

# If advertising is better, why bother with PR?

Last night, at a happy hour for the Washington, D.C. chapter of the ASBPE, I got a chance to meet the managing editor of the *Washington Business Journal*, Vandana Sinha. I asked her about the change I discussed [here last week](#), where the *Business Journal* is now charging for personnel announcements in their “People on the Move” section.

Sinha told me that companies are actually very happy about the change, because they can now be assured that their announcements will be printed. Companies feel they’ve gained control over the process.

## **Paid vs. earned**

That reaction points to the advantage of advertising over public relations, and it’s the difference between paid and earned media. If you pay for ad space, you get it. You can place whatever ad or information you choose (within certain limits).

When you rely on media relations efforts to obtain coverage for your organization, you are not assured of success. It will depend on whether what you are trying to get out there is deemed “newsworthy” by the editors/journalists at the media outlet you are targeting. If you get coverage, you’ve “earned” it.

If we are at a point, due to limited resources and dwindling subscriptions, where reporters and editors are stretched to the point that they no longer can entertain pitches and read press releases, what is the future of media relations? Furthermore, if media outlets are searching for more ways to bring in revenue, by seeking various sponsorships and now charging for announcements (and in effect making something

that was previously earned into paid), where does that leave a media relations practitioner?

Clearly, if you pay for your media (advertising), you are guaranteed not only coverage, but coverage that you like. What is the incentive for organizations to hire anybody to do media relations?

### **Media relations is a tactic**

For many years, public relations practice seems to have been more focused on media relations than on strategy and image management. It was easier to do publicity than it was to counsel clients on other ways to improve their public standing.

In my opinion, the practice of media relations has to evolve (or even disappear), if it hasn't already. No longer can agencies simply churn out press releases, pitch editors, and earn media for their clients. That is become increasingly unproductive and difficult to achieve. Additionally, the way people consume news has changed dramatically. There are few true mass media outlets left, and many more targeted, specialty channels.

### **The media landscape has changed**

Because of the new media landscape, public relations, where the practice is about managing perceptions of an organization, has to re-focus its efforts away from media relations. It's important to recognize that media relations is just a *tactic* to help PR achieve its objectives.

Many PR agencies are already turning away from media relations. Today's PR agencies are doing much more social media, marketing, crisis communications and other practices in order to help organization manage their public presence.

### **Bring back integrated marketing communications!**

PR is not advertising, but both are essential components of any communications plan. Perhaps the future will bring us **communications agencies**, where PR and advertising are integrated. Yes, I know this is not a new concept, but it's one that needs to be revisited now that times have changed.

What are your thoughts on media relations practices? Is it something that is still worthwhile? Should PR evolve? Please share your comments.

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## **Publications' need for revenue threatens public relations efforts**

Personnel announcements used to be one of the most reliable and easy forms of publicity for a company. In the years I worked at PR firms, we always sent out these type of announcements, usually including a headshot. Eventually, most of them would end up in the business section of the local newspaper, or within specialty newspapers or magazines.

Getting personnel announcements in print was a good way to keep companies in the public eye, and also served as a morale boost to the new or promoted employee. Even 20 plus years later, I still have the clipping from *Adweek* showing my appointment to Boston ad firm Houston Effler (now defunct).

Apparently, those days of easy publicity are coming to an end. A few weeks ago I noticed that the *Washington Business Journal* changed its personnel announcement page (called "People on the

Move”) to show the words “paid advertising” at the top. Effectively, the *Business Journal* had started charging companies in order to publish these announcements.



As someone who has worked in communications for more than 20 years, I am not surprised that this is happening in 2017, but I am disheartened, and pessimistic about the future of media relations.

It's not surprising simply because print publications are struggling with declining subscriptions and reduced advertising, and they are looking for additional revenue. Charging for personnel announcements seems harmless, and if companies want to highlight their new hires, perhaps they won't hesitate to spend a few hundred dollars (the Business Journal is charging \$350 for an “enhanced” profile that will appear online and in print).



