for the joint task force deployed to Guyana to recover the remains of U.S. citizens following the Jonestown mass suicide in 1978.

Here, Moscatelli speaks with Kyra Auffermann, editorial assistant for *Tactics*, about the challenges of instant communications, the active voice and the role of grammarians in a Twitterized world.

You have discussed the challenges presented by the unintelligible abbreviations of the "illiterati." How can you reconcile that shorthand with the need for carefully crafted communications?

There is a middle ground. Language is dynamic and it changes. And while we need to have rules and grammar to form a basis for common understanding, we [can't] be so high bound that the rules become a strait-jacket and keep people from being creative and inventive. In this particular time with these new technologies and new means of communicating, people are experimenting. They're doing things with [language] that weren't possible before or weren't necessary before.

The key is to focus on the audience. A tweet isn't intended for a mass audience. So the folks that they're communicating with are operating in that medium — they would understand the communication. If you're writing for a larger audience or in a different format, you need to adapt to that audience and make sure that you're communicating clearly.

For years, veteran PR practitioners have said that new professionals and young adults can't write. Do you agree with that?



Getting to know ... John Moscatelli, APR, Fellow PRSA

Best career advice — "Be ready for change, things always will."

Best leadership advice you ever received — "Ask good questions, then listen before offering advice."

Three dinner guests, past or present — Isaac Asimov, Samuel Clemens and J.K. Rowling

Favorite films — "To Kill a Mockingbird," "12 Angry Men" and "Star Wars." **T**

I've been in this business now since 1966, and people have been saying the same thing every year. To some degree, it's unwarranted. Young people coming out of school don't have the experience and the seasoning to recognize what they can and should be doing with their writing.

I do some teaching at Rowan University, and I insist that [the students' writing] be intelligible, that it follows the accepted formats and that they show some facility with the language as well as simple style and punctuation.

Kids coming out of college think they can write. They tend to try to use big words that they don't understand because they think it makes them sound smarter. They try to write in a very formal business style. What we try to do with young folks is reorient their thinking. Keep it simple, keep it concise, get to the point and write in the active voice. You'll be a lot more successful.

Is there any aspect of PR writing that you would like to change?

A lot of us tend to write to the masses. We draft a letter for a CEO to send to the employees and we address it "To All Employees" and then we write the body of the language as if we're writing to 100,000 people. We tend to forget that communication like that has got to be one-on-one. It's only being read by one employee at a time. So you need to speak to the individual.

What do you consider to be the primary characteristics of good writing?

Brevity and the active voice are the two key things in good writing. And it has to have some passion. It doesn't have to be over the top emotional, but there has to be something in the writing that shows that the person

who wrote it is a thinking human being and not just some automaton cranking out copy.

When you're working with someone on their copy, what do you tell them?

Write what you're going to write and then edit it ruthlessly. Be as tough as you can in the editing process, and then put it away and come back to it with a fresh mind. The ability to be in contact immediately tends to have our clients expect us to produce copy immediately. We have to step back and force ourselves to take some time to think and then translate those thoughts into acceptable language that works — instead of just dashing things off in 30 seconds because we can.

What do you think of the current state of writing?

People are more casual in their writing style today. That reflects our society and the technology we have

Express yourself

The following is an excerpt from a speech made by John Moscatelli, APR, Fellow PRSA, on Dec. 3 in Philadelphia:

Writing has, and always will be, an essential skill for PR professionals.

Everything we do starts with an idea translated into words — written words. The "big idea" that we agency folks like to promote won't fly if we can't express it, if we cannot make others see it. We need words to make that happen.

The most wonderful communications program can't get off the ground if we aren't able to share it with others in a carefully crafted, creative plan. The most compelling benefits of our clients' products and services would be for naught if we can't find the words to effectively convey them to our audiences.

In short, we cannot succeed without a command of the language.

Language is not and never will be static. It will and must change with usage, with new technologies, with new ideas. Some of us will lead the move to change, and the rest of us will need to keep up. **T**

that allows us to be more casual. E-mail [written in] a traditional business letter style doesn't work. The current way that we're writing is more reflective of the way people actually think about things today.

How can grammarians become more accepting of the trend toward a casual writing style?

We need to recognize that language is not static. It has to change to reflect the times; it has to change to reflect what people are doing and thinking and the world around us.

There's certainly a place for grammarians to help ensure that there's common understanding about language. But at the same time, grammarians aren't wardens. Language isn't locked in a prison. **T**