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Writing in the Workplace Report

for Prof Nichols

Dept. of English, NDSU

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Intro and Background

This report is in response to a request for information about writing in a particular workplace: what kinds, how much, for what uses. I investigated the position of general manager for a small outlet of Friends Ranches in Ojai, Calif, a family-run distributor of citrus fruit, avocados, local honey, balsamic vinegars, olives, and locally produced olive oil. The “outlet” is actually an little outdoor market just off of scenic Hwy 33 in Los Pades National Forest. Although only an hour or so from the sprawl of Los Angeles, it is quite primitive, with just several large wooden tables, a few refrigerators, and a cash register setup—all outdoors, but kind of tucked under a giant slab of rock on a mountainside. The modest office in back really can't be seen from the front.

Some of my distant relatives have long worked and managed this market, and are likely to need a new general manager in the near future.

The position I studied is an interesting one because, in such a small business, no one does just one job: everyone performs multiple tasks, and often fills in for someone else when they are gone. It's also interesting in that, being a few miles up in the mountains beyond the city limits, in a really beautiful, somewhat remote place, the business seems at first like a place where any writing performed would be hardcopy and very low-tech. But such was not the case.

Interviews

I chose to interview Carlos Bayless, the current general manager, but also, because everyone there does such a huge range of overlapping tasks, a couple employees who work under him: Margaret Hayes, who designs their t-shirts, tote bags, boutique-quality jars of honey, vinegars, and olive oil as well as the seasonal

designs of their shelves and displays. She also attends to advertising for the company. Don Linkenheldt, who hauls boxes of fruit in from their main site in Santa Paula, keeps the storage area clean, lends a hand in winter when their local orchards need smudgepots fired up to keep the trees alive, and even acts as fire emergency “chief” when the hills of Southern Cal are burning.

Margaret told me that she actually does quite a lot of writing every day on the job. Her use of language is primarily aesthetic: it is meant to be utterly succinct yet beautiful. She pens different versions of the company logo on all of their goods, researches quotations by famous writers for T-shirts and totes, and handles captions for the photos of Hollywood stars displayed along a back wall. (Quite a few famous types routine stop by from nearly L.A. and Hollywood. She says that roughly 50%, however, of what she writes takes the form of emails and, “Quote _____, _____.” She has to meticulously proofread her writing because nothing looks more awful on an ad or jar label than a misspelled word or grammatical error. Her articles for publications up and down the West Coast are the face of the company, and must be fluent, readable, and inventive
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And, finally, Carlos, my main interviewee. You’d think as manager of such a small rustic business, his writing would be somewhat limited, very hardcopy, and merely functional. It turns out, however, that he has quite the wireless desktop setup in the back office where. Travels around to small business conferences,

even as far away as England. I was actually really surprised at how much writing he does, in so many distinct genres, in a single day at work.

Additional Research on Small, Family-Run Businesses

What the distant future holds for family-run businesses...

Findings and Recommendations

It is clear that, even in a small, rather eccentric and out-of-the-way business, fluency in a wide range of genres is absolutely critical, and the amount of writing that goes on during any given day is substantial. A single employee might need to send twelve, super concise and crystal clear, practical email communications full of numbers, but on the same day write up a witty brief article for the Travel section of the San Francisco Chronicle, and then an informal blog proposal for opening a new fruit stand further up Hwy 33.

I'd advise a 320 teacher to...

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Additional Thoughts and Humorous Asides

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Works Cited

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