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AT THE HEART OF COMMUNICATION
across disciplines and around the world

Plain English Campaign, UK

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'In all the history of the English language, there has never been such a powerful grass-roots organisation to influence it as the Plain English Campaign.' That is the opinion of Dr Tom McArthur, one of the UK's leading linguists.

Throughout history, changes to our language have always come from the top of our society and filtered down. But Plain English Campaign has changed all that. In what the author Dr Tony Gibson described as 'neighbourhood-based world shaking', Plain English Campaign has brought about a dramatic improvement in the way our government and many other types of organisations communicate with the people of our country.

Plain English Campaign's roots began back in 1971. George's mother, Chrissie Maher, had been campaigning for the professional newspapers to take up the plight of her local community in Liverpool but they were too concerned with the bigger issues of the day. To combat this she created the UK's first 'community' newspaper called 'The Tuebrook Bugle'. This was unheard of at the time because a great mystique still surrounded the production of newspapers. Together with other women from the local community, and the local vicar, Chrissie set about writing, editing and producing a newspaper that would deal with local issues. The success of this project led to the birth of many other community newspapers throughout the UK. One of the purposes of The Bugle was to help ordinary people understand the baffling information that our government was sending to them.

Before Chrissie started highlighting the problems created by unclear information, most of the information that the public received was written in a style which they had no chance of understanding.

By 1974 Chrissie realised that there was another big problem. The Bugle was able to help many literate adults but there were also millions of adults in our country who could hardly read and write at all. To help these people Chrissie created a newspaper called 'The Liverpool News'. This newspaper was deliberately designed and written in a way which was easy for people with poor literacy skills to read. Before the creation of this newspaper the only reading materials available to adults with reading difficulties were books aimed at children. The Liverpool News gave adults something they could read without them losing their dignity.

Research has shown that about 20% of our adult population in the UK have very poor literacy skills and that the average adult reading age is nine. (According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's research this is about the same in most English-speaking countries.)

Chrissie then went on to create an advice centre in the city of Manchester where she could explain official information to the general public and help them fill in the baffling forms that they were being sent by our government.

Chrissie believed that if people were asked to sign a legal contract then they should be given a fair chance of understanding what their rights and responsibilities were. If they needed to give medicine to their children then they should be given clear information to be sure that they were doing this correctly. And if they were entitled to help from the Government then they should be informed how to claim it in a style of language that they could understand.

Fed up and frustrated with this situation where the public were being kept in the dark, Chrissie realised that a national campaign would be needed to get the Government and big businesses to clarify the information they were producing.

So in July 1979 Chrissie and her colleagues staged a protest in Parliament Square in London. They took boxes of these atrocious forms and started shredding them. As you can imagine the UK's press were there ~ together with the police! The end result was a mass of sympathetic press coverage and the police sending Chrissie and her friends on their way. Plain English Campaign had been officially founded.

Since 1979 the Campaign has had incredible success in persuading many organisations in the UK to communicate with the public in plain language. With over 35 full-time staff we have grown from being a small pressure group into being the largest plain language group in the world.

We are now consulted by just about every major organisation in the UK as well as many organisations abroad. These include IBM in the USA, the United Nations in Switzerland, Microsoft in Australia, AMP Assurance in New Zealand, Momentum Assurance in South Africa and Hoechst in Germany.

There are two parts to the Campaign. One part of the Campaign offers commercial services such as editing and training. This raises the money we need to fund our campaigning activities so that we do not need government grants and can remain politically independent.

Other excellent plain language groups such as the Plain Language Institute and the Plain Language Project in Vancouver as well as the Plain Language Centre (part of the Canadian Legal Information Centre) in Toronto have all had to close when government funding has been cut.

The other half of our work is devoted to campaigning. Our campaigning activities include funding research projects, hosting international conferences, producing free magazines and helping people who have been confused by badly written documents. We also hold an annual awards ceremony in London, to recognise those organisations who have produced particularly clear documents and those who have produced particularly baffling ones.

One thing that is often forgotten is the huge savings that can be made by using plain language techniques. Back in the early 1980s we were involved in one of the most comprehensive reviews of official information ever undertaken by any government. The Rayner review of the UK Government's official communications led to over 171,000 documents being reviewed. 36,000 documents were scrapped because they were outdated and useless, and a further 58,000 were rewritten and redesigned. This work saved central government £15 million and meant that the public would have far less trouble filling in forms.

An independent research project carried out by Coopers and Lybrand Associates looked into the cost of errors which were created by the unclear communications of just one of our many government departments, the Department of Social Security.

This department used some 12,000 different forms, roughly half of which were issued to the public in numbers varying from 10,000 to 30 million copies each year. Estimates made during the course of this assignment suggested that the costs of errors to the department in additional processing costs alone averaged £113,000 for each form every year. For the 6,000 forms issued to the public, the total yearly cost of errors was in the region of £675 million. That gives you an idea of the kind of money that can be wasted by unclear communication.

Here are some examples of how plain language can benefit organisations.

The 'Blue Book'

The original 750,000-word Force Instruction Book was reduced to just 60,000 words. The new plain English Blue Book was so successful that police forces from as far afield as the USA and Australia have asked if they could use this book as a model for their own force instruction books.

Rank Xerox leases

Rank Xerox, Europe's second largest supplier of photocopiers and computer printers, asked us to work with their legal team to revise all their rental, service, and maintenance contracts.

By the time we had finished the revisions, we had a set of contracts their customers found much easier to understand. Instead of each contract running to 2000 words, they were now down to just 200 words.

Aircraft lease contract

British Aerospace asked us to work with their legal advisers, Clifford Chance and Allen & Overy, two of the world's biggest law firms, to create a plain English version of their cross-border leasing contract.

By the time the final version had been approved by the Campaign, it had been reduced to just 50 pages including guarantees, credit letters and leasing amendments ~ a third of the length of the original lease.

The new lease has had some spectacular results. One of the first transactions done using the new lease was for six Airbus A320 aircraft. Normally, such a deal would take six months to complete. But with the new lease, the US\$180 million deal was completed in just three and a half weeks.

There are now many plain language groups around the world working in a number of different languages. It seems that English is not the only language which can be twisted and mangled by bureaucrats! French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Hindi can be made impenetrable if writers choose to make it so.

We try to make writers aware that the people they are trying to communicate with will probably have much poorer literacy skills than themselves. If their aim is to inform people rather than just trying to impress them, they need to use a clear style of language and design.

Francis Bacon said 'Knowledge itself is power' and Plain English Campaign is in the business of empowering ordinary people by making sure that they have access to that knowledge.

That concludes our presentation. If you would like to learn more about the Campaign, we have a website at www.plainenglish.co.uk. This contains a lot of useful information and free publications which you can download, as well as an e-mail contact point.



Plain English Campaign, UK

George Maher

www.plainenglish.co.uk

George Maher, eldest son of Chrissie Maher, the founder of the Plain English Campaign, has worked at the Campaign since 1982. He is a regular speaker and commentator in the media on plain language and its benefits to government and business. He has given seminars and presentations in the U.K., the U.S., France, Canada, Gibraltar, Spain, South Africa, Switzerland, India, Brazil, Ghana, Australia, New Zealand, and Russia.



Plain English Campaign, UK

John Wild

John Wild joined Plain English Campaign after a career as a science teacher. He has also managed quality assurance in the chemical industry, where he was responsible for drafting ISO 9000 quality manuals (not always in plain English!). His work at the Plain English Campaign involves him in training, presentations, editing, and document design. He has spoken publicly and trained people in many countries throughout the world.