

# What writers, journalists, and PR/Comms people need to watch

Over the weekend, I finally got to see *Obit*. This documentary should be required viewing for anybody who writes for a living, and for anybody who work with or within the news media. It's also for anybody who is thinking about what makes a life matter.

With print newspapers on the decline, it's likely many people don't even read the obituary section. I don't have access to the statistics, but I'd bet there's huge spike in readership of *online* versions of celebrity obituaries. Just in the few weeks, we've seen tremendous interest in the deaths of Senator John McCain and Aretha Franklin, and a likely increase in online reading of their obituaries.

Perhaps most people don't think a lot about what goes into writing an obituary, but it takes a special skill. Writing about someone who has died takes sensitivity and a sense for what is newsworthy. A good obituary is informative and interesting, while giving you an overview of the person's life and achievements. Generally, long-form obituaries are only written for politicians, artists, inventors, celebrities and other notable people. Just yesterday, I read an obituary in the *Washington Post* for [Mel Elfin](#), who was the long time Washington editor for Newsweek Magazine. Elfin was not a celebrity *per se*, but his decades of in Washington political and news circles probably touched lots of DC insiders (which is why this obituary appeared in the *Washington Post* and not the *New York Times*).

Among the many questions and issues that the featured obituary writers in *Obit* deal with are these

- What and how much detail to include
- What the lede (first paragraph of the article that includes the most important facts) should be
- What questions to ask to the relatives, and how much to fact-check what they say
- Importance of verifying facts
- How to follow the arc of a life that has fits and starts
- Importance of graphics, and of finding the best image to illustrate a life

There's a lot in the documentary about the news process: editorial meetings, pitching, finding images, fact-checking, and working on deadline. This is why this should be required viewing for public relations practitioners, who need to understand news judgement, and how things make it into the news cycle.

Finally, what writing (and reading) obituaries does is make people think about mortality and how they want to live their lives. You think about what you will be remembered for, what you've done here that is "newsworthy." So do yourself a favor—watch *Obit*. It's available streaming on demand, and on Kanopy.

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## Simple reminders help market doctor's offices

Doctors don't seem to do much marketing. Most doctors' offices have websites, but besides that, they don't actively engage in

marketing. The communications they have is generally one on one, although the more savvy medical offices send out health alerts (e.g., it's flu season and you should get a flu shot) and maybe even health newsletters.

Since most people go to a doctor only when they are sick, it would be better for public and individual health for medical professionals to encourage annual visits. Annual visits would catch potential issues before they become critical. And of course, having a relationship with a doctor makes emergency situations easier to deal with.



Some doctor's offices do encourage annual visits, and they do it by sending reminders. Some reminders are phone calls, some are emails, and I have even seen printed and mailed letters.

### **Bad (no contact at all, ever)**

One doctor's office I used to go to never sent any reminders at all. Even though they had my email address, I never once

got an email from them regarding anything. No calls about annual appointments. No reminder to get an annual flu vaccine. Nothing. Ever. I no longer go to that doctor.

### **Better (well after the year passed)**

An eye doctor I went to for several years called to remind me that I had not had my annual eye exam since November of 2016. It took them more than eight months to realize that I had not been there for more than a year. Of course they had no idea that I had changed eye doctors because of staffing issues.

### **Best (before the year is up)**

The new eye doctor I went to called me in early September to remind that in October it would be a year since my last appointment, and did I want to schedule one now.

Reminders are an opportunity to touch base with patients. They can be a way to schedule an appointment right there and then. There is no down side to medical reminders. They also serve to show patients that doctors want to see them, and that they are not just one more person in a database.

If doctors are not going to do any other marketing, they should at the very least, have a process to remind patients about annual visits.

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# **How to go on vacation and not**

# Lose customers

## Vacation time!

Here we are in the last few days of August. Summer is waning, and perhaps you want to go to the beach or go visit your family or travel to Alaska to see the glaciers while we have them. And why not? You've worked hard the rest of the year, and you should be able to take time off.



