

BUSINESS COMMUNICATION AND ITALIAN COMMERCIAL CORRESPONDENCE

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Abstract:

Despite more frequent use of e-mails, fax messages, or memos, letters still have their role in trade. At the same time, this form of correspondence adapts itself to current times, with the purpose of not being eliminated by "competition", adopting new formats and structures.

The present paper tries to make a brief presentation of the main means of communication, with a particular accent on business correspondence.

A detailed description will be given to the types of Italian business letters (circulars, bids, requests, orders, etc.), to their subcategories (external and internal circulars, offers of goods and services etc.), to their aesthetic format and to their structures.

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Nowadays, probably one of the most commonly used words, in different contexts and often in the same day, is *communication*. There is hardly a field where employees are not asked to pay attention to this aspect, unless they are demanded from the beginning to have even minimal knowledge of it. At the same time, it is difficult to imagine a concept to competes with the one of communication, as far as its large character is concerned. Everybody uses it, in all areas, naming, through it, the most different techniques, attitudes, instruments, skills, abilities and so on.

In any society, there are six levels of communication: intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, public, mass, and intercultural. They differ in two main aspects: "pe de o parte, prin configurația specifică pe care o iau elementele componente ale procesului de comunicare, iar pe de altă parte, prin modul particular în care se realizează trăsăturile generale ale comunicării" (Șerbănescu, 2007: 28).

Out of these six levels, our paper has tried to analyze the organizational communication. We have aimed to present how skills, working abilities and techniques can be developed in the case of students studying business communication, public relations, and modern languages. We are, therefore, on an interdisciplinary field, where future authors of texts for business, public relations, advertising, economic and legal translations are formed.

The reasons that have led us to address this topic are multiple, for instance, the labour market is increasingly demanding, requiring more and more flexibility and mastery of techniques, as well as higher responsibility of the results from the authors of the above mentioned texts. Moreover, future authors of texts for the previous fields will be expected to help the hiring organizations to establish the best relationships with their public groups, as well as to create successful texts for a wide range of means of communication.

The educational objective of teaching knowledge of correspondence is generally to make students aware of the principles, rules, methods, and forms of this approach, as well as of the ways different documents are written, presented, and used in an organization.

The term of *correspondence* is often used without any further specification, which is in fact absolutely necessary, in connection with various types of documents. Official correspondence consists of letters and documents circulating among individuals or between individuals and a legal adviser. There are important differences between the two types of documents, which worth mentioning, even briefly: the letter starts with a greeting and it is directed to a person (an individual or a legal adviser), it goes through a registration process, it can be written and signed by officials or delegates, and it is sometimes standardized, while the document has a title, and plays the role of a written proof of a fact, it is always standardized and gets a registration number. (see Pariza, 2008: 37–38)

Commercial letters have the role to maintain a constant level of information in the company, as well as in the relationships with other companies. Still, it is not the only product fulfilling this role. In recent years, practice, especially of those working in public relations, has developed rather new tools, such as *memos*, *e-mail*, in addition to the classical ones: *reports*, *proposals*, and *letters*. The development of all these forms, as well as tools, of communication may often seem a chore, especially for new employees. However, in time, they end up realizing how important these tools are for the best of the company.

According to the standards established by the public relations or management assistance textbooks, business letters are of different types (of information, request, presentation, promotion, etc.) and they are characterized by certain elements which are necessarily present in their format: the header, greetings, the message itself, conclusion, summary, signature, and reference. (see Newsom, Carrel, 2004: 172-176)

Types of Italian business letters

Leaving the general field of business correspondence, in the following part of our work, we have focused on the specific organization of Italian business letters.

According to Dondina Adelami, Bechi (1996: 38) Italian business letters can be mainly divided in *circulars*, *offers*, *requests*, and *orders*.

1. *Circulars* are, at the same time, divided into:

a) *Internal circulars*: communications addressed to all the staff (Memo) or to the Sales Department, when official communications are made about selling conditions, reports, and different types of dispositions.

Some examples of internal circulars are the following: implementing new legislation, sending of advertising materials, inserting new employees, PC and printer maintenance, transmission of resignations, etc.

b) *External circulars*: communications, information, offers of any kind addressed to individuals or other companies. Such circulars are the opening of an agency or branch office, the setting up of a subsidiary, adjusting prices etc.

2. *Offers* are also of two types: offers of goods and services and present the same characteristics of the circulars. Some types of the *offers of goods* are: magazine subscriptions, invitations, promotional offers, and renewal of productions. In the same way, the *offers of services* are also numerous: opening an analysis centre, proposals for company consulting and insurance advice, etc.

Experts advise companies to personalize the offers when they are sent to a limited number of clients or to companies that are already customers of the agency.

3. *Requests* are simple correspondence in which information about products, services and prices is required. The answer has to be accurate and to emphasize properly the advantages or the quality of products. Such requests are: the catalogue, the informative, the sampling, sending offers etc.

