**Falsifying Information in Business Communication Documents**

By Troy Dabney, Prospective STC Member

**The Setting**

Keisha Carter is the client relations specialist at Anderson and Presley Architecture, LLC (APA), an architecture firm in La Mesa, California that was founded by Stuart Anderson and Patricia Presley. APA was founded in 2009 and continues to grow as a client-based small business with hopes of expanding its clientele. Currently, there are 25 employees and the firm prides itself on being such a close knit group of employees.

Keisha’s job requires her to serve as the primary person of contact for all of the firm’s clients, maintain professional and profitable business relationships with clients, manage written and verbal client communication, and ensure that client needs are met at all times while seeing that the firm’s reputation is not compromised as well. Keisha has worked as APA’s client relations specialist for two years, and this is also her first full-time position after receiving her bachelor’s degree in technical and professional. Although she completed a brief internship with a media management agency during her senior year in college, Keisha does not have any other related job experience in the field of technical communication.Keisha loves her position with the firm, but she is also aware that two of the previous client relations specialists were terminated for not keeping the firm’s best interest at heart at all times. She is aware that these events, but she does not worry about a similar situation occurring during her employment with the firm.

**Compliance Woes**

Approximately one-third of the firm’s profits come froma contract with a local historic preservation organization, the Truman Preservations Initiative. APA conducts several restorative projects on buildings and other structures around La Mesa. The work they do for the Truman Preservations Initiative allows APA to thrive, build, develop other business relationships based on the work they’ve completed with the organization, and easily support the 25-member staff. The Truman Preservations Initiative is also one of its non-local clients; its headquarters is located in Columbia, South Carolina and it has ownership of historic properties across the nation—several of which are located in California. Keisha conducts most of the communication via email and phone conferencing.

Last week, Keisha notified Justin Cole, her departmental supervisor, that the Truman Preservations Initiative decided to end the business relationship and employ another architecture firm to handle its preservation needs because it did not believe that APA represented its philosophy of sustainable restoration. Without the profits from projects completed for the Truman Preservations Initiative, APA will be forced to make severe budget cuts and layoffs. The firm’s initial course of action consisted of reducing the firm’s expenses while continuously negotiating with the Truman Preservations Initiative in order to reinstate their business relationship. Although this method prevented layoffs from being made, resources were growing thin and the firm had not had any luck finding a new client as profitable as the Truman Preservations Initiative.

**Negotiations**

After weeks of negotiation, APA’s persistence had finally paid off. The Truman Preservations Initiative decided to reinstate the business relationship with APA, but they would only do so under one condition: a sustainability compliance analyst must be hired before their next visit to ensure that the first problem never happens again. The Truman Preservations Initiative would also increase the number of project placements after conducting an on-site visit at the firm six months later to make sure that sustainability efforts are being carried out properly.

Management determined that the duties involved with this position can only be conducted by someone who has been with the firm for two years, and right now only one person is able to fill the vacancy. Vanessa Ortiz, one of the firm’s two junior account executives, has worked with the firm for two years and has a degree in sustainability with a concentration in environmental consultancy.

The Truman Preservations Initiative also requires APA to provide them with written verification that they are in compliance with their new standards no later than two months after the renegotiation process. Although APA has decided to place Vanessa in this position, she cannot be moved from her current position until a replacement has been hired in order for firm operations to remain intact.

**The Problem**

The two-month mark is steadily approaching and the firm has not been able to find a replacement for Vanessa’s current position. Justin asks Keisha to send the client written communication verifying that the position has been filled and discussing the initiatives that Vanessa is currently working to implement.

Although Vanessa is excited to start her new position, Justin makes it clear to everyone that until a replacement is found, Vanessa will continue to work as a junior account executive and manage her clients. Kenneth believes that the firm, which is already stretching its resources thin due to budget cuts, cannot afford to be unmindful of smaller clients when attempting to gain one larger one back.