## But...

But before you take off, think about your customers. What do they need to know about your schedule and availability? If they need something, can it wait until you get back or is there somebody else who can help them?

## You could lose business by failing to communicate

It seems fairly obvious to me, but some people just don't think they need to communicate. For example, I was trying to make an appointment. I texted, and several days later, no answer. I left a message, and several hours later, no return phone call. I decided to look for a different provider, and I found one. I got a belated message from the first provider telling me she was in West Virginia with poor cellphone connectivity. Apparently, she has never heard of changing her outgoing message or updating her website.

**It's your responsibility to communicate your availability to your customers.**

If you are an employee, you might email your contacts telling them you will be unavailable on certain dates, and tell them who to contact instead. You may create an auto-responder on your email saying that you are not currently checking email.

If you are a business owner and have a website and/or online booking, you can update those to reflect your schedule. You can make note that your office is closed and you are not taking appointments. On your phone or answering service, you can update your outgoing message to reflect your situation.

**Here's a template:**

Thanks for contacting [name]. If you need to [reach me/make an appointment/other business], please be advised that our office is closed from [insert date] to [insert date]. We look forward to [seeing/serving/talking to] you then. If you need immediate assistance, please contact [insert name and number].

So go on, take your vacation, relax and enjoy. Just make sure you've communicated with your customers.

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## **Is your website undermining your credibility?**

We are long past the time where having a website is optional for any type of organization. If you want business or support,

you *need* a website, full stop.

But having any old website won't do. If you are a serious organization that is seriously looking to get donations, or to increase sales, or to advocate for a cause, or whatever your *raison d'être* is, you have to have a **credible** website.

To make sure your website has credibility, there are three areas you must address:

### **Safety/security**

Credible websites are first and foremost **safe and secure** to use. As I wrote before, [you must have an SSL](#). You should also be hosted on a trustworthy web host. There are many shady (and many times, cheap) web hosts out there. If your site is hosted on a shady web host, you are in fact, guilty by association. This happened to me a few years ago, when my website was hosted on a large, inexpensive web host that also hosted spammers and other questionable organization. Because I was on a blacklisted server, my emails would not be accepted by Yahoo and who knows what other email services. I changed hosts, and the problem has been resolved.

### **Up-to-date**

I just came across a Washington, DC public relations agency that supposedly hosts industry learning events on a regular basis. The website has a tab for these events, and when I clicked on it, it took me to an event that took place in March. I happen to know this agency is hosting an event in August, so it is very clear it has not updated the website in several months.

If you are wondering what you should be updating on a regular basis here's a non-comprehensive list: your blog, your events calendar, your personnel pages, your address, your social media links.

There is no excuse for not keeping your website up to date. If you use something like WordPress, updating is fairly simple. If you use something complex, you should have an IT person or a website developer who can do these things for you. And yes, it is worth the time or money investment because having an outdated website showcases many negative traits: disinterest, laziness, not prioritizing the website (and by extension your audience).

## **Design and UX**

If you were around in the 1990s when websites first started getting launched, you know what an old-fashioned website looks like. It's pretty ugly. If you have a 1990s design, you probably haven't kept up with the times. It's like sporting a feathered Farrah Fawcett hairdo from 1978, and it's now 2018.

Design is important, but so is user experience (UX). How easy is it for people to use your website and find what they need? If people are having trouble finding what they need, then they will not use your website and go elsewhere.

**Don't undermine your organization's credibility. Give your website some attention right now!**

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# **Better safe than sorry (or why you need SSL)**

Take a look at your browser right now. You should see that the web address starts with https, and that there is an icon to the left of that that shows a closed lock (and in Chrome, it says "secure"). This means that my website has its SSL certificate in order, and that this website is safe.



SSL stands for Secure Sockets Layer, and it is basically an authentication protocol that establishes a secure connection for your website.

### **It is better to be safe than sorry**

By having that “secure” label, you are creating a safe experience for your readers/users. This helps build trust. But more importantly, starting this year, Google will penalize websites that don’t have the SSL certificate by labeling them as unsafe or “not secure.” Would you want to visit a site that is flagged as “not secure?” Probably not.

