



To err is human

When Jay Leno hosted *The Tonight Show*, he was known for reading headlines with unfortunate choices in wording. Some of the classics: “Most doctors agree that breathing regularly is good for you,” and “Owner denies lying, admits not telling truth.”

Goofs in publications can be amusing, but when they move into the territory of factual errors, they can cause harm. Errors can create far-reaching problems for the people or organizations they pertain to, and they can damage the credibility of your publication.

Unfortunately, when humans are involved in producing a publication, mistakes happen. That’s why you need a well-defined policy for correcting them — promptly and forthrightly. “Rather than

destroying trust, corrections are a powerful tool to reinforce how accountable and transparent we are,” writes Craig Silverman, editor of the *Regret the Error* blog (“How to correct website and social media errors effectively”).

And what kinds of errors should you correct? If you publish something with a simple typo, it probably doesn’t need an official response. Any mistakes related to facts, however, should get a correction.

Own up

Being transparent about your mistakes calls for quick, clear and thorough corrections. Get them in front of your readers as soon as possible. Start with your website, and then follow up in your next print edition.

When you write the correction, be straightforward. State what was incorrect, and then provide the correct information. Call your correction a correction, not a note or update. “There is a natural tendency to downplay the mistake, but this will only make things worse by leaving the reader confused or suspicious,” Silverman writes.

At the same time, your correction should sound like a human wrote it, not a robot. If your publication wronged somebody, acknowledge it. It is also best to include a statement of regret such as “We regret the error” or “Apologies.”

And if the mistake is funny, it doesn’t hurt to add a touch of humor to your correction. That makes you seem even more human and relatable to your audience.

Once you’ve written your correction, it’s equally important to make sure it’s seen. Some newspapers have been guilty of making an error on the front page but burying the correction in the back of the news section. Run your corrections in an equal place of prominence as the original story. This is a much more respectful approach to your readers.

Online approach

Because most publications today have websites, digital versions and a social media presence, they need to be prepared to correct content in those locations, too. If you’re correcting an online article, place your correction at the top of the article, or if you



have a page devoted to corrections, make sure each correction links to the corrected article.

In a recent blog about best practices for online news corrections, MediaBugs recommends leaving a visible record of all corrections beyond simple typo fixes. “For simple misspellings and the like, many bloggers use the ~~strikethrough~~ rather than resort to a more formal correction notice, and that’s a great approach,” the blog says.

Make it easy

It’s also important that you make it easy for people to provide feedback and report errors. To do this, create a small box or blurb, with a heading,

that readers can use. Provide contact information, or a link, along with clear guidelines about what you need, such as the date and location of an error. Then, make it a priority to respond to reader comments promptly. Again, this feature should be in a prominent place, possibly on your website’s home page.

If your publication’s errors go on social media, you’ll need to correct them, too. Most platforms have their own procedures for handling this. On Twitter, for example, the best approach is to issue your correction as a reply to your mistake. Facebook lets you edit your posts, and while you’re at it, you can add a comment to the post to alert readers to the correction.

Errors in ads

Errors in your advertising content require a different approach than editorial errors. One common solution that is used when publishers are responsible for an advertising error is to comp the ad. Whatever your policy, it should be in writing and should also include protections for you. For example, if a client makes an error with its ad, many publications would not assume responsibility or offer compensation to the client for the error.

Creating a policy for editorial and advertising corrections is not necessarily time-consuming or difficult. And when you put it into action, it really can help strengthen the trust readers and advertisers put in your publication.