

Six trends I don't want to see in 2016

I don't know what happened to 2015. It started with such potential, all shiny and bright (and cold here in the Washington, DC area). And it went downhill fast.

Here are six "trends" that were everywhere in 2015 and that I hope we don't see in the coming year:

1. Overuse of emojis and gifs (they are especially egregious in professional communications). Oxford Dictionary even chose an emoji as "word" of the year. Enough said.

2. Multiple emails asking for money, especially on New Year's Eve (today alone I have already deleted at least a dozen) from organizations that have already sent multiple emails at Thanksgiving, on Giving Tuesday, before Christmas, after Christmas. If I wanted to give, I would have already.

3. And speaking of email, too many were **not responsive/mobile-friendly**. This wasn't good in 2015 and it certainly won't fly in 2016. Most people read email on their smartphones or tablets. Deal with it.

4. Auto-video/audio on websites. This year I felt that every website I went on had a (loud, obnoxious) video pop-up. Having the video or audio auto-play ensures I will click out of your website really fast.

5. Over-capitalization. In American English, we have simple rules for capitalizing words: we use capitals to start a sentence and in proper names. We don't capitalize to show something is important, even if it sounds important (e.g., "we elect a president every four years" not "we elect a President every four years"). And unlike Germans, we don't capitalize every single noun.

And last, but not least:

6. Obsessive news coverage and its partner, endless speculating. It didn't start this year, and probably won't end this year, but we saw too many examples of obsessive coverage of selected news stories this year. Going all out on one news story, like the Paris bombings, sending every reporter and anchor to the scene, and then providing all sorts of baseless "analysis" does not qualify as actual journalism. It does not clarify the story. Instead, it gives rise to fear and uncertainty. This is what's given rise to blowhard politicians such as the millionaire real estate developer who will say the most outrageous things because he knows it will attract attention and speculation.

What trends got your goat in 2015? Share them in the comments.

Let's hope for a better 2016. Happy New Year everybody!

Happy holidays (and that is not a political statement)

Here we are, a couple days before Christmas or Festivus or Kwanzaa. Or perhaps it's a few days after Hanukkah. Whatever you celebrate, this time of the year is full of holidays. And it's time that's devoted to friends and family more so than to work. So in that spirit, and no matter what you celebrate, I wish you all very happy holidays! Have a wonderful time and

enjoy some well-earned rest.

I am working on a year-in-review post and could use your help. What things did you learn this year? What did you resolved to do differently next year? What were your pet peeves or major aggravations (communications-wise!)? Let me know in the comments or send me an email.

How to alienate customers and lose business forever

I needed pizza and water STAT

Last week, I was enjoying one perfect sunny day on the beach in Hollywood, Florida (it rained a lot in South Florida last week!). After going for a run along the boardwalk, I stopped into a pizza shop to get a bottle of water and a slice of pizza for lunch. There was an older man milling about waiting but nobody seemed to be at the counter. Finally, a guy appeared at the other end of the counter. I signaled him. He ignored me. I said "excuse me" and he ignored me. Then I said "Could we get some service down here?" and he said something like this: "in a moment, I am taking care of something else."

What else could be more important to him than paying customers who wanted to buy something? Apparently, anything was more important. Right after that, this guy picked up something and went outside to put it in storage or something. He was not helping other customers and he was avoiding helping me.

Luckily for me, there are several pizza joints along the Hollywood boardwalk, and so I walked out of this one and on to next one. There, I was served a slice of pizza and a bottle of

water in a flash, and with a smile.

We all have tasks galore

Here's the thing: we all have things to do. We all have endless lists of tasks to do daily, weekly and even monthly. Since we have limited hours every day, we prioritize those tasks. For example, if you need to invoice your customers, that task comes before choosing sandwiches for the holiday party. Perhaps party planning is more fun, but invoicing brings in the money that will pay for the party.

If we want to stay in business, we need to prioritize our *current* clients and customers. We need to prioritize the work that pays, and the people that pay us. And yet, we see businesses who are so busy chasing potential customers that they ignore current ones.

