

Mispellings Can Spell Disaster for Professional Credibility

You probably noticed the glaring spelling error in the headline for this article. Maybe you also made a snap judgment about my intelligence or competence as a result. If that's what you take away from reading this article, my mission has been accomplished.

Some of the highest-achieving individuals in history were notorious for their poor spelling habits – Andrew Jackson, Ernest Hemingway and Winston Churchill, to name a few. Bringing it up to the 21st century, President Donald Trump is another high-profile misspeller. In fact, some might consider the president to be a poster boy for bad spelling. The "twitterer-in-chief" gets mocked incessantly by late-night comedians and his critics for his struggles with the English language, especially in his tweets. The president's social media spelling gaffes include "W.H. Council," "Tapp my phones," "honered to serve" and "unpresidented act." (I would include "covfefe," but that's a whole different animal.)

Those who work for Trump also have not been immune to the misspelling affliction. You may recall the famous letter from Trump lawyer Marc Kasowitz last summer, defending the president concerning former FBI Director James Comey's testimony to the Senate Intelligence Committee, in which Kasowitz referred to himself as "Predisent Trump's personal lawyer." OUCH!

(Let me just interrupt my soapbox for a moment to reveal that I, too, and probably most readers of this article, have not been immune to this type of calamity. Acknowledgment is one step on the journey to recovery.)

The fact that Trump, his lawyer and the aforementioned historical figures are accomplished people is proof that being a poor speller (or, in many cases, faulty proofreader) is not necessarily an indication of low intelligence. The problem is that many people do equate the two, which is why, at the end of the day, spelling does matter.

Proper Spelling Matters

Obvious spelling errors are a ding to anyone's credibility, particularly a leader such as the president or a thought leader like an attorney. The position of most lawyers is and should be that spelling (and grammatical) errors will not be tolerated. After all, lawyers are trained to notice problems and mistakes. Lawyers who let spelling errors go unchecked in any written material or correspondence – be it briefs, letters, blog posts, articles, etc. – are putting their reputations at risk.

I recently read about an attorney in Minnesota who was publicly reprimanded for unprofessional conduct and forced to pay court costs after repeatedly filing documents that the court said were "unintelligible" due to numerous spelling and typographical



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errors. An excellent example of this risk.

As PR and marketing professionals, we also should subscribe to the credo that spelling is important. Our spelling errors could cast aspersions on our own credibility and professionalism, as well as on the lawyers and law firms we represent. Our job is to protect that credibility.

Of course, we always want to be correct in our spelling for the sake of accuracy itself. But beyond that, in today's digital world, misspelled words can easily trigger a variety of spam alerts, and that does not bode well for maximizing the reach of our messaging. Amid the current hypersensitivity to "fake" news, it's more important than ever now to get the facts right – and that includes spelling.

5 Simple Spelling Tips

As public relations professionals or lawyers, we all should take whatever steps we can to help get us as close as possible to infallibility. With that goal in mind, let me spell out a few suggestions for helping to make sure all the right letters are in the right order.

Ask Webster – There's really no excuse at all for misspelling a word that you truly believe is correctly spelled. We don't even need to pull the handy dictionary out of our desk drawers anymore – reference guides are just the click of a mouse away, be it an online dictionary or a word processing spell check. If there's even the most miniscule amount of doubt, look it up.

Be wary of the erroneous switcheroo – Speaking of spell check, it is not always your friend. First, spell check won't flag a correctly spelled word that's incorrectly used. (Think: "there" versus "their.") Be sure to pay attention to what word spell check decides to substitute for a suspect spelling, especially in the case of people's names. Been there, done that.

Think like a reporter – When it's a proper name you won't find in a dictionary, confirm the spelling with at least two reliable sources.

Build it in – Look for words that you often misspell and put the wrong version(s) in a customized dictionary. Perhaps most importantly, put "pubic" in your customized dictionary as a non-word so you don't inadvertently leave out that crucial L in public.

Proof like your credibility depends on it (because it does) – Always proofread your copy once, twice, three times – you can never proof too much. When possible, I always try to proof a hard copy printout after my eyes go blurry from onscreen proofing. It's amazing how a distinctly different view can reveal spelling errors and other areas for improvement in your writing. It's also a good practice to try focusing on something else, or even walk away from writing and reading entirely to clear your head for a few minutes before picking up your proofing pen again. You also might want to try reading backward or pointing with a finger to focus on one word at a time.

Finally, always let someone else proof your work as well. No matter how many times you proof, chances are you still might miss something.

These tips sound simple, and you've probably heard or tried them all before, but do you employ each and every one whenever you write?

Want other public relations suggestions on how to protect your or a lawyer's credibility? Contact me, Randy Labuzinski, at rlabuzinski@jaffepr.com. (P.S. Be careful not to misspell my name!)