

Storytelling versus writing

I am a huge Scandi-noir fiction fan. Recently, I was reading (yet again) a mystery by an Icelandic author (in translation, of course). I noticed the writing was a bit stilted. Some of the phrases didn't sound right, and I can only imagine this was a translation/translator issue. Translating is hard work. You need to understand the language, obviously. And you also need to understand author's tone and intent so you can choose the best word or phrase when many will do. This is especially true with colloquial expressions that don't translate directly. And I am sure these colloquialisms, and some peculiarities of Icelandic culture didn't quite make it in the translation. And yet there was a blurb on the book jacket by an American crime author, praising the Icelandic author, saying she was a "magnificent writer." I doubt that the American read the work in the original Icelandic, so she had no way to judge the writing. What she was judging, and rightly so, was the *storytelling*.

Storytelling versus writing

Good storytelling is not the same as good writing, and neither is good writing also good storytelling. Writing and storytelling are two different, albeit related, skills.

Good storytelling pulls you in. It makes you want to know more.

Good writing is about knowing how to use language and its mechanics to communicate ideas clearly.

Can you have one without the other? Yes, you can. And I would argue that the best stories are also the best written.



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Think about your favorite book

If you've ever read a book with an intriguing plot, but with utilitarian writing, you understand that storytelling is a skill separate from writing. Books written by good storytellers who are mediocre writers are readable because you are interested in the story and you want to know more.

If you've ever read a book that's so well written, where the words sing, but there is no discernible plot or the story being told is boring, chances are you stopped reading or read the book super slowly. Beautiful writing alone does not make a readable book.

And I would bet that your favorite books, the ones you recommend or perhaps even re-read, are the ones that have a great story and are well written.

Here's the bottom line for content writers

For those of us who write any sort of content, focusing on *what* we are trying to say should come first. Then, we should think about *how* to say it. If we get both these elements—storytelling and writing—done right, we'll create content worth reading.

Marketing by attrition?

Is your idea of marketing to send out the same offer over and over and over and over again in the hopes that your target will get so tired of hearing from you that they'll just pay up to get rid of you? No? Well, it seems to be the force behind a

lot of marketing, especially direct mail and email marketing. I call it marketing by attrition and I think it is probably the least effective type of marketing there is (not too mention the most annoying to recipients).

An example

Case in point is Sirius XM. A few months ago, I bought a new car that included three months free of Sirius XM radio. Before I even had the car a couple of weeks, I got a letter from Sirius that said I could sign up for \$5 per month for a year(!). But then, I read in the small print, I would be charged \$16.99 per month after. SiriusXM sent me this exact offer in a letter several more times. Then, when my three-month trial was over, they sent me another slew of letters. So many in fact, I don't have an exact number.

The offer is always the same. I am still not interested, but I bet they will continue sending me letters for the next year or more.

Is there a strategy?

What is the strategy here? Is there a strategy? Or is it a mandate that hasn't been ever reviewed?

It seems to me that there's some sort of mandate or directive at large companies, which have hundreds of thousands of potential clients, to keep marketing the same offer to each person who doesn't sign up for the product or service. And keep sending it until they sign up.

But what happens if the target doesn't respond?

Experience says that if a target doesn't respond to your marketing, you may need to change something. Perhaps you need to revise the offer. Or perhaps you need to change your marketing tactics. In the marketing by attrition "strategy,"

there seems to be no course correction other than eventually giving up. I wonder if there is a certain number of mailings that these companies send out, perhaps based on cost, after which they conclude the cost of having you as client is too high. This method seems highly ineffective and costly.

What would work better?

Perhaps what would work better is to really understand what motivates each particular potential customer. This could involve sending out a survey or having a better sense of each customer through demographic and psychographic data.

Bottom line

If you are marketing by attrition, you may be fighting a long and losing battle.

4 Avoidable Pandemic Marketing Failures

When the pandemic forced the country into lockdown last year, yoga studios were among the many non-essential businesses forced to close. Although yoga is best practiced in person with close instructor supervision, yoga studios adapted to the situation and figured how to provide classes online.

