

Marketing communications efforts do not fix organizational problems

This morning, the Washington Post reports that Metro (the Washington Area Metropolitan Transit Authority or WMATA) is hiring two big public relations/communications firms

“to help the transit agency rebuild its tattered image in the wake of a fatal Jan. 12 smoke incident.”

The two agencies, O’Neill Associates and Hill + Knowlton Strategies, are expert in crisis communications and will help develop a reputation management communications plan.

The problem for Metro is that it has more than an image problem. It has an organizational problem.

As anybody who lives in the Washington, D.C. area and who rides Metro knows, WMATA has frequent problems, including lengthy delays, broken car doors, broken escalators, and smoke-filled stations. Most of these problems do not result in fatalities, as did the January incident, but they do inconvenience hundreds of commuters every day.

WMATA has also experienced a drop in ridership in the past year (D.C. area sees fewer taking public transit). Although the article attributes this decline to lower gas prices, it is hard to imagine it doesn’t have to do with the unreliable and expensive service that WMATA offers.

Most news reports about the January incident detail aspects of WMATA’s organizational challenges. There’s a lack of internal accountability (why weren’t NTSB safety directives followed?) and a lack of cooperation with external parties (first responders did not know where the smoke-filled train was in

the tunnel and their radios did not work underground).

It's beyond my knowledge to detail the workings of WMATA, but as a rider, I have seen countless examples of poor service. Track work (or "rebuilding" as it is now called) happens nearly every weekend, causing lengthy delays. And the cost is astronomical. At the highest end, a round-trip peak-hour commute costs nearly \$12.

Frustration with Metro does not have to do with its image. It has to do with the real, day-to-day interactions most riders have with the system. A crisis communication plan is always good to have (as an aside, several years ago I heard Metro's then public relations director say that the agency had a plan in case of terrorism on the system, *but not in case of accidents*).

I hope that by hiring outside communications counsel, Metro is admitting it has a problem and that it is ready to seek for a solution. But the solution is not simply to *appear* to have stuff under control (create a positive image). **The real solution would be to address the organizational issues that underlie the image problem.**

What are your thoughts?

Some weekend reading

I share so many articles every day on Twitter, and of those I save my favorites to Pocket (my favorite tool for saving articles). Starting today, I will do a weekly or biweekly round-up of great articles for weekend reading.

Here are three articles on writing and editing:

7 Self-Editing Tips for Reporters Without Copy Editors

Study Shows the Value of Copy Editing

11 easy ways to write more clearly

Here's a couple about websites and social media:

5 Things You Can Learn From a Poorly Designed Website

Is Social Media Actually Helping Your Company's Bottom Line?

Happy reading and have a great weekend!

6 copy editing rules to make you a better writer

Today is National Grammar Day, and if there's one group that lives and breathes grammar, it's copy editors. (Note: you will find some that write copyediting and copyeditor as one word, but I decided to follow *Merriam-Webster*, which spells them as two words.)

By cleaning up your sloppy sentences, a copy editor makes your writing clearer. But not everyone has access to a copy editor. The next best thing is to learn what copy editors look for and apply it to your own writing.

1. Follow a style guide and stick to it. Whether you have your own organizational style guide or you use a standard guide such as *The Associated Press Stylebook*, be sure to consult it and defer to it. You may want to write "Web site" but your style guide says it's "website." Don't alternate usages. And

check stuff that is likely to trip you up such as dates, abbreviations, addresses, and titles.

2. Be consistent. Make sure you are using the same spelling and style throughout your document.

3. Use a dictionary (and choose your standard). There are a couple big dictionary names: *Oxford* and *Merriam-Webster*. Choose one and stick to it and then use it to make sure that you are spelling [that word] correctly. And more so, does [that word] mean what you think it means?

4. Watch out for often-confused words. Commonly confused words sound the same or are very close in spelling, but don't mean the same thing. Some examples are effect/affect, defer/differ, and compliment/complement. You can find exhaustive lists on the internet. Spell check won't catch these mistakes but using the wrong word will most certainly alter the meaning of what you are writing.

5. Fact check. Make sure it's Mary and not Marie and that February 14th, 2015 was a Saturday and not a Friday. Are you sure that's the correct address? You get the drift.

6. Pay attention to your commas (and apostrophes, colons, etc.). Nothing can derail a sentence faster than missing or improper punctuation. Also, take a stand regarding the Oxford or serial comma. Use it or don't, but be consistent.