### **SSL certificates may be free with your hosting package**

Getting SSL on your website should be a number one priority. If you (like me) manage your own website, check with your host. Most hosts provide free SSL certificates, and can deploy them on your site in a matter of minutes. Just give your website host a call, and follow instructions. If your host does not provide a free SSL certificate, there are plenty of places that will sell you one. Here’s a how-to guide on setting up SSL: <https://sucuri.net/guides/how-to-install-ssl-certificate>

There may be a few more steps that you need to take to make sure your site is secure. In my case, the browser was telling me some images on my site were not secure. Thankfully, there was an easy and free fix in the form of a WordPress plugin. If you are using a site that is not WordPress based, you may have to check with a website developer to get some technical help.

### **Bottom line**

In a world that has become rife with cybercrime, it is important to have provide a safe browsing experience. It is free to very low cost to deploy basic SSL on your website. And if you care about Google rankings, you need to do this now.

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# True marketing gold that guarantees results

**What is the one thing in marketing that guarantees results?**

Is it your website? Your social media marketing? Your strategic, forward-thinking marketing plan? Your market research? Your promotions?

While all of the above help you to generate leads and close sales, there is one thing that you have that will guarantee those leads convert and make those sales happen.

**It's your credibility.**

If I can't believe what you are selling, then I am not going to buy it. In other words, without credibility, you are nothing.

Credibility means trust. If you are credible, your product or service is trustworthy. It's really that simple.

Let me illustrate with the tale of an unnecessary car repair:

A couple of months ago, I took my car in for a tire rotation and alignment to the tire shop where I had bought my tires. The rotation is free for the life of the vehicle, and the alignment costs \$99. After a few minutes, one of the salespeople came out to tell me there was a problem. The shop could not do the alignment because the front end arms needed to be replaced. This repair would cost \$600 (or six times what I had been planning on). The mechanic showed me what he was

talking about, but my instinct (and pocketbook) said to decline this expensive repair.

When I walked out of the shop, I felt highly uneasy about what had happened. I felt that the salesperson was trying to upsell me and I did not trust her or the mechanic's assessment. Also, there had been a change in both the appearance and atmosphere of the shop. Previously, it had a homey (and more trustworthy) appearance. The people were friendly, and seemed honest. Now, things had been spiffed up, and the front desk was manned by two fairly surly people that barely had a smile for me. I got the sense the shop had been sold and was under new management, and that the management was looking to squeeze more profits from its customers. After all you are not going to make a lot of money off free rotations, are you?

This week, I took my car in for routine maintenance to my regular (trustworthy) repair shop. I asked them to check out this front end problem. And, no surprise really, they said it did not need the repair. So either the mechanic at the tire shop did not know what he was talking about, or the salesperson was indeed upselling me something just to generate more money. Either way, the credibility of the tire shop has completely evaporated for me. I can't think of taking my car there, because I don't believe they will act in my best interest. I don't believe anymore in what they are selling.

### **You can't manufacture credibility.**

You have it or you don't. Credibility derives from your actions, from the substance of your product or service. However, you *can promote* your credibility. You can highlight what makes you credible. When you communicate with your audience, you show credibility by your honesty. You can use customer testimonials and ratings. If you've gotten third-party reviews (like a product review in magazine), these are earned media mentions that help promote credibility.

The bottom line is that you can only promote your credibility if you act credibly. Otherwise, all your marketing efforts will be for naught.

Thoughts? Drop me a line in the comments.

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## **Legit or spam?**

Not a week goes by that I don't get several unsolicited emails from people/businesses who think I need financing, or a direct marketing list, or help with my website, or (just got this today) think I may want voice over talent (!). Almost all these emails are personalized to me, or at least to my website (as in "Dear Deborahbrody.com"). Some get my name from my website (presumably after doing a search) and some from LinkedIn. Others, I don't have the foggiest idea of where or how they found me (or even why they are contacting me). Very few seem to know much about my business, and none are companies I have done business with in the past. In short, lots of businesses reach out via email to try to drum up sales or generate cash.