Losing sales

Or worse, we see salespeople who are too busy with tasks (to put it kindly) to focus on the potential sales that are right in their store. That scenario happened to me a few weeks ago when I was shopping for some furniture. I walked into a mega furniture store whose name rhymes with Carlo, and *nobody* approached me. There were plenty of salespeople around but none of them even greeted me. Then I went up to a salesperson who was busy not doing anything and asked her where I could find medium sized media cabinets (I described a very specific need). She shrugged. She didn't seem know but what was worse is that she didn't seem care to help me. Do you think I bought anything at that store? Do you think I am ever going back there again?

In the pizza place scenario, there was absolutely no reason that guy behind the counter couldn't have come over or sent someone to take my order right away. What he "had" to do could wait an extra two minutes, but as a thirsty, hungry customer, I couldn't wait. That pizza place lost my business, not only

on that day, but at any other time I happen to be in Hollywood Beach and have a hankering for pizza.

Priorities, priorities

Current business pays us now. And if we do a good job, it continues to pay in the future. Potential business must also be cultivated so we can continue to grow, but not at the expense of our current customers.

In the end, it's all about priorities.

What are your business priorities? How do you communicate to your customers or clients that they are important to you?

One invaluable writing lesson

Back in October I pledged to myself to complete National Novel Writing Month or NaNoWriMo. If you haven't heard of it, it's an annual event where the goal is to write 50,000 words during November. People self-monitor and track their word count on the NaNoWriMo website. Once the "novel" is done, you upload the document for "validation." And if you indeed wrote the 50K words, then you are labeled a "winner." Although you can order a winner t-shirt (and pay for it), there are no prizes. The only reward you get is self-satisfaction.

Try, try again?

I had tried to complete NaNoWriMo once before, and only got to about 9,000 words. This time, I made it all the way to 20,000. I wasn't even half-way through and I only had about 10 days left. The website helpfully reminded me that to complete the "novel," I would have to write at least 3,000 words a day or, if I stayed at the pace I was going, I would finish sometime at the end of December or early January. It was then that I realized that I simply didn't have it in me.

The "novel" I was writing was not compelling. I did not have a sense of how to keep the plot (such as it was) moving forward. And here's the thing: Novels are not a bunch of words strung together to beat the clock.

What's a novel, really?

In fact, the word novel has two meanings. As an adjective, novel means new and fresh. As a noun, Merriam-Webster defines novel as "an invented prose narrative that is usually long and complex and deals especially with human experience through a usually connected sequence of events." If we put both definitions together, a novel should be a new, fresh, and long narrative or story.

Writing is a discipline

Here's the good thing about NaNoWriMo: If you develop the discipline to write every day, and if you work toward a clearly defined goal, you will get somewhere with your writing. In other words, you become a writer if you write consistently.

But is writing is more than that

On the other hand: A successful writer has to communicate something specific and has to do it clearly. Just hitting a word count does not make you a writer (certainly not a good writer). It makes you someone who has placed a certain number of words on paper (screen).

You have to tell a story

For me, the big lesson of NaNoWriMo is that writing is not enough. You have to have a story to tell. There's got to be more than words on a page.

I have always been an avid fiction reader. And doing the NaNoWriMo experiment gave me much more appreciation and respect for published writers. Writing 50,000 words is hard. Writing 50,000 words (or more) that actually are interesting, make sense, and share a story is immeasurably harder.

Have you tried NaNoWriMo? If so, what are your lessons learned? Did you write something that was published?

Why giving thanks is a marketing win

During this season, and especially during Thanksgiving week, we see a lot of talk of gratitude. At least one DC-area TV channel is asking people to post what they are grateful for (and hashtag it, of course).



Those that do

I have been getting several email thank you notes—from airlines, rewards programs and organizations that I have supported in the past. It's nice to get an email that is simply expressing thanks and not trying to sell or promote or convince.

And every end of year, I get a couple "Season's Greetings and Thank You for your Business" holiday cards in the mail. I generally get one from my accountant and one from a company that painted the exterior of my house three years ago. I get so few actual printed holiday cards, especially from vendors, that I really notice them.

And those that don't

On the other hand, I don't get anything from the painting company that painted the interior of my house, or from the company that installed the hardwood floors in my house (a much bigger job than the house painting) or from the company with which I had a multi-year service contract.

