

Are you reaching out to anyone today?

by Bill Janke

Conversations on Writing (COW)

billjanke@gmail.com

© 2009 Bill Janke. All rights reserved.

I am hearing and reading how more people are ‘reaching out’ to each other these days. I think this is great. The more often people use social media and networking applications to communicate the more sense it makes for them to feel that they are actually touching someone with their e-mails, textings, instant messages, and tweets.

I often hear the phrase ‘reaching out’ in personal conversations, on television and radio, and in newspapers, e-mails, magazines and blogs. I hear the words so frequently that they have become a buzz phrase to me and it loses its impact on my ears.

The words ‘reaching out’ first appeared to me in an e-mail. The writer said he was ‘reaching out’ to specific people with some information. In turn, he encouraged me to ‘reach out’ to another person. To me, the act of reaching out implies that you are struggling to gain my attention or need my help.

If you turn the words around you form the word ‘outreach,’ which is an “act or process of reaching out.” Many community organizations have outreach programs that supplement or provide services above those available in the private sector, i.e., a school providing reading computer courses to older adults. Outreach can also mean surpassing or exceeding, such as “The demand for corn has outreached the supply.”

I was have dinner with a self-employed friend when one of his three mobile phones rang. I overheard him tell his client that he was ‘reaching out’ to another person for his help. I was intrigued that he was using the phrase. His clients are on the east and west coasts and in the Midwest, so the phrase is now common usage in this country.

In another example, a story in the [San Jose Mercury News](#) faulted the city’s public works staff for not alerting the public before sawing down sixty-three 30-year-old trees. A city official defended the actions of the crew and managed to use ‘outreach’ and reach out’ in his explanation. I believe the word ‘survey’ would make for a better word choice:

*“Staff has acknowledged to me that they made a mistake proceeding with construction and the removal of street trees without adequate public **outreach**,” City Manager Jim Keene told the city council. Officials told the project engineers to **reach out** to shoppers and neighbors, he said, but they failed to do so.*

I heard it mentioned three times on the Sunday evening CBS News – two of the times the phrase occurred twice in one story. The story was about a violinist who was reaching out to children by encouraging them to participate in a program that teaches violin lessons. I thought the use of ‘reaching out’ in this instance was appropriate given that the violinist was spearheading a special program outside her vocation.

To me, reaching out to someone implies that you want to have some human interaction. In the days of Ma’ Bell (as in Bell System), the company tagged their advertisement with the line “Reach out and touch someone.” That phrase had a personal touch. It made you feel good about picking up the phone and calling someone. To hear those words used in social media networks today conjures thoughts about connecting with others on a more personal level.

I am not proposing that you banish ‘reaching out’ from your writing. As with any word or phrase, overuse can lessen the impact on the reader. It occurs to me that other words convey more impact and meaning. When you want to use the phrase ‘reaching out,’ consider substituting one of the following words or phrases instead:

- Contacting
- Asking for help
- Warning
- Alerting
- Notifying
- Telling

- Informing

I am sure you can think of other word substitutes to fit your writing style and topics.

If you want to *reach out* or make a comment, you can contact me at bill.janke@wausaufs.com or click **Comment** at the end of this post.

About the author

Bill Janke has extensive experience in writing for print and electronic media. His work has appeared in materials for training, documentation, marketing, advertising, and public relations. He works as a technical writer and instructional designer for WAUSAU Financial Systems, Inc. in Omaha, Nebraska. He also enjoys photography and sells his work at art fairs.