

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.

Small issues ==> bigger communications problems

In the past several weeks, I've noticed a bunch of small communications issues with different organizations. None of them is big enough to merit a blog post, but they do cause bigger communications problems.

Making it extra hard to reach you

I met a graphic designer at an event a couple of weeks ago. I sent her a follow up email, and got an automated reply back from her email service telling me it didn't recognize me and I would have to reply to the reply, so that I could be whitelisted. I've never seen that before, and I get why she does it. We are all bombarded by spam and other unsolicited email. But when you add an extra step to contacting you, especially when you've given me your personal email on a card, you are creating an obstacle to communication and slowing down any potential business. You have to balance accessibility with the desire for less email. I think if you are a business, you must be accessible.

Not including crucial information

The other day I visited microsite for an upcoming conference. It did not list the venue where the conference would be taking place, just the city and state. I've seen some conference websites that don't list the full date of the conference. And many don't list the price, but force you to hit the register button to find out how much it costs. If you are considering attending any event, you need certain information—where, when, how much and why. If your event page or site does not include crucial information, you are just making it hard for people to

decide to attend your event.

Email from unknown senders

The other day I got an email from someone named Orlando. My first instinct was to delete, but something about the headline made me open it. It turns out that Orlando is a new employee at an organization from which I get a newsletter. And it was an organizational newsletter. I will never understand why organizations think it's a good idea to send email from individuals rather than the organization. Unless you're well known already, most people will not recognize you as the new CEO or communications director of an organization.

If your organization recently rebranded or changed its name, you may have to send an initial email from your old name. Last year, I received an email from an organization I had never heard of and I was on the brink of hitting delete. It was communications related, so I figured I must have met someone from that organization at some point, but I wasn't sure. It turns out that it was a new name for an old organization.

Opening external links in the same window

For the life of me, I don't understand why so many organizations want to lose visitors to their websites. And yet, it happens more often than not than when you click on a link, such as the Twitter feed or LinkedIn profile, you are transported out of the organization's website to the other website. It doesn't take too much coding knowledge to have links open in new windows. That way, visitors can still be on your site and view the outside site.

Remember user experience, always.

All of these issues point to one overarching theme: user experience. What do users (visitors to your website, potential customers, potential supporters) experience when they interact with your communications? Are you considering what users need

in order to do business with you? As the small issues I described above show, many organizations are not considering their users at all. And that's a big communications problem.

Successful companies are customer-focused

United learns the hard way what's important

As you no doubt have seen by now, United Airlines has been forced to make several changes in the wake of the customer abuse incident seen around the world (where a passenger was forcibly removed from a plane and injured in the process). United has now released a report that concludes it let company policies trump customer's rights, and is now making changes to focus on the customer. You can read more details in this [Washington Post article](#): United dragging report: 'Our review shows that many things went wrong that day.' Also, today, United placed a full-page ad in the Washington Post (and I assume other large dailies) apologizing for its actions and outlining the policy changes.

It took very negative publicity and its consequences to make United realize that customers are the reason for being of any company. Without customers, a company simply does not exist. We know that companies that are more customer focused are also better regarded and therefore more successful. Southwest Airlines comes to mind.

UX is about your customers

All this brings me to UX (user experience) and how important it is. UX is being customer- focused when it comes to designing your website/app. If you don't consider UX when you design, you are not being customer-friendly. It's that simple.

Verizon FIOS On Demand versus Fandango Movies on Roku

Take the example of Verizon FIOS' On Demand screen versus Roku's Fandango Movies screen.

Verizon re-designed their On Demand screen a couple of months ago. They made fonts and images smaller, they crowded the images together and they changed the categories. Adding to that, the background is dark, making it hard to see the writing. To find out whether a movie is available for purchase or rental, you have to click on the title and only then will you be able to see what it costs.

Fandango has several categories on the left hand side of the screen, starting with "New movies to buy" and New movies to rent." The background is a light color, the images are slightly bigger than Verizon's, and easy to read. Just by scrolling through the titles you can see the price of the movie, its Rotten Tomatoes rating, its MPAA rating, and its length.

Fandango most definitely considered UX when designing its movie screen. It's clear they thought about how customers search for movies, and what information (cost, time commitment, ratings) they need to make a decision. In contrast, the Verizon On Demand screen UX is plain horrible. It's hard to search, hard to find the information you need, and in my opinion, it's just ugly. Oh, and Fandango movie rentals cost less than Verizon's.

Think about your customers, and it will pay off

In my case, I have been renting movies from Fandango and not from Verizon. I definitely find the Fandango interface easier

to deal with. Additionally, I voiced my concerns to Verizon, and so far, they've made no changes. I don't know if the redesign has affected sales, but I wouldn't be surprised.

Your customers and their experience with your company/brand/organization has to be your first concern. If customers are mistreated, they simply will not come back. And in this age of social media, any negative publicity is amplified. Your customer's bad experience can be shared over and over.

Being customer-focused and thinking about their user experience will go a long a way in making any organization successful.

Where is the soap dish? (Or why UX is important.)

Several weeks ago, I told you all about the awful experience that passes itself off as the Holiday Inn Express. One of the smaller, yet super annoying, things wrong there was the fact

that in the (cramped) bathroom, there was no soap dish. A stand holding the usual hotel toiletries, including soap bars, was cluttering the minimal counter space, but there was no place to put the soap once you opened the plastic wrapping. The soap kept sliding to the floor after I washed my hands.



Soap by Radio.Guy on Flickr

Just a few weeks before my stay at the HIE, I stayed at a boutique inn in the same city. Among the many amenities was a soap dish in the bathroom. It was a nice touch. It showed the inn had considered the guest's needs (and that someone somewhere had actually used soap to wash their hands at some point, which apparently the managers at the HIE never had done).

It's really very simple: You have to consider people's needs and how they do things. Providing a great hotel experience OR an effective website **DEPENDS** on whether you are considering your end user (your guest, your audience). How does a person use your product? What does a person need to navigate your site?

Have you ever been to a website where you can't find what you are looking for? I bet you have! Those websites are generally cluttered with tons of information that is not organized for

the user but rather for the idiosyncrasies of the various organizational departments (Sales & Promotion says we need to include this, Legal says we have to include that).

The other day I was looking for a blog on an organizational website and I didn't see it where you would normally. I figured it did not exist. I was wrong. It was under "publications." Why? Because the Publications Department is in charge of the blog. Publications clearly doesn't understand website visitors. Those visitors aren't familiar with (nor do they care about) your organizational hierarchy!

This is where user experience or UX comes in. UX specialists are there to make your website friendly to visitors. If a visitor wants to find your calendar of events, he or she will find it easily instead of clicking through various places. There are ways to make website navigation easy and sensible.

Perhaps you are a small organization that can't afford to hire a usability expert to assess and fix your website. Just think about the soap dish. Do you have what your visitors need? Where would they easily find it?

If you fail to think about how people actually use your product or service, then you will fail to serve their needs.