

5 big communications lessons from 2013

We are constantly learning, and ideally, making changes based on what we learn. During 2013, I learned from clients, from professional development events, from Twitter and life in general. Following are my five big communications lessons.

1. Write down communications and marketing goals and prioritize them.

You have to know what you want to accomplish in order to be able to do so. You also have to realize that you may not be able to reach every goal, which is why you need to prioritize those objectives. What is the most important thing that you want to accomplish in the new year? What would be nice to get done, but is not your top priority? If you don't prioritize, you will run around like crazy trying to juggle conflicting actions.

Where this came from: I have seen too many people/organizations that have no clear vision of what is most important and therefore, try to accomplish too much with too few resources. This is especially true at nonprofits.

2. Strategy should decide tactics, not the other way around.

Don't confuse tactics with strategy. You shouldn't let the allure of a certain tactic drive your communications. This is the "shiny object syndrome." Just because Pinterest is hot, doesn't mean it is the right place for your organization. You must think "big picture." What are you trying to accomplish and what is the best way to get there?

Where this came from: Many people and organizations get enamored with what others are doing, even if it doesn't fit in

with their mission or goals. A tactic is just that—a way to achieve the larger picture goal or strategy. If you haven't defined the strategy, you can't define the best tactics.

3. Consider usability, SEO and content strategy before creating or re-launching a website.

Search engine changes such as Google's new Hummingbird algorithm have made having an organized, updated and useful website non-negotiable. Spending time planning a website, and considering all the stakeholders, will pay off.

Where this came from: Every year there are some changes afoot in "web world." This year was definitely one for search engines, which in turn has put more onus on usability (UX) and content strategy. A website has to reflect the larger organization and can't be controlled by just one small group of people. Just because IT has always handled it, doesn't mean that it is a good idea.

4. Communications presents the entire organization.

This year I consulted with an organization that thought the blog and website should be part of the publications department and other marketing communications should be handled by the corporate communications department. And those two departments didn't interact. That's a communications failure.

Why this is important: Too many organizations fail to think about how they are perceived by the public and where that public might be. You can't be doing all sorts of media relations work on one end, and have an intern doing social media and not discussing what you are trying to achieve for the organization. Anything the public has access to about your organization, be it social media, your blog, your latest brochure, a press release or an interview with your company president—it is all communications. It should be unified and it should have one overarching goal—present your organization's best face to the public.

5. Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

Just because something is not perfect does not mean it is not good. Blog posts are a perfect case in point. You can't spend hours perfecting a post—that's counterproductive. Better to post and then fix, than have the inevitable "paralysis by analysis."

Where this plays in: Some organizations can't move forward because they are afraid of making a mistake. So they cling to the old and fail to embrace change. Sometimes you won't know that something is not working until you launch it (I'd say Healthcare.gov is a perfect case in point). It's easier to fix something than to start from zero.

What did you take away from 2013? I'd love to hear from you about the lessons you learned from clients or from within your organization.

I'll be back next week with some marketing/communications resolutions. Until then, I wish you all a very happy holiday!