### **Is it legit, is it spam, or is it a scam?**

But how many of these are legit, and how many are scammers/spammers? Where do we draw the line between an honest attempt to generate a lead based on internet research, and spam? There are probably a few indicators of spam/scams:

- 1) Using the same pitch over and over and over, sometimes from different names within the "company." In other words, more than one inquiry.

2) Adding, without permission, your name to an email marketing list, and putting the onus on you to unsubscribe (this is a direct violation of the CAN-SPAM rules and can/should be reported as such).

3) A sketchy sounding proposition (financing with no credit check, for example).

### **Is this company a legit spammer?**

For the past several weeks, I have been getting emails from something called Imparture about social media marketing classes in Washington, DC. I was getting about three emails a week, every week. They all had the unsubscribe feature, and finally, this week, I unsubscribed (not that I had subscribed in the first place). Then yesterday, I got a personalized email from "Elliot.: Here it is:

*Hi Deborah,*

*Did you get a chance to consider my last email?*

*Check out our upcoming [Google Analytics training course](#) taking place in Washington DC.*

*There are only a few spots left so sign up if you are interested.*

*All the best,*

**Elliot Jay**

*Client Relationship Manager*

**Imparture**

*London / New York / San Francisco*

Now, I don't know Elliot, and as I said, I had already unsubscribed from these emails. I wrote him and told him I would be reporting him for spam. Then, today, I got this email from "Noah":

Hi Deborah,

I came across your profile and saw that your skill set contains Social Media Marketing, and wanted to reach out with an opportunity.

We have only a few spots remaining in our upcoming [Social Media Marketing Immersive course](#) in Washington DC.

This course will give you an advanced level of understanding regarding Social Media Marketing, and add significant value to your skillset – might this be something of interest?

You can find out more about the course, as well as sign up, [here](#).

Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions.

All the best,

**Noah Kelsey**

Client Relationship Manager

**Imparture**

London / New York / San Francisco

I looked up Imparture and the company does have a website, a LinkedIn profile, and even a Twitter account (with only 500 or so followers), which look legit enough. On the other hand, I did find a review stating that the company had scheduled a class, cancelled it, and didn't issue refunds (sketchy!).

This company may indeed be legitimate (albeit with questionable customer service), but its marketing practices are definitely spammy. As I said before, *I have never signed up for a class or to get these emails*. And I have "unsubscribed" and have since gotten two more emails. Any legitimate marketing effort would ask for permission to add

you to a list, and would respect an unsubscribe request. This company has failed on both ends. It added me to an email list without my express consent (and again, I am not sure where/how they got my email address), and it has ignored my unsubscribe request, twice so far.

### **Do not be a spammer!**

If you are a legitimate business, do not follow the scammer's playbook. Sending unsolicited mail is against CAN-SPAM rules. Want to learn more? Check out the FTC's [CAN-SPAM Act: A compliance guide for business.](#)

Have you had a similar experience? What is your take on the legit versus spam discussion?

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## **How do you know who to vote for when there are so many candidates?**

There are thirty (that is 3-0) people running for Montgomery County, Maryland Council. Voters are allowed to vote for up to four. There are also eight candidates running in the Democratic primary for Maryland Governor (the incumbent, Larry Hogan, is a Republican and is unopposed). Voters also get to vote for County Executive (six Democrats running), U.S. Senator, U.S. Representative, State Delegates, Judges, even for the Clerk of the Circuit Court. In short, there are a lot of people competing for votes in Montgomery County, Maryland. And with so many people running, it's a real challenge to stand out.

And it's because of the crush of candidates that every registered party voter in Montgomery County (where I live) has been inundated with campaign literature. (Read today's Washington Post story, [In Montgomery County, voters face a deluge of campaign literature mailings](#), about it). And that is all in addition to the countless political commercials that have been airing on both the local TV stations and the political talk shows on cable TV. And the many sponsored ads on Twitter and Facebook. And the ubiquitous lawn signs and placards placed throughout the county.



