

# A tale of two organizations and five best practices

To paraphrase the opening line of *A Tale of Two Cities*, it was the best of practices and the worst of practices. Let me explain.

In the past few weeks, I've attended two remarkably similar events put on by two different organizations. Both organizations are membership-based, advocacy/non-profits, and are local affiliates of a national organization. One organization clearly followed best practices, while the other appeared to have no idea how to make the most of a successful event.

## Organization A

Event description: Luncheon featuring a *Washington Post* reporter discussing the challenges of covering the Trump Administration. Cost was \$35.

Sign up: On the organization's website, taken to an outside website (PayPal) for payment. Receipt sent from PayPal but no acknowledgment from organization. No information or email list sign up captured.

Reminder for the event: None.

Follow up after the event: None.

## Organization B

Event: Cocktail reception followed by panel discussion, featuring three White House correspondents, about the challenges of covering the Trump Administration. Cost was \$36.

Sign up: Through Eventbrite, which allows for email capture, branding, and payment on one page. (There are other benefits

to using Eventbrite, including ability to sign in people, print labels, be listed on an events page, and others.) Tickets with event information sent from Eventbrite.

Reminder: Eventbrite sends a reminder two days ahead of the event.

Follow up: Personalized thank you email from the organization's development director, including a program survey, and encouraging involvement in the organization and attendance at future events.

## **Five best practices**

### **1. Have a hook**

Kudos to both these organizations for their choice of speakers. Both events were very informative, lively and interesting. **Hosting an interesting, topical event is a big draw for members and is attractive to non-members.**

### **2. Use the right online tools**

There are lots of online tools available to organizations, at all different prices, for various functions (event management, surveys, time management). They offer functionality such as being able to generate reports, charge credit cards, build email lists, communicate with attendees, and so forth. **Using the right online tool will let you increase your organization's efficiency through automation and increased functionality.**

### **3. Build your email list**

If you are a membership or donor-based organization it becomes extremely important to build and expand your email list. Having an event is a great way to attract new people, so it makes sense to get their email address so you can keep in touch. **Automatically adding people that have signed up for an**

**event to your email list is easy and smart.**

#### **4. Follow up after the event**

Presumably, by hosting an event, you have a goal for it. This goal could be to increase awareness, or increase your membership, or attract donations, etc. **Following up after the event, reminding people of what you do and how they can be involved will go a long way to achieving your goal.**

#### **5. Survey your audience**

If you want to continue to have successful programs, you'll need to know what attendees liked and didn't like. **Asking attendees to rate your program and give suggestions is a great way to improve your future events.**

## **It really was the best of times and the worst of times**

Organization B was much more sophisticated and tech-savvy than Organization A. It used online tools to make things easier, and it seemed to be clearer on the outcomes it wanted. Even though both organizations advocate, only Organization B had the foresight to build their email list to make advocacy happen.

Organization A, in effect, has put the onus on me if I want to be more involved in the future. If I want to see what programs are coming up, I will have to visit their website. Organization B is making my involvement and support easier. Since I will be getting B's emails about advocacy and events, I will be able to involved if I choose, without having to take an extra step to do it.

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# Can they read it?

Perhaps you have a great tagline or you have a fantastic, limited time offer, and yet you are getting no response. It could be that few people are enticed by your offer, or that there is little demand for your product, or, maybe, just maybe, it is that that they (quite literally) *can't* see it.

## What is it that you do?

Yesterday, I was in my car driving behind a commercial SUV, which had the name of the company written in green letters on the back of the truck. But for the life of me, I couldn't, make out what this company did because I could not read the line below the company name. I kept trying to figure out as I was driving a car length or so behind the truck. I finally came to a stop right behind this SUV, and it was only then that I was able to read the line saying it did plumbing. This company probably spent some money to have their company name, telephone and website painted on the back of their company SUV, and yet, it was done with such small letters that it was practically useless. Unless you were stopped right behind it, you would not know what it was.

If you've driven around during the day, you will have seen any number of commercial trucks and cars, each with the name of the company painted on the side of the vehicle. If the name and service are prominent, and easy to read from a distance, there can be big benefits. It creates brand recognition. It can also be free advertising. Say your heating system is on the fritz, and you see a truck for a heating company, you may make note of the name, and even the website and/or telephone number.

## **Crammed with content, harder to read**

Verizon FIOS recently redesigned its On Demand screen. Everything is now more compact (about half of the previous iteration), and all sorts of information is crammed on the screen. To be able to fit all this stuff on the screen, the font size was reduced. The result is that it is hard to read the titles of the movies. And they also added the extra step of making you click on each title to see more information, including cost. It has become very frustrating for me to deal with this new On Demand screen, and as a result, I am no longer going there to see what movies are available.

