

An end to dead letter days

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The dying art of letter writing may be staging a comeback as business and governments endeavour to rewrite their correspondence, hoping to save money, staff time and boost their image.

The Australian Taxation Office recently spent \$250,000 on a marketing firm to teach staffers how to write after realising the 3 million tax instalment letters it sent out every year resulted in 190,000 telephone calls from confused recipients.

Letter-writing consultants are also being asked by banks, utility companies, health funds and insurance companies how they can replace formal, stilted prose with writing that is clear and to the point.

The ATO launched a "correspondence improvement project", noting that some of its letters contained "complicated or unnecessary information" that could be a "high irritant" for taxpayers.

Friend Group creative partner Peter Vierod, who was hired to help the ATO, said computer-generated letters were often the worst.

"It's a service we call the dark side, it addresses computer-generated letters. With the ATO that's the vast majority of correspondence. We go in and dig out all the gremlins," Mr Vierod said.

"The ATO sends out 65 million different pieces of



correspondence a year, so this isn't just a matter of it's nice to have, it's a matter of national wellbeing almost. Getting a letter, it can make or break your day, and create an unnecessary phone call."

Business correspondence in general, he said, was stuck in a rut, with formal, outdated phrases from the 1950s. He advises clients to "write it how you say it, it doesn't have to be too chatty".

He said one health fund saved an estimated \$2 million in call centre staff costs over two years just from changing the wording of one letter notifying a premium rise.

"It's a bit like termites, these communications nibbling away at the brand and undermining what you're trying to do elsewhere," Mr Vierod added.

Plain English Foundation executive director Neil James also

reckoned that clear writing helped the bottom line.

He cited a survey by Britain's Royal Mail that found 30 per cent of people admitted to boycotting a product because they did not like the writing style of company letters.

A Victorian Law Reform Commission experiment found lawyers using plain English completed their paperwork in half the time of a control group toiling through the usual legalese.

When NRMA adopted plain English in 1979, it found litigation fell, while Mr James said a recent insurance client estimated \$5 million in savings over four years after converting its documents.

"That's in efficiency, in reduced errors and customers sending in forms more quickly. Having a more human and less adversarial tone, they found people more readily accept documents and won't dispute them."

Letter-writing lessons are big business in the US. A survey of 120 top American companies found they spent \$US3.1 billion on writing training in 2005.

"The reason they are investing that money is it pays them back. It saves reading time, improves productivity and improves customer relations," Mr James said.

"Because the traditional writing style is just inefficient and yet you've got senior managers taught to write in that style when they started their careers."