Having good email lists became essential as yoga studios had to contact students to let them know how to proceed. Good websites were also important. There, yoga studio owners could post new COVID policies and new schedules. Most yoga studios were already using the online Mindbody software for people to

enroll and pay for classes, so that aspect was seamless.



Photo by Dmytro from Pexels

Up to this point, all three studios I have attended in the past couple of years were doing the same. Each studio was offering classes on Zoom and registering for them was easy to do online. Studios would send out links to the Zoom class and with the click of a mouse, we were doing yoga in our spare rooms and basements. In June 2020, Maryland started lifting restrictions and began allowing non-essential businesses to reopen with capacity limits. Also, the weather got nicer. And that's where these three studios showed their business savvy.

Studio A found a nearby park and negotiated a permit with the city to start providing outdoor classes. Outdoor classes cost \$25 (\$5 more than the pre-pandemic drop-in cost) but were offered several times a week over the course of the summer and into early fall.

Studio B found a several locations that were willing to host outdoor classes, including a brewery and a plant nursery. Pretty soon, they were offering various outdoor classes. This studio charged regular drop-in (\$18 or donation) and offered a minimum once a week outdoor option in addition to its Zoom offerings.

Studio C kept doing Zoom and found a place to offer outdoor classes on a limited basis (four times total in the summer of 2020) and charged a workshop price of \$30 for these. Drop-in classes at this studio had been \$18, and it offered a \$15 Zoom drop-in rate.

As cooler weather started and Maryland further scaled back pandemic restrictions, Studios A and B started offering limited in person classes, with few students, air purifiers and open windows, lots of social distancing, and masks required. In the spring of 2021, as more people were getting vaccinated, Studios A and B added more in-person classes and as the weather got warmer, also added more outdoor options. Studio C opened last, but not before announcing a GoFund Me campaign to raise funds to be able to open its doors.

I don't know the financial situation of any of these studios, but it seems to me Studio C's situation was precarious to be asking for donations. And not coincidentally, out of the three, Studio C did the worst at marketing.

Failure #1: Failure to adapt

Studios A and B were the quickest to figure out that people wanted to do in-person yoga instead of over Zoom, and the only way to do it was to hold classes outdoors. Studio C, on the other hand, was very slow to figure out how to offer outdoor yoga, and when it did, it only did so infrequently and at a high cost.

Failure #2: Failure to communicate

Studios A and B sent weekly email blasts about current classes and upcoming changes and generally to stay in touch. Studio C only sent emails sporadically and instead spent the pandemic redesigning its website. When Studio C sent out an email announcing its new website it failed to announce (disclose) that it had also raised prices. During the pandemic, there was a Zoom drop in rate of \$15. From one week to the next, the drop in rate for Zoom classes became \$19, a 25% increase. Once Studio C opened its physical location, it started sending out semi-weekly emails announcing “new in studio offerings” and a link to those, except that link never worked. Studio C didn’t use email marketing to its potential.

Failure #3: Failure to check out the competition

If you don’t know what others are doing, you can’t effectively compete with them. If Studio C had taken a moment to sign up for other studio’s emails or even check out their websites, it would have seen that these other studios were offering in-person classes outdoors.

Failure#4: Failure to seek out reliable business advice

When interviewed by a local TV station about pandemic effects, Studio C’s owner admitted that she did not like to ask for help but that she was forced to run a GoFund Me campaign to be able to pay back rent and open. If Studio C’s owner had sought out business advice early on in the pandemic, she may have been in a better position. We are not all born with business sense, but we should have sense enough to know we don’t have it and that we should seek it.

The bottom line

Keeping your business open, and by extension, doing a good job at marketing, was hugely challenging during a global pandemic. The businesses that survived were all able to adapt to the

changing circumstances. And those that did the best job at marketing, not only survived but thrived.

The one question you must answer in marketing

There's so much bad marketing out there: Ads that don't convince. Unconvincing pitches that get ignored. Generic email marketing that gets discarded.

All of them fail to answer one simple (not easy) question: Why?

Give a reason to make me want to connect on LinkedIn

Recently, I got a LinkedIn connection request from someone I don't know. She's a marketing manager at a local service provider. We've never met and we don't have any connections in common. And she didn't personalize the invitation. In other words, she didn't say why she thought we should connect. I clicked ignore. And I clicked ignore on another half-dozen requests I got this month that weren't personalized. None of those people thought they should provide any reason why we should connect.