I am pretty certain that Verizon embarked on this redesign without consulting its users. I wonder if the company has seen any change in the amount of On Demand content users rent/buy now. Based on my experience, I would bet fewer people are getting stuff On Demand.

## **Can your audience see it? Can they read it?**

You must keep **readability and visibility** top of mind when you design or redesign any marketing material. If your audience cannot read your material, or cannot see it properly, then they cannot interact with it.

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# **The death of copy editing?**

Yesterday, Bill Walsh, a copy editor for the *Washington Post* and author of three books on language, died. He was far too young—only 55—and a victim of cancer. He was liked and respected by his colleagues, copy editors everywhere, and by people who appreciate clean, readable copy (myself included). His obituary in the Post is a worthwhile read.

A couple of years ago, I had the good fortune to attend a copy editing workshop that Mr. Walsh was leading. He talked about his pet peeves (“armed gunmen” for example) and talked extensively about comma and hyphen use, among other topics. After the session, somebody asked him why there were so many copy errors in the *Washington Post*. He lamented that the sheer quantity of copy (all that digital stuff) made it impossible to keep up. And of course, his department had suffered cuts.

More and more, news outlets have fewer copy editors or even none at all. Writers/reporters are expected to edit their own work, which, as anybody who has written anything, is damn near impossible to do successfully.

Copy editing is not proofreading. Proofreading is about making sure that words are spelled correctly and/or are in the right place. Copy editing is far more than that. Copy editing is about making sure that the work makes sense and that it is accurate. It strives to improve readability and accessibility.

Bill Walsh was a celebrity copy editor (he had a following!). His insight and wit are irreplaceable. I hope that his main skill—copy editing—does not die along with him. He certainly transmitted his knowledge through his books and his workshops. But he couldn’t stop the powers that be from making cuts to copy editing staff.

Without copy editors, readers are shortchanged with text that can be mistake-ridden and inaccurate. Copy editors are valuable and perform necessary work inside news organizations and indeed, any organization that puts out “content.”

Rest in peace, Bill Walsh. You and your skills will be sorely missed.

P.S. I don’t have a copy editor, so any mistakes (and I am sure there are a few) are mine and mine alone.

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# A website mantra to help you achieve marketing nirvana

A mantra is defined by Merriam-Webster as a mystical formula of invocation or incantation. In Sanskrit, a mantra is a phrase, word, or sound that is repeated during meditation to help practitioners focus.

If you want to increase your website's performance and focus, I have come up with a mantra for you:

**Make it easier to find.**

If you concentrate on this mantra, you will have a website where people have an easier time finding the information they want.

If you don't, you will make your website users so frustrated that they will leave your website and will end up not doing business with you.

## **Searching and searching**

This morning, I decided to research CD rates at a local bank. First, I had to put in my zip code "to get localized results." Then, I had to navigate to a "Savings and CDs" page. Then, I had to click on "Savings Accounts and CD Options." Then, I had to click on "Certificates of Deposit," and then scroll down to find the link for "Interest Rates." To sum it up, I had to go through five different steps/clicks to find the information I was seeking.

## **What do most people need and want to know?**

I think going through five steps to find simple information

is too many steps. It can be discouraging to have to keep clicking through various pages to get what you need. In the case of the bank, I assume the one thing most people research are rates. Every industry and business has to answer some questions more frequently than others. Restaurants, for example, may need to provide their menu, hours and location. Banks need to provide a list of services, current rates, hours and locations.

**The information your website visitors request the most, and need the most, needs to be easiest to find. It's that simple.**

So repeat after me: make it easier to find. There, are you feeling a bit more zen?

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## **How to show you really don't care**

**"Your sport is reserved."**

That was the headline in an email I got from a marketing agency confirming my attendance at an event it was hosting. Obviously, it should have read "your spot is reserved." Is this an egregious mistake? Not really, but it is careless. It shows nobody bothered to proofread this email. And remember, this is coming from a marketing agency, which presumably creates accurate copy for its clients.

More careless yet was a letter I received from my HOA's management company regarding board elections. The letter stated that the elections would be held on February 7. The

accompanying ballot said the elections would take place on February 28. Every homeowner was welcomed to attend (if only we knew which the correct date was).

## **Mistakes are everywhere**

I've been noticing these types of mistakes more and more. Yesterday, a tweet from a leading women's organization talked about principals instead of principles. Another letter from my HOA referenced the wrong community.

