

What a bad cup of coffee can teach you

Do you always start your day with a extra-big mugful of coffee like I do? If so, you'll appreciate just how terrible it is to start your day with a bad cup of coffee. A cup of coffee that lacks the delicious aroma of perfectly roasted coffee beans. A cup of coffee that just tastes awful.

A bad cup of coffee just gets your day off to a bad start, and for that I blame myself. You see, I had just finished a package of coffee and needed a replacement ASAP (it is a DEFCON 5 situation around here if there is no coffee). Normally, I buy my coffee at Trader Joe's but I had forgotten to do so during my weekly shopping trip. And so I found myself shopping in a gourmet store for something else, and thought I would pick up a brand of coffee that I enjoy (and for which I am willing to pay a little extra). Apparently, this store no longer carries that brand. They did have another brand that I have tried in the past, but I didn't feel like paying the gourmet store price for it.

So I made a very big mistake: I grabbed a bag of coffee simply because it was cheap. It was not a brand I knew or recognized or had even seen before, but I figured a bag of medium roast Costa Rican coffee from a gourmet store can't be all that bad. Well, I figured wrong. It was the worst coffee I have ever bought in my life. It tasted horrible. It had no coffee aroma. It was so bad I actually threw what was left out.

Then I hustled over to Trader Joe's and bought my go-to coffee. Now, my mornings are back to normal.

A bad cup of coffee taught me never to buy an unknown brand. And it's really not about the cost. You can get very good yet

cheap store-brand coffee like I do at Trader Joe's or at stores like Target, *where you trust the brand*.

Brands are quite literally markers that serve to identify. They let you separate one product from all the others like it. Once you've experienced a brand, you can then look for it if you liked it or avoid it if you didn't. *Brands provide a shortcut* that consumers can use to know what to buy quickly and without much research.

Remember this the next time you are out of coffee: Unless it's a brand you know already, buying just anything based on price alone will get your morning started on the wrong foot.

Do you know what your brand stands for? Are you communicating it well enough? If not, perhaps you should invest in my new [Brand Identity Kit](#). Check it out!

If you want to sound smart, don't use big words

So many times, people think that by using big words, they sound smarter. After all, people might need to go get a dictionary to look those words up. Yet, people who do this, often think they know exactly what a word means, when they don't. Take for example Chris Cillizza, a political commentator for CNN. Last night, on the Don Lemon show, Cillizza was discussing some of the latest news regarding Donald Trump and adult film actress Stormy Daniels. Cillizza

thought that the salacious details wouldn't matter much to Trump supporters, because, as he put it, "Trump has never been a model of *moral turpitude*." Nobody corrected him even though what he said was actually the exact opposite of what he meant.

Cillizza was back on the air this morning, talking about the same subject, and repeated the phrase he had used last night, that Trump isn't a model of moral turpitude. This time, one of the other panelists questioned the word, but couldn't quite find the correct word to use instead.

What Cillizza meant to say is that Trump is not a model of *moral rectitude*.

Rectitude means righteousness, while turpitude means depravity. They sound similar, and that's what tripped Cillizza up. Sadly, nobody else seems to have understood that Cillizza was contradicting himself by using a big word that he clearly did not know.

Nobody can go back and correct the spoken word. However, you can and should fix written work. You can avoid sounding stupid just by getting someone to copy edit your work, and check that the big words you are using are being used correctly.

P.S. I did tweet Chris Cillizza the correction. I don't know if he read it, or whether he cared.

No response = no business

Last week, I had an urgent need to get my roof repaired. We'd had a severe windstorm in the Washington area that blew off several shingles off my roof, and rain was in the forecast. In order to prevent further damage, I knew I had to get someone

to fix this right away.

First, I contacted several friends to ask for their recommendations. This way, I got three names. Then, I went on Consumer Checkbook to check ratings and get more names. I wrote down a few names, and noticed that a couple of the names my friends had provided were on the Checkbook site, and had good ratings. First thing on Monday (I noticed the damage over the weekend), I called all the names I gathered. This is how it went:

1. Call to roofer listed as good value/good quality in Consumer Checkbook. I spoke to an office person, who added me to a list, with no guarantee or timeline for when I would get someone to fix it. She told me that there were several other calls ahead of me, so she could not tell me when someone would be available, but she did provide me with pricing.