It's disheartening because it has further blurred the line

between advertising and editorial content, and opens the possibility up that companies will be willing to “pay to play.” If there is money to be made from charging for what was previously known as earned media, then there is no incentive for publications to cover any press release or announcement unless it is major (e.g., new iPhone).

The pressures on print journalism have been covered before. We know that people are not buying or subscribing as much to print, and we know that publications are asking fewer reporters to produce more content, more often, and with fewer resources. Most publications have a digital presence, and many struggle with instituting a pay wall for readers to access their content.

It may seem trivial for a publication to charge for personnel announcements, but it points to a much larger problem and also to serious consequences for editorial integrity. It’s not only happening in print. Broadcast also seems to require more revenue than what it is getting from traditional advertising. More people are getting news from websites and social media sites, and fewer are watching the evening news. Over the past several weeks, I’ve noticed a trend in which national restaurants are getting local news to cover food and drink specials, not only on air, but on social media channels.

For a specific example, just last Friday, I noticed that WJLA (the ABC affiliate in Washington, D.C., owned by Sinclair Broadcasting) re-tweeted one of its local reporters, Kevin Lewis, discussing a special on a drink offered at Applebees, the national restaurant chain. Lewis included a link to the “news” about this special on the WJLA website, which then linked to a press release directly on Applebees website. At no point did the words “sponsored” or “paid advertising” show on the tweets or on the press release. If the WJLA news team thinks that sharing drink specials from a restaurant is actual news, they are not familiar with real journalism.

In this era where journalism is being called “fake news” whenever it digs up inconvenient information for a politician, it is not a good look to get money to run publicity, without even acknowledging that it is paid.

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## Decisions with unintended consequences

This is a post about unintended and negative consequences, based on two separate experiences yesterday.

### **Last minute deal—get in at no cost!**

Last night, I attended an event on trends in digital marketing. I signed up for it a couple of days ago, and paid \$11.84. Yesterday, about two hours before the event was due to start, there was an email from the organizer to a listserv I am on saying that she didn't have enough attendees, so if anyone wanted to attend *for free*, they could.

I felt like a sucker. Why had I bothered to pay anything at all for an event that wasn't garnering enough attention to the point that the organizer was begging people to come by offering free admission?

And the real question is, why would I ever pay this organizer for any event when it may be more advantageous to wait until the last minute?

The unintended consequence of this poor decision is to

effectively make people decide to not sign up in advance, to not pay at all, because there's a likelihood that if too few people sign up in advance, the organizer will be desperate enough for warm bodies and offer free admission to all.

### **Ask and ask and ask again—until they don't want to be asked again**

Unless you were not online, or checking email, you know yesterday was Giving Tuesday. Giving Tuesday was developed (supposedly) as an "antidote" to Cyber Monday/Black Friday. In theory, Giving Tuesday is a chance to support charities instead of, or in addition to, shopping like mad for the holidays.

A lot of hoopla has developed around this "holiday." Case in point: Every organization that I have ever supported sent me emails the week before, the day before and the day of, to beg me to give them money on Giving Tuesday. Some organizations sent multiple emails on Tuesday in addition to multiple emails on the days before. My inbox was flooded with requests, and then so were my social media feeds.

Some organizations were getting matching funds on Giving Tuesday, so giving on this day automatically meant more money in the coffers. But the level of pushiness these organizations reached around Giving Tuesday in order to get these extra funds may have had the unintended consequence of reducing the number of people opting in to newsletters. I unsubscribed to at least two, and was seriously considering unsubscribing from all of them.

The intensity of the effort made it seem as if this was your one chance to give, as if you couldn't give any time of the year, and *as if giving at any other time was just not as good*. The other unintended consequence of this extreme focus on Giving Tuesday, I believe, is to reduce year-round giving.