I am sure you've noticed it too because it has become rampant. I am not sure what's causing this but I believe it has to do with the expectations of instant communication and the ongoing rush we are experiencing. We've seen news organizations that rush to be first instead of taking the time to ensure accuracy.

## **Avoiding mistakes takes a bit of effort**

It takes time to proofread documents. It takes time to ensure all information (dates, times, locations) is accurate. It involves an extra step and perhaps another person.

## **And not making the effort communicates lack of care**

Remember, not taking the appropriate steps to make sure your communications are clear and accurate shows that you don't care about your reader.

**What do you do to make sure your communications materials are accurate? Do you follow a checklist? Enlist a proofreader? Please let me know in the comments.**

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# 5 Ways You Aren't Showing Love for Your Customers



On this day in which we celebrate love and friendship (by buying overpriced roses and boxes of chocolate natch), I wish that more marketers would show love for their customers. Instead, we see many of the following behaviors :

## 1. Not delivering what you promise

Special discount? “Free” consultation? These are some of the promises that marketers make and then don't deliver on. Another is the “bait and switch” blog post/article, in which the marketer tells you that you will learn something or get something, but instead it's a sales pitch for a webinar or a

product. And one that I have been seeing a lot is when you go to the “fees” tab on a website only to find some gobbledygook about value or some such, but nothing showing firm numbers.

When you don’t deliver what you promise you are not showing love for your customers, but rather the opposite.

## **2. Not providing essential information or making it very hard to find**

I am talking about restaurant websites that don’t include hours or menus, businesses that don’t list customer service numbers or emails, brochures or business cards without addresses, telephones, website URLs or other essential contact information.

When you don’t provide information your customers need to do business with you, it shows you don’t value them at all.

## **3. Using small or otherwise hard to read fonts**

Even if you have a wonderfully informative website or brochure, which includes all the right information, if your customer can’t read it, it’s for naught. It’s a waste, and it shows that you haven’t taken your customers needs into consideration.

## **4. Sending too many emails**

How many times are you going to tell your customers about your sale? I’d say twice a day every day is probably too much. So is sending ten emails urging potential donors to please give before some deadline (end of the year, your fiscal year, full moon). I’d add that too many asks in general are not good business (I am looking at you PBS with the constant pledge weeks that in reality are pledge months).

When you don't consider that you are overwhelming your customers with information, you are showing very little regard for them. That's not loving.

## **5. Not remembering who already is a customer**

Have you ever received an email, clicked on a link on that email which takes you to a website that has a form as a gatekeeper? The marketer who sent that email didn't care that you were already a customer and had already signed up for emails. That's lazy and uncaring. Also, it isn't very effective because it doesn't promote more signups, in fact, it could do the opposite.

This is by no means a complete list of ways in which marketers fail to show their love for customers. Which would you add?

**With that, I wish my dear readers a very happy Valentine's Day. May it be full of all that makes you happy.**

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## **5 Email Marketing Mistakes You Need To Fix Right Now**

Email marketing is still an incredibly effective marketing tool, *if* you are doing it correctly. Sadly, that's a big if. Often, marketers make the following five mistakes. Are you?

Here are five email marketing mistakes that may be affecting your campaign's performance.

## **1. Not getting permission**

Are you sending out your email marketing that haven't signed up for it? Then not only are you making a crucial mistake, you are also running afoul of the CAN-SPAM law. This is huge mistake that you must stop right away.

## **2. Sending image-only emails**

Did you know that Outlook and many other email programs do not show images until the user authorizes their download? This means that if your email is all images, and no plain text, your recipients will not see anything except a bunch of red xes. Don't make your recipients work so hard! Send both text and images.

## **3. Sending too frequently or too many emails**

When people sign up for your email marketing, they are indicating interest in getting information from you. However, they are not indicating they want their email box to be flooded with your stuff. And yet, some marketers feel that reach is not enough to cut through the clutter, and frequency is needed. Excessive frequency will not cut through the clutter, instead it may get you cut off entirely.

## **4. Not checking your analytics**

How many people open your emails? How many click on links? How many bounces are you getting? If you don't know the answers to these questions, you aren't checking your analytics. You are missing out on valuable information that can help guide your future email marketing efforts.

## **5. Not cleaning up your list**

Periodically, you should go through your list. You should pay

special attention to recipients that are not opening your email. If they've been on your list for a long time, keeping them on does not improve your email marketing. You could try sending them an email asking them if they wish to remain on your list or whether there is information that they need from you and aren't getting. If you get no response, then delete them from your list. Getting rid of these users will actually help increase your open rate.

How many of these email marketing mistakes are you committing? Which mistakes would you add?