Perhaps these companies don't send any thank yous at all. Or perhaps they don't value my patronage.

I have been thinking about this because I just had a new HVAC unit installed. It is the largest purchase I have made this year, and it was a hard decision to make. The company that sold and installed the unit was very professional. The salesperson followed up and answered a ton of my questions and concerns. The installers were on time and worked diligently, leaving everything clean and tidy. All the paperwork was in order.

But a week later, I have not heard a word from this company. No follow up to see how the system is working, no inquiry about my experience with the installation, and most surprisingly, no thank you for buying the product/service.

Polite, and meeting expectations

We don't expect thank you notes from the grocery store (even though we probably spend money there more consistently and frequently than almost anywhere else) or for the vast number of regular transactions we all make during the year. But when we buy something big—a car, a house, a time share—we do expect a thank you.

Writing (or emailing) thank you notes is what polite people do when they've received a gift. And it is what companies should do when you've made a big purchase or done business with them. Because so few companies do it, sending a thank you is what differentiates them. It also shows, in a tangible way, that a company values your patronage. It's a marketing win.

Do you send thank you notes to your customers or clients? If not, why not? If so, how do you do it—electronically or with a printed card?

And with that, let me say thank you for reading this post, and this blog. Have a very happy Thanksgiving!

How to sell 1000s of cupcakes

You've heard of Georgetown Cupcake, right? In case you haven't (seriously?), the company started in a small space in Georgetown back in 2008 and has now expanded to six locations, including stores in New York City, Los Angeles, Boston, and Atlanta, plus a thriving mail order business. The founders—sisters Katherine Kallinis Berman and Sophie Kallinis Lamontagne—even starred in a reality TV show for TLC called

“DC Cupcake.”

But getting to a point where Georgetown Cupcake sells 25,000 cupcakes a day on average did not happen overnight. It took a lot of hard work. Katherine and Sophie shared how they did it at the Inc. Magazine/Capital One Founders Forum last week in Washington, DC, which I attended (it was free and yes, they served cupcakes).

The Georgetown Cupcake ladies shared a lot of information about what it really takes to get a business off the ground (working all hours, every day, and incurring a lot of debt for starters). Their success seems to be tied to how hands-on they are and how personal their motivation is (they learned to make cakes from the grandmother and wanted to recreate that).

They also shared some very interesting marketing insights. From my notes, following are six marketing and communications takeaways:

Use data to drive your business processes and collect data wherever you can

Everyone keeps talking about metrics and analytics. Well, here's why: data can fuel your bottom line. In Georgetown Cupcake's case, they used shipping data to choose the locations where they have opened stores. The sisters say you need to ask yourself what information you need, and then collect it.

Prove your business model and have a good product before getting marketing help

You have to have something people want to buy before you market it. The sisters got great publicity early on because lines were forming out the door at the first (and at the time, only) Georgetown location. They were able to get stories in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* without public relations assistance.

Word of mouth is the best advertising

You haven't seen ads for Georgetown Cupcake because they don't advertise. Instead, they rely on word of mouth. Which is how they got those lines out the door in the first place. Which is what led to the major newspaper coverage. Which is what led to the TV show. Which has led to their success.

Use social media (and do it well)

From the start, Georgetown Cupcake has been on social media. First they had a Facebook page, then Twitter, and now Instagram and Pinterest. One of their early social media innovations was to announce a special flavor of the day which you could mention at the store to get a free cupcake. They are still doing it—in fact, I just checked and today's free flavor is Apple Caramel. Why this works is that it gives people a tangible reason to follow, giving them "inside" knowledge. Katherine says she PERSONALLY handles their Twitter feed, which has 101,000 followers.

Stay true to your brand experience and mission

It was important to the sisters that each new store reflect exactly the brand experience that the first store embodied. They wanted customers to feel a certain way when they walked through the doors, whether in New York or Atlanta. Because brand experience is not easy to replicate, the sisters are not rushing to expand nationwide (although you can order the cupcakes to be shipped anywhere in the U.S.).

Focus on employee communications

Because the sisters cannot be at all the locations every day, they keep in touch with their employees constantly. They have a weekly internal newsletter, and they email each store several times a day. All employees are trained to understand the company's mission.