2. Call to another qualified roofer listed in Consumer Checkbook. I left a detailed message, which was never answered.

3. Call to roofer (who was highly rated in Consumer Checkbook), referred to by a close friend. There was no answer and the voice mailbox was full, so I had no way to contact this contractor or leave a message.

4. Call to roofer referred to by my neighbor who recently had her roof replaced. When I called, I got a message saying that they were overwhelmed with calls, to either leave a message or send an email. I sent an email, to which I received an answer more than a week later, explaining pricing, etc.

5. Call to handyman referred by a friend. He referred me to a contractor friend of his, a jack of many trades, who answered immediately. This contractor offered to come by to give me an estimate, and then was able to complete the repair the same day.

Now, this was an unusual situation. Many, many people had damage to their roofs from a strong and unusually long-lasting windstorm. Roofers were slammed. Yet, their responses showed a lot about how their businesses are run and how they deal with customers.

I am sure I will have a need for a roofer in the future. Based on my interactions here, I would contact the first and the fourth roofers because they were responsive and I got the sense of professionalism. As to the contractor who actually fixed my roof, I know I have found someone who is punctual and reliable, but he is not primarily a roofer and I would not ask him to do more than repair shingles.

Not being responsive and not even having a mechanism to leave messages is the sign of a business that is overwhelmed and incapable of dealing with emergencies and not very professional and customer-centric. It's better to get a late reply than no reply at all.

No response leads to no business.

What can a small, one-person business do to be more responsive? There are several options.

- Have a website that explains how you respond in emergencies, and which also provides a phone number, email, and contact form to get in touch (in other words, many ways to get in touch).
- Have an online booking system. There are several paid and non paid options out there that allow your customers to book time with you, either for a consultation or a full-fledged appointment.
- Consider having an answering service, virtual assistant, or in-house administrative person so that customers can talk to a person in real time.
- Make time to answer every email, contact request or phone call that you receive, even if it is to say we

can't help you at this time.

No amount of marketing or beautiful website design is going to overcome a lack of responsiveness. If you want business, you have to respond to inquiries. If you don't respond, you will not get that business now or in the future.

Why you need a copy editor (a new series)

A few weeks ago I shared with you a [picture of a postcard](#) that advertised a townhouse for sale at more than \$51 million. It was an error that would have been caught by a copy editor but likely not by a proofreader. That's because a proofreader seeks and corrects mistakes such as typos, misspellings, extra words, repeated words, and other errors. A proofreader does not look at the content, and rarely queries the accuracy of amounts. A copy editor, on the other hand, goes beyond checking for mistakes, and also verifies that sentences are clear and accurate (e.g., the correct address, the right day of the week, the correct amount, etc.).

Sadly, there are many examples of printed materials that needed a copy editor, or at the very least, a proofreader, to check them, and did not get either. My goal is to find these examples and share them with you.

Today, I was looking at the back of a Sunsweet Prunes package:



Can you spot the mistake? Here's a hint: it's subject-verb agreement.

A grammatically correct sentence would read:

We believe making good food choices **is** critical to treating your body right and living life to its fullest.

Subject-verb (dis)agreement is a very common mistake. The subject should always match the verb, that is, a singular subject needs a singular verb, and a plural subject needs a plural verb. Lots of people have problems identifying the subject. In this case, the writer is not correctly identifying the subject, *and* is thrown off because he/she sees that a plural word ("choices") goes right before the verb. In this sentence, the plural "choices" is not the subject, rather the singular *phrase* "making good food choices" is the subject.

I am a bit shocked that a large international company would make this type of mistake in its packaging. Perhaps it should hire a copy editor!

Secretive is a good brand attribute for a spy

Are you a spy or a spying organization? If so, this post does not apply to you. You definitely want to keep secrets, and be known for your secrecy.

