

Checking Report Energy Supplier Letters

Summary

Most letters order the information well in short sections. Some use clear words and sentences and support the information with graphics such as symbols and logos.

Most letters have small writing, too many hard words and long, unclear sentences. Most only use a company logo and no further graphics to support the information. None tell the customer that they provide information in other formats.

We suggest the following might help suppliers

- A list of common hard words with explanations to add to the letters
- A resource of symbols to support important information such as contact details, bill,
- Tell customers that they can get information in other formats such as Braille or bigger print. A symbol to go with this would be ideal.

What we did

- We agreed 39 standards for making information easy to understand
- We took the standards from *Plain English Campaign, Norah Fry Research Centre Guidelines and Mencap Let's be Clear campaign guidelines
- We checked letters which 6 energy suppliers send to customers who have not paid bills
- We checked the letters to make sure they are clear for the general public including
 - People with English as a second language
 - People with low basic skills
 - Elderly people
 - People with mild learning disabilities

What we checked

- How well suppliers organise the letter including the order and they you break up the information
- The words and sentences including how easy the words are and how short and clear the sentences are
- Use of pictures to support important information such as company logo, address, phone, gas or electric, bill
- Layout and design including clear fonts, size of fonts, size and colour of paper
- Extra information such as the sender, date, contact details and how to get information in other formats

What we found

Organising the information

What was good

- Most letters organise the information well. They only include what people need to know. This is usually in short sections and in a sensible order.
- Most letters use a heading at the top of the letter
- The clearest letters have more headings throughout to help the reader understand what each section is about

Suggestion

- All letters should use more headings throughout the letter to help the reader understand what each section is about

Words and sentences

What was good

- Most letters use no abbreviations at all
- Most letters are clear about times and dates using the 12 hour clock and writing numbers as numbers not words

What could be better

- Most letters use a lot of hard words although some suppliers do manage to use only a few
- Most letters use a lot of long sentences of more than 20 words. About half of these are over 25 words. The longest we found was 54 words
- Most letters use a lot of unclear sorts of sentences such as passive sentences.
For example 'The warrant will be actioned without any further notice being given'

Suggestions

- Suppliers could explain some hard words they use.
For example Right of Entry Warrant, Personal credit rating, Debt collection agency
- Other words suppliers could just find more everyday words to use instead.
For example outstanding, obtaining, execute, liable, settle, incurred
- Suppliers could keep a list of common hard words with explanations
- All sentences should be 20 words or less and should not be passive

Pictures

What was good

- All the letters use a company logo
- 2 suppliers use symbols for phone and address
- 1 supplier uses a symbol for bill
- These pictures are clear and easy to see

What could be better

- Most of the letters only use a logo and no other pictures to support the information

Suggestions

- Letters could also use a symbol to represent the most important ideas for example phone, address, gas or electricity, payment due, disconnect, bill. This way people who do not read at all will be able to recognise the basic subject of the letter
- A central resource of symbols for all suppliers to use would be ideal. This would mean consistency and so make the symbols easier to recognise

Layout and design

What was good

- The letters are usually on white, A4 and non glossy paper. This makes the writing easier to see.
- The letters are usually well spaced out
- Most of the letters use sans serif fonts

What could be better

- The font size on all the letters is too small. In most cases the font is far smaller than the *RNIB recommendation of size 14
- Most of the lines are too long
- A lot of the headings and some other words in the letters use block capitals, italics or underlining. This makes the words harder to read

Suggestions

- Use a font size of at least 14
- Make the lines shorter. They should have no more than 60 letters or spaces for each line
- Do not use block capitals or underlining. Use bigger and bold writing for headings

Extra Information

What was good

- Most of the letters have who sent the information, a date and contact details

What could be better

- No suppliers say on the letters that they can supply the information in other formats. This means that fewer people who need this service are likely to know about it and so ask for it

Suggestions

- Suppliers should tell customers on the letter that they can give the information in other ways. A symbol to go with this would be ideal

Jill Eddlestone

Director

Clear for all Community Interest Company

***Norah Fry Research Guidelines**

www.easyinfo.org.uk

***Mencap Let's be Clear campaign**

www.mencap.org.uk

***Plain English Campaign**

www.plainenglish.co.uk

***Royal National Institute for Blind People**