

# Training

## Stasiowski to news reporters: Give me an example

The weather forecaster was perky, and I liked that. The sight of a cheerful, well-dressed blonde on TV was a tonic.

She also was wrong. That, I didn't like.

She predicted no snow for a few days. By doing nothing more strenuous than shifting my eyes 30 degrees to the left, I saw snow falling outside my window. And it wasn't just an insincere flurry; snow was filling my window the way the forecaster's blond hair filled my TV screen.

She had committed the sin peculiar to the TV weather forecaster: Before going on the air, she didn't go outside.

I remember a newspaper story about an old-school TV weather guy who was retiring. He had seen weather forecasting advance from grease-pens-on-Plexiglas to moving, multi-colored innards of storms on radar. Nevertheless, the last line of his retirement story said that, before every broadcast, he stepped outside to confirm that

what he was about to say was what was happening.

I yearn for the old days when radar was something the Pentagon used to track Soviet bombers ominously headed east over Sakhalin Island, and weather gurus didn't have fool-proof gizmos that allow them to be so smug (and yet, so often wrong) as they deliver their 5-day forecasts.

Such thoughts bounced around in my brain when I read a story about a bill in a state legislature. The bill's aim was to reduce the volume of lobbying. The reporter allowed zealots on both sides to shout.

The issue at stake may have been significant, or it may have been silly. I couldn't tell. The reporter didn't ask for specific examples of specific difficulties brought about by excessive lobbying. I wanted history, a description of what happened when lobbyists inundated the legislature. I wanted to see how all that lobbying had affected law-making.

Instead, the reporter relied on journalism's version of weather radar: a few phone calls, a visit to a Web site, some light typing, instant story.

Then I read a story about the alleged evils of having judges run for office, and thus accept campaign contributions. Critics accused elected appeals-court judges of ruling in favor of whoever gave the most money to their campaigns.

The reporter researched and found nothing conclusive. Sometimes decisions favored big contributors; sometimes decisions went against them.

So the reporter went to a critic and said, "Here's what I found, so how can you accuse the judges of favoritism?" The critic said, "Well, the contributions' influence doesn't show up in the judges' decisions; it shows up in the cases they accept for review."

But the reporter failed to ask the critic to give examples. The critic, I will wager, didn't have such examples. He was criticizing in a vacuum, saying that because judges seek campaign money, they will be biased. When he couldn't prove bias in the court's rulings, he invented a different explanation.

In every interview, reporters should say: "Give me examples."

It's the same principle as looking outside before the weather forecast. By using every modern convenience, you can get signs and symbols and indications, but for news value, nothing beats real life.

Of course, real life has its perils. It's not as sterile as the phone interview in which the source delivers lukewarm, risk-free platitudes. One of the common perils is the overused anecdotal lead.

Instead of seeking as an example a person who illustrates the awkward way real life works, we often settle for the first person able to sustain consciousness long enough to answer a question no more challenging than, "So, how does it feel to (fill in the blank)?" No matter what that person says, he or she lands in the first paragraph.

When I talk about an example, I do not mean a mere blood-pressure check to make sure the real-life person is really alive. An example should yield insight into how real people live, endure, try to overcome, even fail.

To a weak answer, the follow-up "Give me an example" challenges the source to justify or verify, to

expand, to convince the reporter, and thus readers, that his or her view has value.

The blonde who didn't check outside lost me. The TV weather person I trusted most was Al Herndon, a runty guy from my Baltimore youth who wore mechanic's coveralls in honor of his sponsor, a gasoline company.

Al wielded his grease pen as if he were commanding the rain to fall or the sun to shine, and I'm sure that, unlike the blonde, he didn't worry that by sticking his head outside, he might ruin his hairdo.

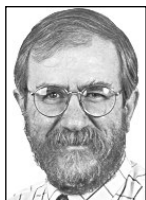
### THE FINAL WORD

A reporter used the verb "devised" to describe the construction of an innovative machine.

Although the dictionary allows "to devise" to mean "to invent," I checked in older usage books and found that "to devise" refers to the planning, not to the actual construction. "To create" or "to invent" is preferable if you are including the building of a machine.

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### Newswriting



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### Business Advice



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Cash is king, and in these tough economic times collecting all the money owed to you is more important than ever.

Here are 10 steps you can take to improve your cash flow and receive more of the money owed to you. Remember, a customer who does not pay you is not a good customer.

#### Step 1)

Develop and follow an accounts receivable ("A/R") policy. A good policy should include the following components: Address who gets credit, and define your A/R practices, e.g. when you cut off credit; when an account goes to collections; when you sue a customer; when you discount and settle for less; and when you decide to write-off a bad debt.

Most important, your customers should know your policy as it relates to when you cut off credit, go to collections, or sue.

#### Step 2)

Learn about your customers' pay practices and follow them. For example: Do they want a purchase order ("PO") number on invoices? Does an invoice received by Wednesday get paid by Friday? Or are invoices paid net 30 days? Etc.

#### Step 3)

Meet or have someone on your staff meet each customer's accounts-payables person and build rapport. This makes getting issues resolved easier, and if a customer is juggling which invoice to pay, there is a better likelihood your invoice will get paid because of a good relationship with your A/R professional.

#### Step 4)

If there is a contract or PO, follow the terms of the contract or PO. This includes how and when

to invoice, the quality and/or quantity of work, what to do if there is a dispute, etc.

#### Step 5)

If there is a dispute over paying, follow the steps outlined in the contract as soon as possible without delay. If the contract says all notices must be in writing, make sure a letter is sent.

#### Step 6)

Confirm the work to be done is finished or the product to be sold is received by the customer and that the invoice is correct in describing the work to be done or product to be sold. Provide sufficient detail in the invoice to describe the work that was completed or product sold.

#### Step 7)

For best results, follow-up with a phone call one day after you expect the invoice will have been received by the customer and confirm receipt of the invoice; confirm that the product or service was received and there were no issues with the customer; and ask when the invoice will be paid. If the customer says the check is in

the mail, ask for the check number and mail date.

At a minimum, make this phone call no later than the 20th day after the invoice is sent.

#### Step 8)

If you have not been paid within the agreed-upon time period, promptly call the customer and ask why the invoice has not been paid. You may find out the service is not completed or not completed to the satisfaction of the customer; or that the product did not arrive or it was damaged. If the customer says the service was completed satisfactorily or the product was delivered, ask when they will send payment. If you have the capacity, offer to take a credit card number over the phone.

#### Step 9)

If the customer has no problem with the product or service and you cannot receive a commitment for payment, send the customer a letter confirming that they owe you money and that in accordance with your policies you are suspending further work or deliveries until full payment has been received. If you have the ability to accept a

credit card payment, tell the customer that you will accept a credit card payment. Explain that as of a specific date, the matter will be sent to collections and reported to the credit bureau.

Whatever you say you will do, keep your commitment.

#### Step 10)

Outline actions to encourage prompt payment:

a) two-percent discount for full payment within 10 days (but not more than 10 days);

b) payment by credit card with a credit card number on file. The customer doesn't need to remember to pay and may also earn point or miles;

c) auto payment from the customer's bank.

Some work is required upfront to establish such a process for your business, but following these steps will improve your cash flow.

For more help, or for a complimentary review of your A/R process, call Ernst Enterprises, LLC, today at 847.438.8977. Or visit [www.eellc.us](http://www.eellc.us).