Placards outside Silver Spring Early Voting Center

I know because I have received dozens of door hangers and flyers on my doorstep, dozens of flyers in the mail, tons of emails, and even personalized texts to my cell phone (I am still trying to figure out how they got the number). The most notable piece of campaign literature that I got was a form



letter from a candidate stuffed inside a handwritten envelope.

### **The name of the game**

When a race is so crowded, you have to really fight to stand out. When you are running against 29 other candidates, name recognition matters. And so you spend a lot of money to make sure people know and remember your name.

### **So you need money to succeed in politics**

There are two big problems with making name recognition a priority. The first is that you need a lot of money to be able to make people remember your name, which means candidates with the deepest pockets have a big (unfair?) advantage. And indeed, in Montgomery County, two self-made millionaires (David Trone, who is running for U.S. Congress, and David Blair, who is running for Montgomery County Executive) are leading in the amount of money spent. Both these guys are saturating the market with flyers, TV commercials, placards and so forth.

### **And a stand voters agree with**

The second problem is that we don't vote on name recognition alone. Serious voters (and primary voters tend to be serious) vote on where candidates stand on issues they care about. Name recognition is helpful for sure, but it doesn't inform voters sufficiently. If voters care about issues, it becomes incumbent on them to research the candidates' positions. Thankfully, the League of Women Voters publishes a Voters' Guide. And most candidates have websites.

In the end, you vote for people who reflect your priorities and values, not for the person with the most lawn signs or door hangers. To really stand out in a crowded field, candidates need to be able to communicate who they are, what they stand for, and why they are the better choice. That takes a lot of money, great communications know-how, and superb

political skill.

May the best candidates win! And if you live in Maryland, don't forget to vote on June 26th.

UPDATE: Today, I received an additional five pieces of campaign literature in the mail, three of those promote ONE candidate, and the other is the tenth or so piece I have received from another candidate. Sending three pieces of mail about one candidate strikes me as overkill, and could backfire. Certainly the other candidate, who clearly has very deep pockets, has shown he will spend (waste?) as much money as he can. There's no added advantage to sending a piece of campaign literature every day. It becomes junk mail, quite literally. Direct mail does not benefit from frequency as does radio/TV.

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## **Deception is not a good marketing tactic**

Have you ever bought something because it was on "special" promotion pricing? Have you bought a product to get a "free" gift? Have you rented a car because of a "discount" rate? If so, you may have been a victim of deceptive marketing tactics designed to boost sales.

Some marketers seek to entice customers by offering what seem to be great deals. Usually, it's a special "one-time only" price or a discount or a "bonus." What they fail to mention is

that you may have to pay extra for the bonus (many cosmetic brands do this) or that the special price doesn't include something else that you are required to pay.

Recently, I fell for a "special rate" from Thrifty. I was planning a trip to Boston, and researching rental cars when I got an email from the car rental company offering a 30% discount. This made the base fare for a rental car in Boston much better than the competition. It seemed like a no-brainer.

Last Friday, after landing in Boston, I got to the counter at Thrifty to find out that in addition to my discounted rate, I would be forced to pay an \$11.99 per day toll charge for each day I rented the car. Massachusetts has joined other states in getting rid of toll booths (and jobs for tollbooth collectors, but I digress) and instituting an all-electronic system. You need an E-Z Pass to pay, or else the toll authority will take a picture of your plates and send you a bill (with an extra fee to boot).

At no point in the reservation process, nor in any confirmation email, did Thrifty tell me that Boston was a place that has all electronic tolls and that I would be required to pay an additional toll pass fee. They also did not disclose the amount of the fee for the toll charge, which they add on for *all* Boston renters. Had I known, I could have brought my own E-Z Pass and avoided the extra charge. And had I known that tolls would be an issue, I could have researched the toll charges at other car rental companies, and may have chosen one of them instead.

