



Paperwork Solutions

by Carl Hagstrom



Construction Forms & Contracts by Craig Savage and Karen Jones-Mitchell (Craftsman Book Company, 1994; 800/829-8123). Softcover, 8 1/2 x 11, 427 pages with a 3 1/2-inch disk. \$39.75.

What is black and white, and dread all over? Paperwork. Contracts, time sheets, change orders — all these and more are necessary when you run your own business.

Construction Forms & Contracts is a no-nonsense form book that will be useful to anyone who has yet to tame the paperwork beast. It contains 125 forms, ranging from contract statements to field reports, which are listed in five categories: Accounting, Contracts, Estimating, Field Forms, and General Office Forms.

What I found particularly appealing about this book was its practical format. Each form is displayed full size (8"x11") and ready to photocopy. The authors explain how to superimpose your business card in the title block area of the form for an "official" look.

If the thought of photocopied business forms makes you wince, the authors have also produced every one of the 125 forms on a 3 1/2-inch disk, in four common software formats (Word for Windows, WordPerfect, Excel and Lotus 1-2-3). They have also included a program called "NCU Edit" on the disk, which allows you to work with the forms even if you don't have word processing or spreadsheet software.

Even if your computer experience is limited, you'll find these forms extremely easy to work with. At the most basic level, all you need to do is enter your company name, then print the form. And those without computers can take the disk to a computer-literate friend, who can tweak the form to suit, and

print out master copies.

I printed the Daily Construction Report and gave it to my lead carpenter to try. After the first week, he asked me to add a section to track material deliveries. It took about five minutes to edit and reprint the form.

If you do edit the forms (or even if you just use them as is), it would be prudent to have a lawyer review them for problems. Requirements often vary from state to state.

This is a good book for those who haven't perfected (or have yet to attempt) the paperwork shuffle. It's also valuable for those who are considering, or are in the process of, computerizing their paperwork system. If you are new to computers, you'll appreciate the advantage of being able to edit a form instead of creating one from scratch. At 32¢ per form, this book is a good buy.

Carl Hagstrom designs and builds in Montrose, Pa., and is a contributing editor to the Journal of Light Construction.

The McGraw-Hill Handbook of Business Letters

by Roy W. Poe (McGraw-Hill, 3rd edition, 1994; 800/722-4726). Softcover, 7 1/2 x 9 1/4, 400 pages. \$19.95.

Guide to Good Letters

by Bill Brockway

Anyone who's in business needs to write letters, but letter writing takes time. It's a task that many business people dread — and consequently put off until they have to include a line like, "Sorry it's taken me so long to get back to you." A new book called *The McGraw-Hill Handbook of Business Letters* offers advice on writing good, timely, effective letters, and contains hundreds of examples of successful business letters.

If you've been in the business for awhile, you've probably already got a

few standard letters that you adjust to fit each new set of circumstances. Author Roy Poe gives you lots more, covering all kinds of business communication.

The first 51 pages of the handbook make up a section called "The Letter Writer's Craft." The book gives examples



of clear, concise writing, contrasting it with "federalese" — the practice of using several big words where one short phrase would do. For instance, instead of writing "Renumerative dis-

bursements are predicated upon the ultimate disposition of the construction process," try the simpler "You'll get paid when you finish building." This section also talks about ways to personalize letters, how to use language that emphasizes the positive, and when to use the various layout options.

The rest of the book is packed with sample letters and responses to them. Different sections deal with request letters, announcement letters, sales letters, letters dealing with suppliers, customers, credit and collection, public relations, and employee relations. There are even sections covering interoffice communication, responding to job applicants, and some social correspondence.

Each section contains "good news" and "bad news" letters. Rejecting someone by letter can be a tricky job, and these examples illustrate tactful and gentle ways to say "No."

Each letter is introduced in a paragraph describing the situation that inspired its writing. These scenarios are presented in detail, which makes it much easier to choose the right example and modify it to your needs.

This is not a book of form letters that you can just plug a name and address into and toss in the mail. It's a book of thoughtful letters designed to achieve specific goals. You use them as models — which is much easier than writing the letter from scratch.

This handbook will make you a better letter writer, and each time a new situation — requiring a new letter — comes along, it will save you time, effort, and aggravation. ■

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