



Book Review

Eckhouse, B. (1999). *Competitive communication: A rhetoric for modern business*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Paperback, \$39.95. 304 Pages.

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Perhaps nothing is more important in the business world than communicating effectively. Whether it is writing a memo to employees, pitching a sale to potential clients, negotiating a raise, etc, communication is what drives business and commerce. In *Competitive Communication: A Rhetoric For Modern Business*, Barry Eckhouse focuses on “competitive communication, the kind of communication that seeks and competes for an audience’s attention, agreement, or action” (p. xi). Like anything else, there are appropriate strategies and approaches to take when attempting competitive communication. Eckhouse covers the basics of communication that contribute to credibility such as conciseness, word choice, punctuation, grammar, syntax, and word processing. The primary concentration; however, is argumentation. Eckhouse “emphasizes the competitive dimension of communication in a way that should be familiar to anyone who is aware of contemporary business trends and practice” (p. xi).

Communication typically has three elements: the message source, the message, and the message receiver. As communicators, business professionals are often concentrating heavily on themselves and their message rather than the client or message receiver. Eckhouse stresses that communicators must “discover the client” in order “to understand better not only the client but also the kind of message they would need to craft if they were to succeed in persuading that client” (p. 17-19). By putting an emphasis on the client, organizations will be able to persuade more effectively. Eckhouse begins the book with this very important facet of business communication. Right away the reader understands that “in competitive environments, audience is probably the most critical element in communication” (p. 21).

Once the focus is on the message receiver, the organization of the message or argument is then established. It is ideal to remove all confusion so that the audience completely understands the message. “Without organization, readers will not be inclined to follow the writer from point to point and will not be able to retain the writer’s message” (p. 27). The organization of a message must be considered before, during, and after composing. Eckhouse stresses; however, that good organization is not everything. “A paper with a well-presented form of organization is almost useless to a reader who is constantly distracted and confused by problems

in conciseness, word choice, word order, grammar and punctuation” (p. 38). Eckhouse goes into further detail on these topics in the second half of the book.

In the first half, Eckhouse concentrates on argumentation, because “modern business is typically an argumentative process” (p. 41). Eckhouse argues that most organizational communication may seem to be simply informative, but is actually “characterized...by...an obligation to argue” (p. 41). As employees and managers, individuals are intellectually competitive. Therefore, most communication between individuals is competitive. Eckhouse also explains that arguing is not a negative thing like many people think. It is an exchange process in which all parties give and receive something in the process. Eckhouse succeeds in portraying argumentation as a positive and necessary concept in business communication.

When arguing a point of view or attempting to persuade an audience, an extremely important tool must be used if someone expects to argue successfully. This tool is including opposition. “Writers who do not move beyond the plan that represents their point of view will probably fail to win the assent of their readers” (p. 61). Doing this increases the credibility of the arguer and is linked to the arguer’s success of persuading the audience. Although it is never easy, the inclusion of opposition will benefit any argument if done correctly. Without opposing viewpoints a writer will be satisfied with an underdeveloped and possibly an inaccurate viewpoint. Eckhouse explains perhaps his most important point in this section of the book. Planning an argument and presenting an argument are very different things. The argument needs to be presented to an audience “in a form that is strategically intended for [them]” (p. 76). To go along with the notion of discovering the message receiver by organizing the argument to be understandable, portraying an argument as a positive, including opposition, and strategically presenting to the audience, arguments must be ethical. There are several fallacies committed in argumentation that arguers may or may not be aware of. Eckhouse provides an extensive list of fallacies for writers to try to recognize and avoid.

The second half of *Competitive Communication: A Rhetoric for Modern Business* pertains to building and maintaining credibility, referred to by Eckhouse as “ethos.” There are several ways to do this, but all must be performed if an argument is expected to be accepted by an audience. “For most people, the best strategy is probably one that strives for a consistent ethos, one that is in line with the claims of the argument, one that does not distract from or undercut those claims, and one that does not attempt to provide their exclusive support” (p. 121). Eckhouse makes the claim that a writer that is concise has good word choice, proper syntax, correct punctuation, and good grammar will successfully manage ethos.

Barry Eckhouse provides a comprehensive and very helpful text that has the potential to help both employees and students. The main points of “communication as argumentation” and “managing ethos” are vital to successful business communication. Eckhouse states, “Argument, as a useful form of reasoned persuasion, is indispensable to working professionals who must convince others of their point of view. It is also indispensable if one is to be clear about one’s point of view in the first place” (p. xi). Business professionals and MBA students, who care about communicating skillfully and effectively, should read this book.