A politician who is an outsider. So what?

In the recent Virginia primary, the Republican candidate for governor was running an ad touting his experience and background. Then he said this: "It's going to take an outsider [to fix Virginia's issues]" What he didn't address is why. Why would it take an outsider? What does an outsider bring to the situation?

It's about answering the why

To market your product or service effectively, you must tell your audience *why* they should choose your offering. People need to have a reason (preferably a good reason) to act.

Here's the bottom line: Provide an answer to why, and you will improve your marketing. It's really that simple.

Marketing does not work if your operations aren't up to the task

Marketing is not just about promotion, sales, or pricing. Marketing is also customer service and customer communication. Marketing is about operations and logistics. In other words, can you fulfill the orders? If your operations are not working well, no amount of marketing is going to close a sale.

Where is my order?

A couple of weeks ago, a friend recommended some face masks (I am not going to give this company any other publicity, so I will refer to it as the company). She even had a promotional discount to share with me. I went to the company website, and I bought a set of three masks.

At 2:51 p.m., I got an email with my receipt.

At 3:01 p.m. got another email confirming my order, which

said there would be a one to three day processing time before shipping.

At 3:03 p.m. I got another email, this one thanking me for my order and asking me to submit a review to Facebook. Mind you, I don't yet have the product.

At 3:05 p.m. I got an email with the subject line: "Deborah, You Forgot Your Filters!" (I didn't forget the filters, I just chose not to order them.)

At 3:08 p.m., I got a fifth email with the subject line: "You Forgot Your Filters."

In the space of 15 minutes, I got FIVE emails. That's too many.

The next day, I got two emails:

"Your Orders (sic) About To Ship Out...Don't Forget Your Filters"

And

"Deborah, Your Orders (sic) About To Ship...Don't Forget Your Filters."

Now, I am getting very irritated. Clearly, they want me to order filters before they ship out my order, and they are not being subtle about it.

One week later, I still hadn't gotten a shipment notification. I email the company asking where my order is. I get this email reply:

Greetings Deborah,

Thank you so much for taking the time to reach out to us ☐

We would like to thank you for your patience and we sincerely apologize for any delays in delivering your order!

I will personally reach out to our fulfillment team and ensure that your order gets expedited and sent out for delivery ASAP.

Once your order has shipped, you will automatically receive an email containing the tracking information.

Thank you for being so patient with us, it has not gone unnoticed <3

If there is anything else we can ever help you with, please, just let us know – it would be our pleasure to serve you.

Okay. Nice enough email, but no answer to my query, “Where is my order?”

I replied telling the customer service agent that if my order was not shipping that day, I wanted it cancelled. The agent replied:

Hello Deborah,

Thank you so much for your reply and apologies for the inconvenience.

I have reached out to our fulfilment (sic) team and found that there are orders that haven't been shipped due to courier delays affected by the pandemic. I've refunded your last order as requested.

Please allow 5-10 business days for the refund to be processed. Reimbursement of funds will be allocated back to the original form of payment used for purchase.

Again, we are truly sorry about the delays.

One full year into the pandemic, this company is blaming it

for shipping delays!

Wow. If this were happening sometime in 2020, perhaps this excuse would ring true. Or even during the USPS breakdown in December. But in March of 2021? This is just a stupid excuse.

There are plenty of other mask providers

I got my refund, but then I went to another mask maker, where I ordered masks on Sunday, got a confirmation email (just one email, not five), and then on Tuesday, got an email saying my masks shipped. I got my new masks yesterday. No muss, no fuss. Just the way any other transaction should be. I have gotten no marketing emails. And actually, if I did get a promotional email now, I would most likely buy from this company, since I had a positive experience.

How to fail at marketing

The first company does not understand marketing.

Here's just some of the issues:

- Focusing on its needs or goals (in this case, selling filters), not the customer's
- Not delivering what it promised.
- Blaming an external circumstance instead of taking responsibility.
- Communicating aggressively to sell and not to service.

And how to succeed

The second company just did what anyone expects from any sales transaction: take an order and then fulfill it. It is that simple.