Secretive is *not* a great attribute for non-spy organizations

However, in general, most businesses should not aim to be known as secretive. And let's be clear, I am not talking about being known as an organization that keeps its customer information private and confidential. That's a good attribute. I am talking about organizations that don't tell you stuff you need to know, like how much things cost or whether pricing has changed. Or what the return/refund policy is. Or who to contact if something is wrong.

Changing prices is not something you should be secretive about

There's a yoga studio I had been going to most of last year. I was taking a noon class (perfect for my schedule) known as "value vinyasa" because it cost \$12 instead of the usual \$20 (perfect for my budget). I missed a couple classes due to vacation, and when I went to check the schedule when I returned, I noticed that the noon class I had been taking is now known as "vinyasa flow." In the pricing section of the studio's website there's no mention of the "value" classes. The studio sends a weekly newsletter and there was no mention of the change. The value classes had been very quietly (secretively) eliminated. Does the studio owner think we won't notice?

There's a hiking group I belong to on Meetup.com. The group had been charging \$2 for each hike as a way to ensure attendance (people tend to show up for something they've paid for), and to cover the costs of running the group. Without any

announcement, the group began charging \$5 per hike. There was a lot of questions and outrage posted by members on the Meetup's discussion boards. There was an answer saying that this hiking group is really a nonprofit that now supports various causes, and that the fees were going to be used to raise money for said causes. That was the end of the discussion, and the discussion boards were disabled. The group leader could have easily sent a note to all the members explaining the price hike and the reason for it, but chose to be secretive and not forthcoming. She also chose to shut down discussion, to tamp down discontent with the sudden, unexplained policy change. This is not a good luck for this group, and I have noticed that where hikes used to get filled up really quickly, there are now several spots open.

Being secretive, and imposing changes without notification, could backfire.

If your organization is planning to make a change that will affect your customer's interaction with you, you must make sure to announce it. Being secretive may seem like a good way to avoid customer discontent, but it actually increases it. Being secretive communicates to your customer that you are hiding something, or not being upfront, or just don't care to keep your customer up to date.

In my case, I have stopped going to that yoga studio because I want to pay less than \$20 per class, and because I think the studio is not well run. I usually don't do hikes until the weather is warmer, but I think I will look for other hiking groups that are more upfront about their policies.

Being secretive can cost you customers. Most people value transparency and honesty. If you are being secretive, you are not being transparent or honest. You are hiding something or perhaps you are just being thoughtless in not letting your customers know your policies, costs, etc.

Here's the bottom line: when you are being secretive, you are not communicating.

When your customers don't know who you are

This morning, I came across an article on [EaterDC](#) about the new Isabella Eatery food hall at Tyson's Galleria in McLean, Virginia: [Gargantuan Isabella Eatery is Confusing Customers](#). It seems that although some of the elements of the food hall get good reviews for quality and design, customers don't know what to make of the whole thing. It seems that Isabella Eatery is offering so much that its customers no longer know what Isabella stands for. (Some background: Mike Isabella was a contestant on Top Chef. Later he went on to open up Graffiato, an Italian restaurant in Washington, DC and later a Italian sandwich shop called G by Mike Isabella. He then expanded into Greek food with three Kapnos restaurants, and then into Spanish food with Arroz. He heads up a company called Mike Isabella Concepts, which also operates a French restaurant, a Mexican restaurant and the aforementioned food hall.)

Something for every one?

And then there's the local pizza chain with the catchy jingle that says it offers "something for every one." The place is called [name] Pizza, and its current TV commercials show pictures of a burger and fries. Because, of course, if you want a burger and fries you'd call a pizza delivery place, right?

Jack of all trades, master (brander) of none

When you seek to please everyone by offering tons of choices, you end up pleasing no one.

In terms of branding and marketing, when you offer so many choices (and in Isabella's case, cuisines and restaurants) you are violating the first two of *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding* by Al Ries and Laura Ries. The first law says that your brand loses its power when you expand your scope, and the second, which really is the inverse of the first, is that having more focus strengthens your brand.

A strong brand is focused, a weak brand is not. It seems to me that Mike Isabella is expanding at the expense of his brand. And the pizza place? Well I don't think it would be anyone's first choice for pizza *or* for burgers.