Organizations make lots of decisions to fulfill short-term

goals (get lots of donors on Tuesday), but which neglect to take into consideration long-term goals (develop good relationships and donor opportunities year-round). In other words, before you make a snap decision that only affects one event/day, think about what your overall goals are, and whether this decision furthers those goals or not.

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## To gift or not to gift...a marketing question

As has happened every November for the six years I've lived in my current home, I received this on my doorstep:



It is given by a local real estate agent who also sends a magnetic calendar in the mail and places quarterly sales updates on my doorknob. He includes a card with his contact information along with the jar of apple butter.

Here's the problem: I don't really eat apple butter. I am not opposed to it, but it is not something I eat regularly. I have three unused jars from the past few years, and I don't really



know what to do with them. It's a shame to throw them out, but it's not something I feel counts as food to be taken to the food pantry. In other words, it has become clutter and something that puts the burden on me. For me, this is not a welcome gift.

I am not sure why this real estate agent keeps doing this. Perhaps he has found there is a return on investment, or he wants to be known as the apple butter guy. I am not sure, but in my opinion, his is an example of how not to do corporate gift giving.

**Gift giving can be a good marketing tactic, as long as there is some thought and strategy behind it.**

Many large companies regularly give customers a gift that costs them very little but is very effective in getting people to the door: a free visit, a \$25 coupon toward your purchase, discount cards, VIP seating, and so on. Others send Christmas gifts to ongoing customers. Some take hold monthly birthday lunches for clients. These companies and organizations have budgeted a certain/set amount toward corporate gifts, and have instituted these as regular marketing effort.

In order to have a *successful* gift giving campaign. you should think about the following two things:

**1. What are you trying to accomplish?**

Perhaps you are thanking customers for their business during the year, or perhaps you want to entice new customers. Either way, if you don't know why you are giving, there is absolutely no point to doing it.

**2. Who are you giving to?**

This is crucial information. If you are giving to a client you've known for years versus giving to a potential customer, you will be spending different amounts of time and effort. For

a long-term client, you probably will need to find a personalized gift, and for a potential customer, you want to encourage them to check you out.

**But not just any gift will do.**

Once you've decided what you are trying to do and to whom you are giving, you can choose the gifts that make the most sense. Some attributes that you may want to consider are these:

- Memorable
- Useful
- Linked to your brand identity
- Stand out from the crowd

**Remember: what makes a a good gift is something the recipient appreciates or wants.**

What are your thoughts on gifts as a marketing tactic? Have you received or given a particularly good or bad gift? Please let me know.

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## **Be very scared (of poor word choice)**

You know what is (a bit) scary? When you say or write something that you don't mean. You don't intend to do it, but you do it anyway.

Why would you do something spooky like that?

First, it's because you use words that you don't understand, or you misuse words. This is more common in spoken than in written communications, since we don't have the luxury of

having a dictionary available when we talk. This type of scary mistake seems to happen a lot in television/cable news.

Here are two examples:

A political analyst/journalist who said **nonetheless** (which Webster's defines as "in spite of that") when she really meant **never mind** (which means much less or let alone).

Someone who said "from the **outset** (which means beginning or start, and can be used alone, without a modifier, such as, *from the outset*) **of...**" when he/she should have said the **onset of** (which also means beginning or commencement, and is usually used in conjunction a phrase, such as in the *onset of winter*).

It's easy to mess these up. They are very similar in meaning, and similar sounding, but yet are different words with slightly different usages and meanings.

Second, it's when you use words that are spelled similarly to what you meant to say, but are not the right word. This happens mostly in written communications, and it mostly happens because you rely on spellcheck, and you don't proofread.

Here are a couple I have seen recently:

A sentence that used **neatly** instead of **nearly**.

And even more weird, a sentence that used the word **bong** instead of **bond**.

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Don't be ghoulish—use your words carefully—and go ahead, have a happy Halloween!

I've started collecting these, and I intend to publish them once a month. I invite you to share any you find by sending me

an email at [info@deborahbrody.com](mailto:info@deborahbrody.com).

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## Closed, or just changing names?