Bottom line

Before you blame your marketing efforts for lackluster sales, take a look at your operations. Are you fulfilling orders in a

timely manner? Is customer service working well? Are you communicating any issues to your customers? Marketing can't solve operational issues.

Success starts with being targeted

When you're left shaking your head

The other day I got an email from someone who wanted to write a guest blog post (presumably for this website) about how to get better sleep. Do you know what I did with that email? I deleted it. Why? Because if you take even a cursory look at this blog/website, you will note that it is not about sleeping, or health, or wellness, or anything related to getting better sleep. Also of note is that I write all posts on the blog. I don't have guest bloggers or any information on how to submit a guest blog.

A friend was telling me just the other day how she got a call about her expired car warranty. Except she doesn't even have a car.

And then there's the gas company that calls about your gas bill, and you don't even have gas at your house.

It probably is spam

Yes, these are all examples of spam. We know spammers don't have time to research and target a message that is specific to you. That is why they are spammers. They send out the same message to everyone and hope that one hits the right target.

Effective marketing is not spam. It is targeted.

The opposite of spamming is targeting. If you target your message to the right audience, you have a much better chance of success.

How do you target?

To be targeted, you have to start with definition. You must understand exactly who needs or wants your product or service, and be able to describe those people or organizations. Once you know who you are selling to, you know your target audience. For example, if you are selling extended car warranties, your audience is people who own cars that are out of warranty. Perhaps you can further narrow it down by how old the car is and where these people are located.

Once you've defined your target audience, you have to figure out where you can find this group. Where does this group go to find information?

Bottom line

Send your message to the right audience and you will be much more effective.

Wishing for better communications in 2021

Count me in as one of the many who are glad that 2020 is over. I am optimistic about the year ahead, in spite of the horrendous and deadly insurrection last week at the U.S. Capitol.

There's a lot to look forward to this year: a new administration, worldwide COVID vaccinations, and the subsequent return to normalcy. Maybe by the end of 2021 we'll be back to attending in-person events!



As a communicator, I thought the biggest lesson of 2020 was the need to adapt and quickly. Events went from in-person to virtual. Many workers were no longer commuting to their offices (I wonder what happened to drive time radio costs!). There was (and continues to be) a lot of stress and anxiety. Those realities impacted marketing efforts. We saw an increase in email marketing, on-line presentations and events, and a general toning down of advertising.

Now that we are in a new year, I have five wishes to make 2021 the year for more effective, high-impact communications.

1. Use email marketing more effectively

At the end of the year I got bombarded with donation pleas from many nonprofits—and I mean several in just one day. On December 31, 2020 it was particularly bad, as I got emails from each and every organization I have supported, and one organization sent me four or five emails! And then there's Overstock.com, which sends at least an email every single day—one day offering me 12% off and the next 15%. The lesson here is: Don't overwhelm your customer or donors. Be strategic and think of your recipient. And then there's the many small groups who are still sending all-image emails. The problem here is that unless the recipient downloaded the images, your email appears blank. Follow some guidelines before you send out that next email. Jill Kurtz wrote a great Email Marketing Checklist, which is worth a read.

2. Leverage your website

Your website is your reception desk to the world. If people have questions, chances are they will check your website before they call. It follows your website should have all the information they need. Keep it updated, especially with any COVID protocols you are following. For many, the idea of spending money to update a website in these times may be anathema. However, an outdated website will result in customer

frustration and maybe even lost business.

3. Focus your social media efforts.

This is they year to choose your social media platforms and embrace them. The truth is that you can't effectively manage too many platforms. You won't be able to have meaningful engagement if you have to monitor too many streams. Choose the platforms that *perform* best for you, where you have the most traction and/or where the majority of your audience is. Do you really need to be on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, TikTok, etc? I am not saying that you can't try out a new outlet, but if you do, and it works well, perhaps you replace instead of adding. And if you are using multiple platforms, create content with each platform in mind. The post you use on LinkedIn should not be the same as the one you use on Twitter.