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## **If you don't get it, you don't get it.**

The *Washington Post* runs an advertising campaign with the slogan "if you don't get it, you don't get it." And on Monday, I did not get my print copy of the *Post*. I called the re-delivery number and left a message. Five hours later, I had not yet received a replacement copy so I called again, and left another message, asking for a call back. Then I went to the online complaints, and left two messages—one about the missed delivery and one about another delivery issue I had during my end-of-year vacation.

### **I didn't get it**

I heard nothing from the *Post*. Not one word. No call back and no redelivered paper. No apology. No credit. No nothing.

### **Subscriptions matter**

The *Washington Post* has seen an increase in digital

subscribers and a decrease in print subscribers. This isn't surprising since most people seem to prefer to read their news online. However, in terms of advertising sales, which is what pays the bills at the *Post* and most every other newspaper, circulation numbers are what sets advertising rates. Fewer print subscribers means smaller circulation numbers, which means lower advertising rates. Obviously, the less the *Post* charges Macy's and the various other advertisers, the less revenue it generates.

### **Disregard is disrespect**

So subscriptions matter. And yet the *Post* continues to treat its subscribers with, if not outright disdain, complete disregard. Prices are increased every few months, credits are no longer given even though the print subscription charges for delivery costs, and customer service has been outsourced to Asia, where the agents barely speak English and don't know K Street from Pennsylvania Avenue.

The Washington *Post* would prefer if you never called them, so they've created an online account/customer service portal. Except it sucks. Every time you want to do something, you have to sign in, and then somehow, you are signed out of your digital subscription. And not everything works. I tried to change my vacation hold dates, and was not able to. I had to call an unhelpful customer service agent.

When I got home from vacation, I discovered that of the six days I was gone, four days of newspapers were delivered. My vacation stop was not honored. I complained online and nothing. Again, no apology, no credit, no acknowledgment of a mix-up.

Here's the bottom line: The Washington *Post* can advertise for new subscribers all it wants, but until it fixes its broken customer service, it will continue to lose print subscribers (and by extension advertising revenue).

Customer service matters more than marketing in retaining customers. Marketing is about acquisition and customer service is about retention. If you acquire customers just to lose them because of poor service, you are wasting money marketing and you are threatening your bottom line.

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## Not using my [name] pen to write you a check



Kaboompics.com

## Pens, t-shirts and apple butter?

Right now, I have a pen on my desk from a design studio in Washington, DC. I like the way it writes. But I don't think I will be using that design studio for any work any time soon.

I have another pen that I picked up at a conference a couple of weeks ago. I also like the way it writes, but I don't like the web hosting company whose name is on it. I used to host my website there and had nothing but problems. I would never take my business back there or recommend the company to anyone. But I do use that pen.

And then there's the t-shirt I picked for a service I don't even understand, but hey, this t-shirt is super soft and comfy. Or the magnetic calendar I got from the local realtor, who has also delivered apple butter (in a branded jar) to my door.

## **Is your promotional item really promoting you?**

All of these are promotional items, sometimes called advertising specialties. Some cost pennies each and some cost much more. The question is, no matter how little or a lot you spend on these items, is it money well spent? I believe the answer lies on your expectations.

## **Sales?**

If you expect to gain sales from a promotional item that you have given away without any type of qualification, then you are probably wasting your money. If instead, you ask people to provide an email address or fill a questionnaire, then you will at least have generated a potential lead. However, it's also true most people are willing to give you some information in return for a good item (t-shirt, notebook, etc.) without having the slightest intention of buying from you.

## **Brand recognition?**

If you expect to gain name/brand recognition, and nothing else, and that's all you want, then you will have spent your money well. Promotional items are designed by nature to boost brand recognition. Generally, they are items that you use regularly, like pens or mugs, making the name on the item very familiar to you.

## Bottom line

If you want to boost your name recognition, and you have money to spend, it may work in your favor to produce some promotional items. My advice is to choose useful items that people keep around for a while.

If you want to boost your sales, you have to do more than hand out stuff with your name on it. The decision to buy is not simply based on name recognition. It is based on need, trust and perception of value. There are better ways to accomplish that than spending money on pens and other items. Especially if that pen is never used to write you a check.

**In order to allocate your marketing budget wisely, you must be clear on your goals and how much you are willing to spend to accomplish them.**

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## On writing: Ami Neiberger-Miller sticks to the tried and true

We've arrived to the last On Writing interview of the year, and this month, I've turned to public relations maven (check out her Twitter handle below) Ami Neiberger-Miller. I met Ami at a PRSA conference a few years back where we both were presenting. Ami truly understands how PR works, and how important writing is to communicating effectively.