4. *Orders* are letters that appear as a result of sending an offer of goods or services, or of requesting more detailed information about products or prices. Such orders are: acceptance of orders, cancellation of orders, out of stock items, increase in the price list, confirmation orders, counter offer, improper billing, goods not in accordance with the sample, refusal of order, feedback for price increases, negative answers, delayed delivery, shipping, replacement of goods, etc.

Parts of an Italian business letter

The image of a company depends also on the way the commercial letter is written, as well as on its layout. As business letters slightly vary from one country to another, we intend to present the conventional format of Italian letters. The essential parts of an Italian commercial letter are the following (see Cherubini, 1992: 205, 208-209):

1. The *header* represents a collection of information about the sender, it is generally printed and it contains: the name of the company, address, phone and fax number, registration number, share capital etc.

Letters addressed to a particular person in a company or in a department contain the following underlined words, two lines above the address: *Alla cortese attenzione del Sig./della Sig. ra.*

2. The *date* indicates the place where the letter was written, the day, month (in letters) and year: *Verona, 20 aprile 2009*. It appears under the header, to the right. Date in circulars is substituted by the words: *data del timbro postale*.

3. The *address* of the recipient is generally placed under the date. In the case of a company, the address is preceded by *Egregio, Gentile, or Spettabile (Spett.le)*, while in the case of a person, the name and surname are preceded by the professional title and by *Sig. (Mr.), Sig.ra (Mrs.), and Sig.na (Miss)*. It contains the full name of a person or company, zip, city, and address.

4. *Distribution* serves to indicate all the recipients of the letter. It is placed under the address and preceded by *p.c. (e, per conoscenza)*.

5. *References* link the commercial letter to previous communications, easing the research. Found before or after the date, references are optional and may contain: the number of registration, and abbreviations. Spelled in capital letters, abbreviations refer to the person who drafted the letter, and in lower case, to the person who typed it: *Vs. Rif. 6/11/2004*.

6. The *object* is not a mandatory element, but it describes the content of the commercial letter: *Oggetto: assemblea generale*.

7. The greeting formula is written at the left margin, and it is always followed by a comma (addressed to a woman: *Gentile Signora, Egregia Prof.ssa, Dottoressa*; addressed to a man: *Egregio Signore, Ingegnere, Dott.*; addressed to a company *Spettabile Ditta, Pregiatissimi Signori* etc.

8. The *body* of the letter is the most important part of the commercial correspondence and has three main principles: accuracy (no errors or vagueness), conciseness (attracts the attention from the beginning on the object in discussion), and clarity (no space for misinterpretations). All important details must be included, but unnecessary information is avoided. The letter is logically organized in paragraphs, each containing one idea. Politeness is essential in business relationships, as well as grammar correctness (no spelling and grammar mistakes are allowed).

9. The *closing sentence* must take into consideration the register and the tone of the whole letter. It can appear in a separate paragraph (*Con i migliori saluti, Distinti saluti / Gradite i nostri più distinti saluti / Migliori saluti / Cordiali saluti*) or in the final paragraph (*Restando in attesa di un Suo cortese riscontro, La prego di gradire i miei migliori saluti*).

10. The *signature* generally contains: the name of the company, the title of the person who signs for the company, the name and surname of the last:

Digital Way S.r.l.

Il Responsabile vendite

(Dott. Vincenzo Montano)

11. The *annexes* are indicated at the left margins under the names: *Attachment(s)*, *Attachments: catalogue*, etc.

12. Abbreviations are placed to the left, as the last element of the letter. They contain the capitalized initials of the person who sends the letter: AD / mr. The lower case letters are the initials of the person who has typed the letter.

Format of an Italian business letter

Most specialists in business correspondence (see Cherubini, 1992: 210-211) classify commercial letters also according to their format:

- *Blocco Americana*: the whole letter in aligned to the left;
- *Blocco*: the whole letter is aligned to the left, except for the date and the signature;
- *Semiblocco*: similar to *blocco*, except for the alignment of the paragraphs;
- *Classical*: similar to *semiblocco*, except for the address, placed to the right;
- *Personal*: the letter starts with a vocative greeting and the address is placed after the signature;
- *Short*: the letter has large indents and line spacing;
- *Memorandum*: a very short text placed on half of a page, on the largest part of it;
- *Quatrain*: a very short text placed on half of a page, on the shortest part of it;
- For *window envelopes*: requires a standardized position of the address;
- *Circular*: generally omits the recipient and uses the vocative followed by comma (*Egregio Dottore,*) or a general reference (*A tutti i nostri collaboratori,*);
- With *multiple addresses*: sent to more recipients (the main one is aligned to the left, while the others to the right, in a column);
- With *subheadings*: placed to the left, the subheadings emphasize more ideas linked among them.

Conclusions

In order to be certain that the image of the sender is not distorted and that the business letter, regardless of its content, will reach its goal, the above mentioned rules, parts, and techniques must be followed.

Therefore, a business letter requires accuracy in all its parts, clarity, brevity in the exposition, and a formal language. Writing such a letter needs utmost precision, clarity, conciseness, as well as to avoid complicated expressions, twisted, long sentences and useless repetitions and compliments. Language is supposed to be simple, accurate, respectful and without a confidential tone.

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