

# 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.**

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## **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.

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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](#).

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## **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?

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# 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.

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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.

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## **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.

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## **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.

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## **4-step plan to achieve marketing success in 2018**

We are only four days into the new year, and there is plenty of time ahead to re-calibrate or re-focus your marketing

efforts to achieve maximum success in 2018. You can also use this time and planning to create a completely new marketing strategy. To help you make the most of this opportunity, I am offering you four steps to get you on the right track.

### **Step 1: REVIEW**

Look back at your marketing efforts in 2017. What did you do? Social media marketing? Content marketing? List all your marketing activities, such as newsletters, blog posts, video, social media promotions, advertising, etc. Be sure to include specifics, such as what vendors and technology you used (e.g., Constant Contact or MailChimp, Hootsuite or Tweetdeck, etc.) You may also want to incorporate how much these activities cost you, for example, how much you spent on subscription-based services, video production, content production, and so forth.

### **Step 2: BENCHMARK**

How do you know how far you've come if you don't know where you started? Benchmarking at specific intervals or times of the year is a great way to measure your progress (or lack thereof). To do this, create a simple table in Excel or in Word. The first column will list the indicators you want to track. Input the numbers for the indicators you are tracking under a second column headed with the date you collected the information. Add another column for the next date you will revisit these numbers. You could do this on a quarterly, semi-annual, or annual basis, depending on your business plan.

To figure out what to benchmark, think about the different components of your marketing plan you reviewed in the first step: content marketing, digital/social media marketing, print, etc. What are some key performance indicators (KPIs) within those components?

Some possible indicators are:

- Revenue
- Social media likes/followers (broken down by channel)
- Newsletter subscribers/open rates
- Website conversion rate
- Number of visitors to the website
- Number of customers/clients served

### **Step 3: ANALYZE AND ASSESS**

Looking back at your efforts in 2017, where did you spend the most time and effort? What worked the best? What worked the least? Where was the biggest return on investment (ROI)? What vendors were worth it? Did you have trouble using certain technology? Is there a better way to do what you have been doing? In terms of social media/digital strategy, what tactics earned the most attention/engagement?

Your aim here is to recognize patterns, successes, and failures.

### **Step 4: CREATE YOUR 2018 ROADMAP**

Now that you know what you did and whether it worked or not, you can decide what to continue and what to eliminate. Perhaps you want to add more budget/time to your email marketing. Perhaps you want to scale back your efforts on social media channels. Looking at your benchmarks, what numbers do you want to change? How will you get there? Perhaps you want to increase your website conversion rate. What activities will achieve the results you want? Are there areas you want to explore? Perhaps you've heard that voice search will be big in 2018 (it will). What do you need to do to make your SEO responsive to these new challenges?

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I'd love to hear what you are planning for 2018 and where you

will be spending your marketing dollars. Please share in the comments or email me. I may include your responses in a future blog post.

**Happy New Year and good luck with your 2018 planning!**

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## What's a comma worth?

I got this postcard last week from a real estate agent who is selling a townhouse near me:

Just Listed.  
And Inviting  
You In.

[redacted] Court, Rockville, MD  
\$51,900,000

Open House Sunday, December 17th 1 - 4  
Call me at 301-[redacted] for details.

Beautiful Garage Townhouse!

Invite us in. We'll bring results.® Weicher Realtor

Seems this lovely townhouse costs more than \$51 million.

Yes, it is an error, but that's what happens when you don't bother to proofread your work. Numbers are especially tricky, and in this case, comma placement (and lack of periods) makes a several *million* dollar mistake.

Would you trust a real estate agent who doesn't bother to check details on a listing before she prints hundreds of postcards and mails them out? Would you want someone like this reviewing your contract for a home? Putting in an offer in your name?

Don't lose millions and your credibility. Take a few minutes to proofread your work. And if you can't, hire someone who can.

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**Happy holidays to our Caffeinated Ideas readers! We'll be back with more great content in 2018.**

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## **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.