Your brand is your mark of distinction. How well are you communicating it? If you need help with your branding, check out my new [Brand Identity Kit](#).

I really liked that Super Bowl ad for Doritos

But I don't ever buy Doritos. I also never drink Mountain Dew.

I certainly do not drink Bud Light. Or Michelob Ultra. I don't use Tide. And I am not about to go get life insurance from Mass Mutual.

If you prefer real beer to Bud Light, no amount of clever/funny/slick ads will change your mind. If you, like me, avoid sugary sodas, having Morgan Freeman appear in an ad drinking one, is not going to make you run out and buy a case.

They are memorable

As a marketing communications person, I've been closely watching Super Bowl ads for the past 20 years. When I worked at an ad agency in Boston in the 1990s, we had time set aside to view the Super Bowl ad reels, and discuss. If you study Super Bowl ads, you can see that many are memorable, and are often discussed for years after they aired. Here, check out this [list](#) of the top spots from the last 30 years and see how many you remember.

They cost a lot

Super Bowl ads are very expensive: expensive to produce (how much do you think Morgan Freeman got paid to swill the Dew?) and expensive to place. They are very high profile, and are seen by millions of people. Most of these ads are what the industry calls "image ads." That is, these ads promote a brand's image more so than making a sale. They raise "brand awareness." And yet, any advertiser that has the budget necessary to run ads on the Super Bowl already has brand awareness. So why bother?

But do they have a good ROI?

To use an industry term, what exactly is the ROI (return on investment) on a Super Bowl ad? What do you think? Do you think the high investment provides the returns to justify doing so?

Setting customer expectations

I just came back from a mini-vacation to visit family in New York City. It was lots of fun—there was lots of walking, and lots of eating. But great time aside, I noticed that different vendors/organizations set expectations differently. Setting customer expectations early and clearly helps ensure your customers have a good experience with your organization.

Either put those jackets back on or tie them around your waist

My cousin and I visited the Jewish Museum in New York. It was warm in the building and once we got to the floor for the special exhibit we were there to see, we had removed our winter coats and had them draped over our arms. Within seconds, a guard was telling us we had to put the coats on or tie them around our waist. It was too late to go back down to the coat check so we both put the coats around our shoulders. But we were uncomfortably warm. The woman at the admissions desk could have told us to check our coats. She could've given us a map of the museum or some (any) information. She did nothing but take our money and give us tickets. She, and the museum itself, did not set expectations properly. (P.S.: Directly after the Jewish Museum, I went to the Met. The guards there do not care if you carry your coat.)

Wagamama knows how to do it

Wagamama is a British chain of Asian-style food. They've only recently expanded to the United States with a couple restaurants in New York City. Most Americans are probably not familiar with the chain, and the first question my server

asked was whether I had dined at Wagamama before (I have). Since Wagamama has a quirky way of serving—they mark your order on your placemat and then bring out food as it's ready—the waiter wanted to set my expectations. Like I said I have dined there, but I appreciated the reminder (it'd been a long time).

Vamoose is confuse(d)—and uneven

I've taken Vamoose before, and I thought I knew how they operate. For example, I know that when you get to the designated pick up stop, there will be a line to get on the bus. Obviously, the closer to the front of the line you are, the more likely you will be able to sit where you prefer. On the trip from DC to New York, the bus attendants gave out water and newspapers. But after getting on the bus, there was not a word from anybody. Nobody told us about WiFi, lights, bathrooms/rest stops, how long the trip was expected to take, nothing. The driver did not utter a word until about two and half hours into the ride, and that was *after* he stopped at a rest stop and then all he told us was that we had fifteen minutes to use the facilities.

On the return trip, when I got to the stop in New York, I wanted to make sure there would be water, and I asked the attendant if they would give it out. He didn't know. Based on my experience and expectation, they would hand out water, but I decided not to take any chances and went to buy some. Good thing I did because there was no water to be had from Vamoose. In other words, they did not meet an expectation, nor did they set it appropriately.