Today, on my way to the Metro, I walked past where a Mediterranean cafe has been located for the past five years. It was closed, and in the window was a sign saying that “Amai Japanese Crepe” was coming soon.

By the way, anybody know what the hell a Japanese crepe is?

When I got back to my office, I checked on the web to see if I could figure out what happened. I first went to the cafe’s website. It’s still there. Same address. No update on the situation. Then I went to Yelp, and I noticed it said the place was “temporarily” closed but a five-star review had just been posted yesterday. Hmm. Stranger and stranger. I went back to the cafe’s website, and clicked on their Twitter feed. Last post there was from 2015. Not useful at all. Then I went to the Facebook page. I clicked on “posts,” and found one from September 22, which says this:

*Thank you everyone for your loyalty and support these past 5 years. We opened in February 2012 and strived to bring a little taste of Isreal and classic Italian espresso to our customers. Now, it’s time to look to the future. XXX will be closed as of September 22 for renovations. We will be closed for two weeks to improve and update the cafe. We look foward*

*to showing the improved us when we reopen.*

Errors above appeared in the original post. I just x'ed out the name of the restaurant. There was also a picture of the sign about the Japanese crepes. That's it. No more information. But now we know the restaurant is changing name and changing focus. What we don't know is when this will happen, or what the hell a Japanese crepe is supposed to be.

To me, this is a classic and stupid communications failure. Why a failure? Here are the mistakes I see:

1. Failure to use their website to provide updated information.
2. Failure to provide complete information on the actual site (something like: XX cafe is transforming. We aim to re-open on [date]).
3. Failure to use social media appropriately. The Twitter feed should be deleted, and they could provide updates about the renovation, some information about what they will become. Not to mention that Facebook post was from a month ago, where they claim they would re-open in two weeks.
4. Failure to consider what customers need to know. Maybe this is the biggest problem. Nowhere do you really know what is going on.

It's hard to say what will happen here. People who came to this place looking for Israeli food are not necessarily going to feel good about a Japanese crepe (whatever that may be). Passersby will think that the old place is gone, and will not necessarily think the new place is associated with the old.

As with any change, clear and precise communication is necessary. It seems that to this restaurant, communication with customers is an afterthought.

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# Two must-haves for your business website

I do a lot of research online, and I am definitely not alone. Most people conduct internet research on companies before they choose to do business with them. And this is the reason most organizations have websites, right?

And yet, how many times have you gone searching for something specific, found a few websites, visited them, only to find that few, if any, have the information you need?

Do you agree that the main point of your business website is to provide potential customers with information they need to make a buying decision? If you do agree, then you should have these two items on your business website:

## 1. Pricing

## 2. A real description of the company and its key personnel (aka "about" page)

Let's discuss each point.

*Pricing information is necessary because cost matters in*

## ***making buying decisions.***

This is a no-brainer, or should be, and yet most consulting/service industries do not list prices on their website. For example, last month I was looking for a cleaning service. Since there are many in this area, reviews and referrals matter (you don't want a cleaning service that has a track record of breaking stuff or of not dusting your chandeliers), and *so does cost*. Some cleaning services I found listed specific pricing on their sites, but many did not. Instead, some want you to call to get the estimate, and some want you to fill out online or email forms to provide you a quote.

By making pricing information difficult to obtain, you are losing potential customers. People have budgets in mind. They may be able to afford a monthly cleaning service of \$150, but not one that costs \$200. Why make those customers waste their time, *and yours*, by having a conversation about something that you can easily post on your website?

I know for many consultants there is a fear of pricing yourself out of a potential job. However, you know what you want to make from your work, don't you? Why would you want a client/customer that is not willing to pay what you think the value of your work is?