4. Use Zoom or Livestream more effectively.

Check out my post about this. I've spent too much time having to hear people explain how to use Zoom, muting/unmuting, and just plain wasting time reading lengthy presenter bios. People are spending much more time in front of computer screens, and want you to get to the point. I can read the bio myself if you send it in an email or provide a link to it during the presentation.

5. Copy edit and proofread all your marketing materials, including (perhaps especially) social media posts.

The other day, my local police department posted about how a driver ended up with her car on the train tracks because she used the gas pedal instead of the "breaks." And the local weather Twitter feed told me there would be "peaks" of sun. These are very small examples, but when you make these type of mistakes, you are showing a lack of care. So, proof everything before it goes live. And say what you mean clearly and concisely, and if you need help doing so, use a copy editor!

Happy New Year 2021! Let's work on making it better for our communications. If you have a 2021 communications wishes, share them with me in the comments.

What helps businesses thrive during COVID-19?

While many businesses, especially restaurants and small retailers, have seen their revenue drop because of COVID-19, others have thrived.

Some business failures are due to circumstance and public health regulations, such as lock down orders and capacity restrictions. But in some cases, businesses failed because they were unable to respond to the new situation.

Not adapting to the situation:

I know a small, local gift store carries an item I was shopping for. I went to Google and found the store has no website. According to the Google business information, this store opens weekdays at 10:00 a.m. I headed out to the store on a Wednesday around 2 p.m. I found a handwritten note on the door listing the shop's (reduced) hours, which said the store opens Monday through Thursday noon to 4:00 p.m. However, the lights were off and the store was closed, and I was not able to buy what I needed.

To recap, this store has:

- No website (and thus no way to shop online)
- No updated Google business information

- No social media

Making the best of the situation:

Then, because I still needed this item, I checked out a larger gift store within 10 miles of the small store. This other store does have a website, with online ordering, so I was able to determine whether they carry what I am looking for. It also has updated its Google information, which reflects that it provides curbside pickup. I explore the website, and I find out exactly what COVID measures the store is taking (i.e., requiring masks, providing sanitizer, restricting the number of people in store, widening the aisles to allow for social distancing, and increasing the air circulation).

This second store has:

- Updated website that includes COVID-specific information and the ability to order online
- Updated Google business information
- Social media, with a robust Facebook presence that includes videos and special deals.

How do businesses thrive during COVID? Here are three must-dos:

Embrace digital more than ever. Restaurants and small retailers embraced online ordering (just as the big box stores have done for years). My local library switched to an online ordering and appointments-based way to get books. Successful organizations use all types of digital presence:—social media, websites, Google profiles, e-newsletters, etc.—to communicate with customers, clients, or donors. With many people choosing to stay home or working from home, the internet has become even more important.

Be aware of the situation and explain how you are responding. Do you understand how your customers feel? Are they anxious about getting the virus? Do they want to shop safely? Do they

want to save money? COVID has changed the reality for everyone. You have to make changes, and more importantly, you have to make sure your customers know what you are doing to respond to the situation.

Go virtual and like it. Many organizations and businesses use events to drum up support and sales. In 2020, events went from being in person to being virtual. Using a virtual format is not the same as being in person, but to succeed, organizations need to embrace this reality and adapt to it. Churches and synagogues started using Zoom and other livestreaming software to provide religious services to their congregants. Associations moved their annual meetings to be virtual. Some stores, such as the second example above, switched their product demonstrations to platforms such as Facebook Live.

The bottom line is that to thrive during COVID, businesses have to adapt. Failure to adapt will also mean failure to thrive.

Have you seen good examples of adaptation? Please share in the comments.

Desperate times call for desperate measures?

Among the COVID economic downturn, some companies are getting desperate for business, as I wrote in my last post.

If you are desperate for business, does this mean you should

do desperate things or act in a desperate manner? In one word, the answer is no. Appearing desperate or doing desperate things will backfire, guaranteed.

Jane Doe thought that she would reach out

Take for example the case of Jane Doe (using this name to protect this person's privacy). Jane Doe attended an online business presentation a couple of weeks ago, as did I. There was a networking component to the presentation, but I did not participate. After the event, the organizers sent a follow up email that included a list of all who attended. Several days later, I got an email from Jane Doe. This is what it said, in part:

It was great meeting you at the virtual event last week.

