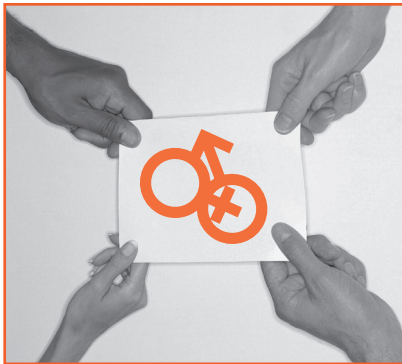


Compliments of Your Technical Communication Experts at Freund Associates

Business communication today must avoid undue emphasis on distinctions among people, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and age. The point is to try to communicate your messages in a way that is respectful of diversity. This issue of Ask Dr. Freund will tackle the always controversial topic of political correctness in the workplace, which is important for all types of communication and for creating an environment where everyone can be as comfortable and productive as possible. Please understand these “rules” are relevant today but may change next week or next year. Respect, however, is something that never goes out of style, and it is in this spirit that we offer our answers to some “sensitive” questions.

Question 1:

This may sound silly, but I don’t even know how to begin writing a business letter any more. How can I address my readers in a way that does not offend them or turn them off before they see what I have to say?

A: You are not alone. The very formal “To Whom It May Concern” can address anyone (or no one), and it does little to welcome the reader. This is the letter that will likely get passed from desk to desk or filed in the trash. Ideally, if you have your addressee’s name, then your task is simpler. Lacking that, you might want to try using a salutation that is more specific and less formal; for example, “Dear Editor,” or “Dear Internal Revenue Service Agent,” gets the job done nicely.

Question 2:

I’ve made the mistake of referring to our wheelchair-bound Account Manager as handicapped. I was chastised by both the Account Manager and management for not being more sensitive. What did I say that was so wrong? Help!

A: Problems arise from the mistaken idea that “impairment,” “disability,” and “handicap” all mean the same thing. They don’t. An impairment is a physiological condition. An example would be arthritis, in which the tissues of the joints are damaged. A disability is the consequence of an impairment and may be caused by injury, accident or disease, often a disease long past. But a disability may not necessarily be a handicap. Similarly, disabled people should not automatically be viewed as being sick or having a disease. Finally, a handicap is a social implication of a disability, a condition or barrier imposed by society, the environment, or oneself. This is where you got in trouble with your Account Manager. The term “handicap” should NOT be used to describe a disability. Simple courtesy and communication on everyone’s behalf can go a long way in resolving any misunderstanding.

Question 3:

As a male in management, I have received many questions and comments (not to mention steely glares) from our female staff and customers as to the male-oriented nature of some terms I have always used. Since when has saying, “We need more manpower at the end of this sales cycle” or “We need someone to man the booth at our trade show” become offensive?

A: Since persons of all sexes (male, female and trans-gender) have taken exception to it, that's when. Instead of using “manpower” you can use “workforce,” “staff,” or “personnel.” Instead of “man the booth,” try “staff the booth.” In lieu of “man-made” I suggest “synthetic,” “manufactured,” or “artificial.” Yes, it will take awareness and practice to make these transitions, but this is the nature of today's business environment.

Question 4:

I am a lesbian working for a male manager and with a predominantly male staff. Some of them are sensitive to my orientation while some, I'm afraid, are simply ignorant. Is there a simple way to address this to avoid unnecessary tension at the office and perhaps later, a harassment lawsuit?

A: It is incumbent upon your company and management to respect your diversity. If this has been ignored or not properly communicated, perhaps you can explain that instead of being referred to as “homosexual,” you would prefer being referred to as “lesbian.” Heterosexual males may not immediately understand that being gay or lesbian is not a “lifestyle” but a fundamental orientation and they may need to be reminded of this. If your efforts at trying to educate your co-workers to these basics are ignored, then perhaps it is time to visit the Human Resources Department.

Question 5:

Our office is comprised of a diverse and multi-racial staff. What terms or expressions can I use to avoid offending anyone?

A: First, you can avoid referring to or identifying people by their race or ethnic group. Unless there is a specific reason for referring to a group of African-American men as African-American men, refer to them simply as a group of men. Similarly, instead of using the term “non-white,” specify the group: “Members of the Latino community.” Avoid the term “minority” in favor of the specific group, the Asian-American community, for example. And avoid altogether using the terms “culturally deprived” or “culturally disadvantaged” as they imply that one culture is superior to another or that other cultures lack a culture.

Question 6:

Even when I know the recipient's name I get confused, especially if it's a female. I don't know if she is a Miss, a Mrs., a Madam, or something else. What is the most acceptable way of dancing around this issue without appearing sexist?

A: You can avoid this by using the “M” only. For example, “Dear M. Brown.” This is also acceptable if you are addressing a male, as well. Additionally, if you have your reader's name but are unaware of his or her gender (the names Chris, Pat, and Terry come to mind), it is perfectly acceptable to use a first initial only: “Dear C. Brown” or “Dear P. Smith” or Dear T. Jones.