## ***People do business with people, not with vague or non-existent descriptions***

Just yesterday, I was checking out a website designer/developer's website, and guess what was missing? An "about" page. There was no bio on the designer, no information about when he started his company, or what his experience has been. Not. One. Word. Yes, he included a portfolio of websites that (supposedly) he has designed. But there is no clue as to what sort of person he is, how long he has been doing this work, and why he does it. In other words, by not having an

about page, this designer left many questions about his own ability and experience unanswered. Perhaps the one question he did answer is his philosophy on openness and transparency (apparently, not a high priority). And this is yet another reason why you need an about page: you want to build trust and credibility by showing exactly who/what you are.

But an about page has to provide real information, not the generic and jargon-filled pile of words one finds on many websites. If you are wondering what to include on your about page, think like a journalist. That is, try answering the 5Ws: why, where, when, who, what, and throw in the how too.

**What kinds of information, beyond these two points, do you need in order to make a buying decision? Please let me know in the comments.**

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## **Always aim for clarity**

Have you ever read something that left you shaking your head, where you wondered what exactly the writer was trying to say? That's what happens when the writer of what you are reading lacks the ability to communicate clearly.

It's important for your communications to be clear, to be easily understood, and not to confuse your audience. How do you achieve this type of clarity? Following are four suggestions:

- 1. Know what you are trying to say before you start writing.** Remember in high school when you were taught about a thesis and its supporting points? That lesson should be ingrained in any writer's head. Always have a thesis (your premise or argument) and why you support it. It's helpful to jot down



your thesis (for this piece—clarity is essential to communication) and then your top reasons for supporting it (for this piece I jotted down too many words, not knowing what you really want to say).

**2. Balance your assumptions.** Don't assume your audience knows too little or too much—find the middle ground that works for your specific audience. To be able to find the middle ground, you must know who is in your audience. Are they insiders? Are they the general public? How much do they know? Have you ever watched *Washington Week* on PBS? I watch it practically every Friday. One quirk they have is that they insist on spelling out every reference. If a journalist on the panel simply says "McConnell," the host quickly adds: Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. This assumes the audience won't understand the reference to McConnell and yet most people who watch *Washington Week* are fairly informed and interested in all things political.

**3. Write simply.** Often, clarity is compromised by wordiness or jargon or big words when smaller words would do just fine. It's tempting to stuff articles and blog posts with fancy words, and office speak, but what you end up doing is alienating the audience who may not be conversant in your world. So work to eliminate extra words and jargon, and use plain language instead (e.g., if you see the word "utilize" substitute "use").

**4. Reread and edit everything before you make it public.** Sometimes we write something and then look it over quickly before we hit "publish." It may make sense to us at that moment, but does it make sense to others? Taking the time to read something slowly, copy edit it, and make sure it says what you want it to say will go a long way in making sure it is clear to *others*. If possible, get another person to read your copy (a copy editor and/or proofreader).

**Always aim for clarity. If your audience doesn't get what you**

are trying to say, then you haven't communicated at all.

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## When you want to be found

Yesterday, I was browsing through books in my favorite used bookstore (where you can get most soft cover books for \$2 each, a real bargain, and most books are in great shape to boot). As I was making my way through the Fiction section, I came across Diane Ackerman's *The Zookeeper's Wife*, which is the *real* life story of a Polish woman who saved Jews during World War II, thus making it a non-fiction book. I came across a Denise Mina book that should've been housed in the Mystery section. I came across memoirs and biographies. In short, there were a lot of books that were not classified correctly and therefore shelved in the wrong place.



The used bookstore is volunteer-run, and it may be too much to ask volunteers to know what each book is or where it belongs. Since books are donated, there is no inventory. On the other hand, in a regular bookstore, books are shelved by ISBN numbers and inventories are computerized. It'd be rare that a book was shelved in the wrong place, unless a customer put it back where it didn't belong. If you were looking for a particular book, you could ask someone to look it up to see if it is available and if so, where it is located.

### **Classification is important, especially on the internet.**

The internet is more like the used bookstore than it is like the organized world of Barnes & Noble. The internet is pretty much volunteer-run and the volunteers are each website's owners. In other words, on the internet you self-classify—you put yourself on the right (or wrong) shelf.