I am passionate about travel, having traveled to over 80 countries and 60 cruises on 5 continents. At award-winning [our company], we create amazing customized travel experiences for you, your friends, family, colleagues and clients, saving you a lot of money, time and stress, on your "ideal vacation", all with risk-free booking guarantees!

I would like to know more about you and your business and see how we can help grow each other's businesses. Are you open to a 15 minute phone call? What is a good day/time/phone number?

I would like to add you to our email list where you will receive travel deals and travel tips. If you do not wish to receive these emails, kindly let us know via this email address at your earliest convenience.

I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Right off, I am irritated by this email. First, we didn't meet. Second, this email is not personalized. And third, she says she will add me to her email list unless I opt out. And

last, she says (twice) she needs to hear from me at my “earliest convenience.” Apparently, Jane repeated it because she meant immediately as she added me to her list and sent me a marketing email just two days later.

Jane Doe became a spammer to her email marketing company

Once I got her marketing email, I immediately unsubscribed. When asked why, I said I had never requested being on this list. That response will most likely categorize Jane Doe as a spammer, since she didn’t follow CAN-SPAM rules. People should opt in to your email, not opt out.

Is there a less desperate way?

You don’t have to take desperate or even illegal measures just because things are grim. Jane Doe could have reached out and said something like this:

Hello [name of person],

I got your name from the [event name] list, since we both attended the presentation by [presenter]. I enjoyed the presentation and wanted to reach out to attendees to introduce myself and my business.

My travel company, [name of business] specializes in customized travel experiences. For example, we recently created an unforgettable business retreat for a small company, in which we [insert salient details of special trip].

Is customized travel something you’d be interested in? If so, I’d love to chat with you. Please email me at [insert email] and we can set up a phone appointment. In the meantime, I invite you to visit my website at [insert website address and link] and view some of the many customized experiences we have created. Learn more about our other services, and take a moment to sign up for our weekly

newsletter, which is chock full of travel specials and other great information. You can also click here [insert newsletter sign up] to sign up.

I look forward to staying in touch.

The bottom line and three better business tips

There's a difference between wanting to get more business and being desperate to get new business. Here are my for non-desperate, best business and email marketing practices:

- Don't spam people. Know the CAN-SPAM rules and remember you need audiences to opt in, not opt out.
- Customize outreach emails and personalize when possible.
- Write a compelling introductory email. Think about your audience—what's in it for them?

Don't let pandemic cause pandemonium in your business practices

The pandemic has left many desperate for business. These are tough economic times and lot of people around the globe are hurting. I get it. But the need to grow your business

doesn't mean you can overlook best practices. In fact, doing things in a slipshod manner may even backfire.

Do I know you?

A couple weeks ago, I started receiving emails from "Debra" with no last name and no affiliation. The subject line had something to do with yoga classes. I figured it was spam from a company that knew I had signed up for a yoga event. I kept deleting these emails.

But on Monday, the subject line said something about outdoor yoga this week. I opened the email and found it was from a yoga studio in Washington, DC. I have never attended this studio. And I don't recall signing up for its emails. I unsubscribed because it is highly unlikely I will ever go in to Washington for a yoga class.



Email marketing best practices

1.) Introduce yourself

Bad: Adding people without permission; sending emails to a new list without introduction or buy-in.

Best practices: It's best to requiring consent, but if you are building your email marketing list, and you have new names, *always* end an introductory email explaining who you are and what you want, and then ask whether those people want to be on your list. You achieve this by segmenting your list.

2.) Use your business name

Bad: Not having a professional/identifying sender name on your emails.

Best practice: Use your business name in the return email unless you are the business, and then you should use first and last names. Think about how emails show up in your inbox. Would you open an email from someone you don't know?

3.) Use your subject line to inform

Bad: Uninformative or vague subject lines that don't provide any specifics or needed details.

Best practice: No need to be clever, but don't be obtuse. Be clear as to what your email contains. If I don't know you, your subject line has to provide enough information for me to open your email.

Bottom line:

The pandemic is no excuse for forgetting your best business practices. By letting desperation for new business lead you to doing things thoughtlessly you are bound to hurt yourself more than help yourself.