This situation could and should be avoided. Thrifty has permanently damaged its reputation with me because it chose to be deceptive. It could have done the following:

**Tell me the true cost of my rental—including *all* taxes and fees.**

Thrifty used a special rate to entice me to use its services.

The company never mentioned the additional toll pass charges, which effectively increased the total amount of my rental by \$48. Thrifty also charges much higher toll pass rates than its competitors.

**Provide enough information for me to make an informed decision.**

Thrifty knew I was renting in Boston, and it knew that Boston requires electronic toll collection. But Thrifty did not include that information anywhere on its website when booking. The first I learned of it was after I was already at the rental counter.

**In the end, deceptive marketing tactics will backfire.**

Deceiving your customers just to get them to buy from you may generate a *short-term increase in sales*, but it will create a *long-term decrease in your credibility and trustworthiness*, which will mean a loss of future sales.

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## **It's easy to notice bad writing**

Last week, I went to a panel discussion about user experience (UX) design. The whole idea behind UX is that websites should be designed with the users/readers in mind, so that they can easily find what they are looking for. One of the panelists said this:

*It's easy to notice bad design.*

Why? She went on to say that if something is easy to use, then you don't notice it.

Right.

The same is true for writing. If something is written well, you don't notice anything wrong. You understand what is being said. Conversely, when something is written poorly, then you don't understand what the writer is trying to communicate.

On Friday, I got a very odd email from a local brew-pub with this subject line: Curtain Call-[XX] Brewhouse

The body said this (although I have redacted the name and location of the brew-pub):

*We are honored to have been a part of your community and your history.*

*When we opened [XX] Brewhouse in March of last year, we sought to give a piece of [city]'s history a home in the West End and provide a community gathering place to relax and enjoy the company of friends and family. While this chapter in [XX] brewing history may seem short-lived, it will remain with us for the entirety of our lives.*

*In realizing the changes to the surrounding landscape, we pushed for appropriate changes to our lease agreement, which were temporarily provided by the landlord. However, permanent change could not be achieved. We did everything in our power to sustain the company it for as long as possible, which is why we are sharing the conclusion to this chapter with you today.*

*Whatever the future holds, keep us in your thoughts, drink really great beer and hold family dear.*

When I read this email, I was confused. Had the brew-pub closed? If so, when would they stop serving? What would happen to the employees, the beer, the brand? And that last sentence, about holding family dear, gave me a sense of dread. Did someone die? (Plus, the use of the word curtain the subject line made me think of Agatha Christie's book *Curtains*, in which her main character, Hercule Poirot, dies.)

Why am I so confused? Because this email is poorly written. It lacks basic information, creates more questions than it answers, and makes too many assumptions about the reader's knowledge. I am left wondering what changes were they trying to make? Why were those changes not implemented? Why do they mean about a short-lived chapter? Does it mean there are more chapters coming?

And then, there are the mixed metaphors. The subject line talks of a curtain (I assume, as in a theater's curtain call) but the body of the email talks about chapters as in books, and not about acts in a play.

In sum, this email is a mess. You notice how bad it is because it was not written for the reader. It did not take into consideration what the reader may or may not know about the brew-pub. It doesn't even spell out the basic news, which is that they are closing. The reader does not know if this has already happened or will happen, since no date is given for the closure.

If I were to rewrite this email I'd start with a clear, unambiguous subject line: XX Brewhouse will close on [DATE] or XX Brewhouse has closed.

Then, I would write something like this:

*It's with heavy hearts, that we are writing you, our supporters, today to let you know that we will be closing XX Brewhouse as of [DATE]. We thank you for your support, and we are honored to have been part of the [city's] community and*

*history.*

*We are closing because we could not reach a permanent agreement with our landlord regarding our operations. Our location needed [whatever this was]. Without permanent arrangement, we weren't able to operate the way we needed to continue to bring you our high-quality beer and food.*

*For now, we do not have plans to re-open in a different location, but please stay tuned.*

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Before you write anything, think of your readers. What do they need to know? Why are you sending them this information?

**Make your communications easy to use and understand. If you do that, you will be noticed for what you say, and not how you said it.**