As the website owner or manager, you choose how you want your site to look, what content to include, and what keywords to use. You choose whether you will optimize your site to be found on search engines (SEO) and whether you will do it well (use the right tools, or hire a professional) or not.

When you want to be found, especially online, you have to know how to describe yourself and where people would look for you. You have to know how you are classified and what keywords people use to find you.

### **You must understand yourself and your market.**

In the used bookstore, there are some volunteers who are avid readers, some who are aces at alphabetization and organization, and some who just want to help but have no clues. The volunteers who can alphabetize, organize *and* know books well are the ones who know the right place to shelve a book.

You have to understand exactly what to do, and how the world

classifies you. You may think that you do one thing (like Mattress Firm thinks it sells “sleep solutions”) while most customers see you differently (customers shop for mattresses not sleep solutions). It may be tempting to figure out some fancy description to help you stand out, but unless you classify yourself correctly and use the more common keywords searchers would use, you will not be found.

**Don't be the memoir languishing in the fiction section. Classify your website correctly and use the right keywords.**

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## **Care matters more than marketing**

A few weeks ago, I dropped my old Samsung smartphone, rendering it useless. Panicked at the thought of not being able to check Facebook on the fly (kidding), I ran over to the ATT store nearest me. There, a very young person pretending to be a customer service agent, did *not* help me get a phone.

### **Here's why care matters**

First, I had a contact lens emergency. I asked to use the restroom to deal with it. The young lady said no restroom was available. Evidently, ATT does not care about the well being and comfort of visitors to its stores.

Second, I asked her to see a Galaxy S7. She told me they don't have them in stock. Only the more expensive Galaxy S8s. I don't want to spend the extra money I told her. She then said maybe it could be shipped to me, but that it would take a week. A week? Without a phone? I asked her if she could check availability at nearby retailers. No, she said, she couldn't

possibly do that. Could she expedite shipping then? No, she couldn't do that either.

Third, and finally, I said: "What if I go over to the Sprint or T-Mobile store then? I am not under contract with ATT." She shrugged. She didn't care. I left.

### **Another young person without a clue**

I drove up the street to BestBuy. There, the store did have some Galaxy S7s in stock. However, the young (notice a theme here) "sales" person was not super helpful. He did get me a phone, but only after telling me several times that I should get the S8. He also tried to scare me into getting GeekSquad protection. And into getting a screen protector, case, charger, etc. In short, he was being a real pain. And to boot, he would not even try to get my contacts and other information off my old phone. I am not even going into the whole story but suffice it to say that the 24-year-old had a horrible attitude.

### **Being helpful and trying to resolve problems goes a very long way**

I ended up speaking to the kid's manager, who promised to speak to him and to help me out. The next day, the much nicer (and older) manager spent nearly two hours with me, getting the stuff off the old phone and transferring it to my new phone and to a flash drive. He saved the day for me, and gave me a much more positive view of BestBuy.

### **Complaining to ATT garnered zero action**

I called ATT and after dealing with the most annoying robot, I got through to a customer care agent. I told her I had a complaint about the store I went to. She put me through to a manager who didn't see a problem, didn't even ask what store it was or the name of the employee. I then tweeted the wrongly named @attcares. No care there either.

## **Is all well that ends well?**

In the end, I have a working phone. I have my contacts. I have my photos. I don't have voice mail but that is the subject for another day.

ATT can market all they want but unless they start showing some care, I will not stick with them as a customer. Their Twitter "customer service" is slow to respond, and that makes it nearly useless. Their customer service via phone has gone down hill. If you have a problem with ATT, it seems you are on your own.

We are fine with any company until there is a problem that the company will not *try* to solve. If a company shows genuine care (like the BestBuy manager did), you are willing to overlook the problem. If a company does not show care (like ATT), you are not willing to give it a second chance.

What do you think? Do you stick with companies that treat you poorly? How important for you is it to get good customer service?