

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.

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**.

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.

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.

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.

Does PBS get the support of viewers like you?

We need your support and we will interrupt your viewing until you give us money!

This seems to be the PBS mission during its pledge drive

Currently, it's the upteenth day during the upteenth time this year that my local PBS station, WETA, is looking for support from viewers. It may not be endless, but it sure feels like it.

Pledge month (?) is the time when the station starts playing “specials” that have been played dozens of times before, and interrupting them every fifteen minutes to ask for your support. In return, you will get any number of mugs/bags/videos/books based on the size of your contribution. Also, every other show seems to get interrupted—the Newshour,

Washington Week, and most egregiously, the finale of the Great British Baking Show.

Enough!

Viewers like me do not like to watch tired, old “specials.” Viewers like me hate having shows interrupted multiple times by the same talking heads giving repetitious pitches on why to give to the station. Viewers like me do not want mugs or tote bags. Viewers like me click off PBS the instant this pledge madness starts.

How can this model work today?

Here’s a newsflash for PBS: Times have changed.

Hundreds of viewing options

All TV channels are under intense competition—both for viewers and for advertising dollars. This is because viewers have many more options for entertainment than ever before: There are hundreds of cable and streaming channels, and also an internet chock-full of stuff to watch, read, react to and interact with.

It’s an on-demand world

With DVRs and/or access to content on demand, people can watch shows on whatever schedule they choose. They can ignore advertising (and pledge drives).

There’s a streaming channel for that

It used to be that you could only watch British shows like Downton Abbey or Inspector Morse on PBS. Now, you can stream them on specialized British TV/movies channels, and even watch them on Netflix.

Watch TV wherever you are, whenever you want

Smartphones and tablets can access the internet anywhere and

everywhere. And users of these devices can buy/rent/download all sorts of entertainment to watch even when there is no internet access.

Interrupting viewer with a push-message is really old school

These days, inbound marketing is in favor. That's when potential customers/supporters come to you because you are providing great content/reasons for them to interact and buy/support from you. Forcing yourself on viewers, like the pledge drive on PBS does, is the complete opposite. It assumes a static audience that does not have any option but to sit there and listen to a sales pitch. It assumes that pushing a message is the best way to get action. It's the old way of doing things. And it may help PBS shed viewers, not gain them.

Is annoying viewers for a \$60 donation the best way to keep PBS afloat?

When you are aiming for lots of small donations, you have to do a lot more work. In this case, it means interrupting viewing more times, more often. It gets annoying. It's a turn-off. And I don't believe it's effective. I think it would be far more effective to concentrate on getting and retaining big, corporate or foundation sponsorships.

I understand PBS wants community support too. Perhaps instead of asking viewers to donate, PBS could emphasize obtaining a yearly membership with (real) special benefits (currently this is not clear on the PBS website). Instead of having pledge drives, PBS could include a 15-second ad/message for membership before popular shows.

What do you think? Do you watch PBS? Do you support PBS? Why or why not?

Check for accuracy STAT

The other night, I heard a loud, scratching noise in my chimney. It sounded as if an animal had gotten in. My first thought (and fear) was that a small bat was in there and it would then come into the house. Since it was close to midnight, there was nothing I could do except check the website for the local animal trapping company that I've seen working in my neighborhood. According to Google results, their office opened at 7:00 a.m. The website listed an 800 number, and four local-area numbers. I decided to call first thing to see if they would send someone right away.

At 7:00 the next morning I called up the company. I got a message saying their offices opened at 8:00 a.m. Their Google My Business listing was wrong and their website did not list hours at all.

Sometimes companies spend more time and money on developing new marketing or on sales pitches, and they forget to check the basics. So, before you do anything else marketing-related, check your current stuff for accuracy. Do it now. Seriously.

What to check:

- Business name (is it complete, spelled correctly?)
- Address/es (accurate, current?)
- Telephone number/s (accurate, current?)
- Website URL
- Hours/days of operation
- Staff names/positions/contact information

- Email addresses
- Pricing information

Where to check:

- Your website
 - Your social media pages (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, etc.)
 - Google results/Google maps/Google My Business
 - Yelp and other review or listing sites (e.g., Angie's List) you appear in
 - Printed materials (business cards, brochures, letterhead, postcards, etc.)
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In the end, I was able to get the animal trapping company to come to my house later in the day. They checked the chimney and nothing was there (thank goodness!). They put some mesh on the chimney cap to prevent bats or birds from getting in.

This company has plenty of business around here. I've seen their trucks before as squirrels are constantly getting into attics (and bats are always in the belfry). They certainly have developed brand recognition. But you only call them when you need them and it is usually an urgent situation. Having multiple phone numbers and inaccurate hours is not helpful for anybody needing their services.

Any organization needs to consider what information potential users/customers/donors need to have, and then make sure that information is easily *available and accurate*. It just makes good marketing/communications sense.