

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

It's all about being informed

If you were canvassing for a political candidate, would you place a paper brochure or flyer promoting the candidate outside in the rain? I hope you wouldn't, but that's just what happened around here today.

The forecast called for lots of rain

This morning, when I opened my front door to get my morning

paper, I found a soggy brochure on my doorstep. The brochure was for a guy running for county executive in Montgomery County where I live. I couldn't tell you much about this candidate because the brochure was practically dissolving from all the rain we've been getting. I am not sure when the brochure was placed there, but I do know the forecast called for rain every single day this week, to the extent we are under a flash flood warning. And even if you didn't hear the forecast, all you had to do is step outside, feel the rain drops and look at the gray skies and know that the weather didn't look good.

But you have to care to know the forecast

A whole lot of effort and money was wasted here, seemingly because people didn't know it was raining. Or perhaps they just didn't care. I don't know which it is but if you are doing marketing, it pays to be informed.



The solution is simple: Do your research

In this case, whoever was in charge of the canvassing, should've looked at the weather and scheduled it for a day when it wouldn't be raining. Or perhaps, should have considered alternative means to get the brochure out.

If you were planning an event, you'd want to check the calendar to see if there was a holiday or other big event on the date you were considering.

If you were planning to launch a product, you'd want to make sure production is on schedule.

You have to ask the right questions

You always have to ask questions...but you have to know what to ask about. In order to do this, you may have to do some research, talk to experts, ask other people. In short, you need to gather information so that you can ask the right questions.

For example, you may have heard that the EU's General Data Protection Regulation or GDPR is going into effect on May 25, 2018. Some questions you may have are these:

- What exactly is GDPR and does it affect me?
- What do I have to do (if anything) to be in compliance?
- Why is this important?

If you don't ask these questions, you may not be in compliance with GDPR when it goes into effect next week.

For any marketer or communicator, information is the key. So do your research and ask the right questions before you undertake any action.

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.

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.

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 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.

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.

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.