Once I got on the bus, one of the attendants gave a detailed announcement about the WiFi, travel time, bathroom availability, and also, telling people to keep conversations short and phones on mute. That was a plus and something that had not been done on the trip there. It was a good thing the attendant gave that information, because for the rest of the

trip, there was not one word from the driver. He did not stop at all. He did not even announce that we had arrived at the first stop in the DC area, or how long the bus would be there to offload passengers.

None of these experiences changes my opinion on the organization/business. I would still attend the Jewish Museum in the future, still eat at Wagamama, and still ride the Vamoose to New York. I chose these organizations for specific reasons—interest in the exhibit (museum), type of food and ambiance (Wagamama), and convenience and price (Vamoose).

Even though you choose to do business with companies and organizations in spite of any shortcomings, those that are able to set, manage, and most importantly, meet customer expectations will provide a more enjoyable customer experience.

How do you view your target audience?

This is not the Spam that comes in a can

On the telephone

Have you received multiple calls on your landline and/or cell phone that are in the same area code and start with the same three digits as your phone number? Chances are high that you have. Spammers are hoping that you will think that this a local number and therefore will answer. However, when they

keep using this technique over and over and over again, and when caller ID shows you names of people you don't know, you learn pretty quickly that this is a spam call and you don't answer.

On email

If you are a website owner, have you received emails telling you that you have problems on your website and that the emailer can fix these "fatal" errors so that your website can function? After the second or third one, chances are good you figured out that this is a scam and you deleted the email and/or added it to your junk list and/or reported it.

or

Have you gotten an email like this one I have already received twice (word for word) from "Tina Richardson:"

Hello Deborah,

I just came across the Mad Mimi piece, "[Dyscalculia and MLD Newsletter](#)." Nice job! As a heads up, your site is not WC3 accessible for people with physical disabilities related to dyscalculia. I get it: your website can't be accessibility compliant without sacrificing design, interactivity and general user experience for visitors without disabilities (paying 50% more for designers and coders might help, but would still fall short).

The very red flag here is that there is no "Mad Mimi" piece that I wrote about dyscalculia.

These are real examples. I get these calls and emails, several times a day. Apparently, the idea here is that I am going to believe that the call is from someone I know, or that my website has a ton of problems, or even that I wrote something that I didn't. In short, all these "marketing" pieces depend on my naivete or stupidity or lack of common sense. They are

designed so that a trusting or uninformed person falls for them.

What differentiates spam marketing from real marketing

How you view your target audience determines what kind of marketer you are. If you view your audience as naive, easily swayed or just plain stupid, chances are you are a spammer/scammer. If, on the other hand, you view your audience as knowledge-seeking and perhaps even sophisticated, chances you are a real marketer (and therefore probably more successful).

Real marketing seeks to give potential customers fact-based information on which to base a buying decision. Spam/scam marketing often uses fear-mongering or the assumption that the target does not have enough information.

If you want to be taken seriously, do not view your target audience as stupid, gullible, uninformed, unsophisticated. Instead, view your target as smart and then your marketing will also be smart and successful.

You do know you can segment your mailing list, right?

Today, I got an email about a six-week communications leadership seminar. It sounds interesting, except it takes place in Chicago and I live near Washington, D.C. The target audience for this seminar is business professionals who live in the greater Chicago area yet this email was probably sent to

the whole list.

Email marketing is great because it is relatively inexpensive, and because it is highly customizable. Say you are a retailer with stores across the country. You could send emails to your customers in specific locations announcing the opening of a new store or a change in hours, or perhaps a change in location.

In other words, with email marketing you can send targeted email messages that are relevant to their recipients at a relatively low cost.

Yet the email I received about the Chicago seminar is not relevant. It is just clutter in my inbox. Why did I get this email? I'd venture to say it is because the list owner did not either a) segment the list, or b) gather enough information from the recipients to allow for segmentation, or c) both.

Most email marketing programs allow for list segmentation. If you are marketing to a diverse audience, you will have to gather some relevant information to be able to segment your list or to be able to personalize it. If you don't gather information that will allow segmentation and/or you have an email provider that doesn't allow for segmentation, you need to make some changes ASAP. That is, unless you are trying to get your email deleted or generate a few unsubscribes.