Justin reassures Keisha that since the Truman Preservations Initiative is not a local client and is not due for an on-site visit for four more months that providing them with the requested documentation will be of no harm. Keisha does not feel comfortable falsifying information but she does not voice her concerns to Justin in great detail. She does not believe that business can be conducted properly if both parties are not open and truthful with each other at all times.

**Keisha’s Dilemma**

If the client does not receive the proof of compliance by the deadline, all negotiations are null and void. In other words, if Keisha does not provide the Truman Preservations Initiative with the requested written communication describing the progress of Vanessa’s new sustainability implementations, then the organization will not continue to place new projects with APA. This will eventually result in even laying off many of the firm’s employees. Given the reason why the previous client relations specialist were terminated, Keisha will most likely be terminated as well for not keeping the firm’s best interest at heart. Since this is Keisha’s first technical communication job, finding similar positions without having a positive reference (due to her noncompliance) will be hard for her.

If Keisha does provide the Truman Preservations Initiative with the requested communication and they do not find out that Vanessa has not started any of the mentioned projects, then business will drastically improve and she and her coworkers will be able to continue working. The firm will find a replacement for Vanessa’s position and Vanessa will be able to initiate sustainability implementation plans before representatives from the Truman Preservations Initiative visits the firm four months later.

If Keisha does provide the Truman Preservations Initiative with the requested communication and they find out that Vanessa has not started any of the mentioned projects, then Keisha has no guarantee that she will not be terminated for not keeping the firm’s best interest in the forefront.

How should Keisha handle this situation? Should her personal values regarding honesty and integrity play a role in her decision? Can she as a technical communicator persuade Justin to consider other options that would not involve creating false documents? What other consequences could Keisha face if she decides to produce and deliver a falsified document to the Truman Preservations Initiative? Is it Keisha’s responsibility as a technical communicator to consider whether an act is ethical or unethical?

**Ethics and Small Business Communication**

Ethical conduct in business environments is something that many organizations strive to maintain on a daily basis. A common misconception, as noted by Kevin Cooksey & Dolores Kuchina-Musina in their article “Does Size Matter? Ethics Applied to Small Businesses Compared to Large Businesses,” is that many people do not see the importance of set ethical standards in terms of small businesses as opposed to large corporations such as BP and Enron (Cooksey & Kuchina-Musina 2010). In terms of ethical regulation, however, 23 million businesses in America are classified as small businesses and “account for 54% of all U.S. sales,” (Small Business Trends: Small Business, Big Impact!). The large number of small businesses should speak volumes about the importance of small business ethics since more than half of the nation’s businesses are considered small businesses.

In “Ethics: It Isn't Just the Big Guys,” Lisa Miller discusses how “bad practices that hurt outsiders can damage a reputations, impact sales, and hurt the bottom line,” and for small businesses (Miller 2003). Falsifying information in order to secure profitable business relationships is an example of this predicament. Technical communicators that work for such companies have to thoroughly consider where they stand ethically as individuals and as professionals when they find themselves in situations that prompt them to reflect upon small business ethics.

**Your Role as a Technical Communicator**

In this situation, the technical communicator is not a transparent. Although Keisha has only met one representative from the Truman Preservations Initiative briefly shortly after she began working for APA, she has established a good rapport with them through online and telephonic communication. Also, since she is the client relations specialist, this communication will be coming directly from her instead of the firm’s founders from Kenneth, or any other party. What other options as a technical communicator could Keisha offer the firm that would avoid falsifying information and help the client understand what position the firm is in?

**References**

Miller, Lisa. (2003, July 24). Ethics: It isn't just the big guys. *Bloomberg Businessweek*. Retrieved from <http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2003-07-24/ethics-it-isnt-just-the-big-guys>

Cooksey, K. & Kuchina-Musina, D. (2010). Does size matter? Ethics applied to small businesses compared to large businesses. *2010 Small Business Institute National Conference Proceedings, 34 (No. 1),* 292-300.

U.S. Small Business Administration. Small business trends: Small business, big impact! Retrieved from <http://www.sba.gov/content/small-business-trends>