In a world where cupcakes chains have come and gone, it is interesting to see that Georgetown Cupcake is still doing well. Perhaps it's because the sisters are so involved and committed to their business. In any case, it was fascinating to hear them talk about their business.

You are competing for attention with attention itself

Last night, I happily attended the latest Kalb Report at the National Press Club. The topic was the Sunday morning public affairs shows and the guests were Chuck Todd of Meet the Press and John Dickerson of Face the Nation (and in case you didn't know, moderator Marvin Kalb was moderator of Meet the Press in the 80s). As is usually the case, the program was very interesting, especially to someone like me, who always watches Meet the Press or Face the Nation on Sunday and has been doing so for decades.



Chuck Todd and John Dickerson at Kalb Report, November 9, 2015

Not paying attention

But apparently, not everybody else was as interested or at least, not everybody was giving the program their full attention. Next to me, two women were whispering to each other during most of the program. On my other side, a woman was busy on her iPhone. I wasn't sure what she was doing—maybe texting or maybe taking notes—but she was at it the whole time. Behind me, a gentleman kept fiddling with his camera. In front of me, two women were whispering to each other every few minutes. An official-seeming photographer (although I am not sure he was there officially) kept photographing the stage (and annoyingly, had his camera set to make clicking noises as though it were an old-fashioned camera).

Distracting others

Even though I was very interested in the program, I was getting distracted by what was going on around me. Other people's lack of attention (or perhaps, it was lack of manners) was attracting my attention!

Lack of manners or short attention span?

I have been seeing this lack of attention a lot and in many different types of venues. Just last week, I took an email

marketing class along with about 15 other people. Two women were busy whispering for a good portion of the class, while the instructor was explaining something. These women showed a complete disregard for the instructor, and also for the rest of the class. Were they just completely unaware of how distracting they were being? Were they bored? Was something else more important happening that had to be discussed right there and then? I don't know, but again, their rudeness (because talking while someone else is presenting is just plain rude) was distracting me.

More and more, short attention spans are making it hard for anybody or anything to retain attention for any length of time. If people watch live television, they start fiddling with their tablet or phone during the commercials. If people are at the movies, they fiddle with their phone during the trailers (and sometimes, during the movie too).

A real challenge for marketers

People seem more restless and less able to focus and that's a real challenge for communicators and marketers. We've seen an increase in image-based marketing precisely because people are not reading text. Marketing materials must grab attention quickly and only hope to hold on to it for seconds.

The impact

1. Shorter messages. Marketers have to keep in mind that their messages are competing with thousands of other messages and with a shortened attention span. This means we really have to know what we are selling (or advocating), and how to distill it into as few words as possible.

2. Customization. We also need to realize that people are living in little bubbles, where they choose to pay attention to only what they want to pay attention to. Mass messaging doesn't work anymore. People are demanding to get only what they want to get.

3. Becoming part of the discussion. Messages alone don't do it. Now, you have to become part of the conversation. Take the REI announcement a couple weeks ago that it was closing on Black Friday "to let associates be outside." Everyone got in on this conversation. REI used the hashtag #OptOutside in the announcement. Discussions on social media and mass media ensued. Brilliant!

Have you noticed the drop in attention? What are you doing to counter it? Can you? Please let me know in the comments.

Is lazy interaction better than no interaction?

This post is about a phenomenon that I've noticed on Twitter (just in case you aren't on Twitter, I'm letting you know now so you can stop reading).

First of all, here's a question: do you expect a thank you or other acknowledgement when you re-tweet something? I would like to know for sure (I would appreciate your thoughts, please do share them in the comments) but my gut tells me most people appreciate a thank you but don't expect it or need it.

And yet, there's been an explosion (or at least it seems so to me) in automated 'thanks for your interaction' tweets. You've probably seen the ones I mean:

My best RTs this week came from: @xxx @xxx #thankSAll Who were yours? sumall.com/thankyou

or

Thanks to my top interactors!

@xxxx @xxxx

#tweetjukebox

I see why some people would think this is a good idea. Perhaps they were raised by parents who insisted that you must write a thank you note whenever you get a gift. Or perhaps, they think any interaction, even automated interaction, is better than no interaction.