Ami Neiberger-Miller

Ami Neiberger-Miller is a public relations strategist specializing in nonprofit organizations, associations and small businesses. She is the founder of Steppingstone, LLC, a communications and public relations agency. She has written educational curricula, a book, feature articles, press releases, infographics, training materials, websites, style guides, policy manuals, and much more.

Find her on Twitter at @AmazingPRMaven

**1. What role does writing play in your work and how important a skill is it?**

Writing is the lifeblood of my work in public relations and advocacy. I am constantly writing for news releases, feature articles, emails, strategic plans, social media and much more. Writing is an important skill because of the electronic age in which we operate. Even though people are reading content

online, they are often reading written text when they view content online. And written text plays a role in shaping visual media now too – in the form of scripts, graphics and video.

## **2. Does writing well still matter in a digital/text/emoji world?**

The craft of writing is very much alive and well today. Writing well matters even more in a digital world. Writing the right words has never been more important than it is today – because attention spans are shrinking. We have to share information much faster now and it's even more challenging to get people to pay attention. There is still space for longer form writing, and with the internet, more opportunities to attract attention and be published. Digital options also offer writing opportunities – because scripts have to be created for videos, and copy has to be written for infographics, flipbooks, and all sorts of other materials.

## **3. What's the best advice you've received or would give on how to improve writing skills?**

To me one of the best skills you can develop in writing is delivering quality copy quickly. I am typically the person who tries to muscle through to finish the job and reach my word count for the day (and then some). But I've found that I do better if I take breaks when I get stuck or reach a point where copy is just not flowing. Taking a break can be as simple as going for a walk, making some tea, or packing up and working in a new environment. Returning with fresh eyes to your work can make a big difference. Just a short break can refresh your spirit.

I also find that I tend to do better with longer writing projects if I focus on them in the morning. By the end of the day, my creative juices are spent. While I can do "sausage-grinding" types of writing fairly late in the day and into the

evening, I find I am typically more focused and creative in the morning. One of my favorite time slots for writing is 4-6:00 a.m. (yes, I know that sounds insane) because it's a time of day that's quiet and distraction free. It's also when my mind is freshest. If I wake up on a mission for a particular project – early morning is the time I want to use to write and pour out the words.

I also think it's important to develop the ability to “free write.” Just getting what you want to say out is a triumph, even if it's messy. Far too often, I see writers get paralyzed by wanting to be sure that what they write initially is correct or concise. I may be the kind of person who proofreads restaurant menus for typos, but I can't apply that same eagle eye to newborn writing as it's pouring out. Getting the initial “brain dump” done can be cathartic and help you organize. Editing can come later. Respect the process so you don't lose a great thought or element because you got caught up in the details. Being able to just sit down and “free write” without judging yourself is a really helpful practice to develop.

#### **4. What are your top three writing resources or references?**

I am old-fashioned in that I still keep on the shelf near my desk a red Webster's New World Dictionary (that I won for an essay I wrote in sixth grade so it is horribly out of date but beloved). Next to it are a thesaurus and a Bartlett's Familiar Quotations. To me, those are the big three. But I readily admit that I don't take them out very often. I keep a lot of writing books nearby too. I have some favorite online resources, such as Purdue University's Online Writing Lab and Grammar Girl. I also like Ann Wylie's writing workshops (which I take as webinars through my PRSA membership). On Twitter, I search for #writing #quote when I need an inspirational pick me up. I also subscribe to Women on Writing.

#### **5. Do you follow a style guide, and if so, which one?**

I don't really follow a style guide with my own writing. If I am doing a project for a client, I use whatever style guide they prefer. Increasingly, clients are issuing their own style guides and making variations from the major style guides, as style has become tightly linked to branding. I keep on my shelf the following: the Associated Press Stylebook, the Chicago Manual of Style, the Elements of International English Style and the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association.

## **6. What's your top writing/grammar/usage pet peeve?**

My most cringe-worthy writing gaffe is when I double up a sentence, as in "today we are going to announce that XYZ is today." It's an easy mistake that can be caught by proofreading. For some reason though, it's one of my bad habits.

## **7. What's your favorite word and what's your least favorite?**

Favorite word: partner

Least favorite word: innovate

It's always good practice to keep tried and true resources at your fingertips. Like Ami, every writer should have a dictionary and thesaurus nearby. The various style guides are invaluable, and AP and Chicago both have very good online versions by subscription.

Coming up later in December will be a recap of the On Writing advice. Please keep an eye out for it here and/or on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.