It's similar to when you send a company an email outlining some concern or question you have and you then receive an automated reply thanking you for your email but not addressing your issue. You could have said that the company's product is killing you and the reply would still say "thank you for your email."

Automated replies and automated tweets may be expedient but they are empty gestures. They have no content. They have no context. And they are basically useless in terms of creating the social media "engagement" everyone talks about.

If the only way you can think of interacting with others on Twitter is by automated thank yous, I respectfully suggest you get yourself off the platform immediately.

Similarly, if you absolutely, positively need to have an app send out canned tweets for you, you may not have the time or inclination to be on social media.

Here are some truths about social media engagement:

- its time-consuming
- there's effort involved

- personal beats automated every day

What do you think? Are you using these automated thank you generators? If so, what are you hoping to achieve? Are you achieving what you are hoping?

What does the customer have to know?

This weekend I noticed the mums in front of my house were looking a bit sad...all droopy and discolored. Apparently, they were in dire need of watering.



Sad mums

What do dying mums have to do with marketing communications? Let me tell you.

A couple of weeks ago, I bought these mums at my local farmer's market . I asked the farmer/vendor how long they would last. She told me that mums are hardy and should last

through Thanksgiving, providing some color as the flowering annuals die.

But at the rate my mums were going, they wouldn't make it to Halloween. So this past Saturday during my weekly visit to the farmer's market I asked the vendor about the mums: Should I water them or would it be OK to wait until it rained on Sunday? She told me that I should most definitely water them as soon as I got home, *because mums need a lot of water.*

Well, then. I had made the incorrect assumption that because mums are hardy plants, it meant they needed little water. If, when I bought them, she had mentioned that mums should be watered frequently, I would have done so. But she hadn't and this is exactly the type of information I needed to know to help my plants survive.

Customers don't know what they don't know. Period.

It's your job as a marketing/communications person (let's include sales under marketing here) to make sure they have the information they need to use your product or service appropriately and get the most out of it.

You are the expert...not the customer

Customers don't know your product or service as well as you do. You are the real-life expert on your product or service. You know what it does, how it does it and why.

So, ask yourself this one simple question:

What does the customer/ client have to know about my product or service?

Once you have the answer to this question, your content marketing, copywriting, and especially your customer/client interaction, will all be easier.

If you need help figuring out what your customers should know

about your product or service, get in touch! I can help.

Blogging is easy until it's not

I've been blogging for years, since early 2008. That's almost eight years in which I have blogged here, on a personal blog, for clients, and even developed a training workshop to teach people how to blog. I love the format—it's generally quick and up until recently, it's been easy. But lately, blogging has gotten harder and harder. It's a struggle to come up with one good blog post a week when in my heyday, I wrote several blog posts a week.

What's going on? I can only speak for myself, but here it is:

- 1. Blogging itself is easy but coming up with relevant, meaningful posts is hard.** Lately, I see lots of posts that are just crap. They recycle information or they post obvious "tips." I want to create original and creative posts, and lately, I don't have a lot to add to the conversation.

- 2. There's plenty (too much?) of competition.** There's so much to read and we have limited time. I know I scan through the

headlines on my Feedly and probably only read a small percentage of articles. It feels overwhelming to try to stand out with so much out there.

3. And of course, we are being told by the “experts” how to make our blog posts better: add images, make sure to optimize for SEO, and on and on. In other words, put more work into it. I am a fan of writing and posting quickly, while still posting something that is grammatically correct and typo-free. I don't enjoy looking for images for a post, although I know why it's important but to me it makes the posting so much more onerous.

4. There are real-world consequences. On a personal blog, all we are doing is sharing our thoughts. If people flock to it, then so much the better. On a business blog, we are doing “content marketing.” We are trying to help our websites and increase our business. We are establishing “thought leadership.” Whatever our business goals are, they can and should be measured, and they can and should impact our bottom line.

These aren't excuses. I will continue blogging—it's important. But it's not as easy as it used to be.

What about you? Are you finding that blogging is harder to get done? If so, why? And how do you counter it?