Want more? Check out Grammar Girl's Editing Checklist for an overview of the various mistakes that copy editors look for, and you can even print it out as reference!

It's easy to get lost in writing your thoughts and not pay attention to the details. However, the details (grammar, style, punctuation, spelling) are what help to make your thoughts clear to your readers.

How are you celebrating National Grammar Day?

Are you sure you know what that word means?

By now you will have heard about the Cleveland local news anchor Kristi Capel and how she used a racial slur to describe Lady Gaga's performance at the Academy Awards. According to this report in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Capel apologized and said she did not know what the word meant (I am not using the word here because it is racist).

Think about that for a moment: *A news anchor, while broadcasting live, used a word that she did not understand.*

In Capel's case, I don't think there was any racial motivation behind this incident, but there was something much more common: ignorance. She was called out (and rightfully so) because what she said was racist. But every single day, people are guilty of using words they don't understand, mangling their meaning.

If you watch enough TV or read enough stuff online or in print, you will see many instances of misused words. To quote Inigo Montoya in *The Princess Bride*:

"You keep using that word. I don't think it means what you think it means."

Lifhack says that travesty, ironic and bemused are among the 10 Most Commonly Misused Words. Just look up the phrase "misused words" in your favorite search engine and you will

get loads of examples (there are many more than 10).

Here's one I see all the time

One word that I have seen misused over and over is "misnomer." Merriam-Webster defines misnomer as:

: the misnaming of a person in a legal instrument

: a use of a wrong or inappropriate name : a wrong name or inappropriate designation

Basically, a misnomer is using the wrong *name* for something. The example used by Merriam-Webster is the *international* airport that only serves domestic flights. Seems straightforward enough. Yet, many times I hear journalists using the word misnomer when what they really mean is misunderstanding. They'll say something like: "It's a misnomer to say that the senator is going to vote for the bill."

You know that word doesn't exist, right?

There are some people who make up words or mispronounce words. Huffington Post lists "11 Commonly Used Made-Up Words That Drive Us Insane" to include: "expresso," "supposably," and the famous "irregardless." (Buzzfeed has a similar list: 17 Misused and Made-Up Words That Make You Rage.)

Using words that don't mean what you think they do only makes you sound ignorant to those who do understand the meaning. In cases like Capel's, not only will you sound ignorant but you may also offend. So here are some warnings:

- If you are not sure of what a word means *precisely*, don't use it.
- If you think a word is right, but you aren't absolutely sure, don't use it.
- If you think you will sound like you know what you are talking about because you are using a long word, definitely don't use it.

- And finally, use a dictionary. Look that pesky word up.

What words do you often notice as being misused?

One action to take to guarantee blog continuity

I used to blog a couple of times a week, sometimes more. Then, after six years, I reduced my blogging to once per week, with the occasional second post in the same week. My aim is to be consistent, and I always want to have at least one blog post each week, no matter what.

Consistency is key to keeping your blog viable. If you take off for months on end, people forget about your blog. And if you don't blog regularly, it is hard to promote your blog.

So what are you going to do when you can't or won't post on a regular, consistent schedule?

Some share old posts. In many cases, that's not sustainable. After all, a blog is generally about timeliness and being topical. Although some blog posts have value long after you post them, you can't be wholly dependent on a few old posts.

Some hire a ghostblogger. Paying a third party to produce blog posts on a continual basis can be an excellent solution if you can afford it *and* you can provide good instruction to the blogger for hire. You will also have to supervise the blog posts, and make sure they are meeting your audience's needs and your organization's voice.

Some solicit guest writers. This is a great option if you can find the right person to guest post on your blog.

The one action you should do to prevent this situation from happening in the first place? *Write an evergreen post once a month or so.* (Evergreen means that it can be used at any time.) File it away. This way, when you are in the situation where you can't or won't blog, you have fresh material to post. If you are like me, there are times when you are feeling more creative or more focused, and writing seems easier. Take advantage and write up a blog post. Another plus of doing this is that you can work on your post to perfect it before posting. More editing time, more time to find images, and more time to work on the headline.

If writing an extra post each month seems daunting, perhaps start with having a regular brainstorming session (say once a month or once a quarter) where you challenge yourself to come up with five to ten blog post ideas. Keep that list on file and when you are feeling blocked, you will have something to work on.

We all get derailed but that doesn't mean we can't get back on track. Having a back up plan is a smart blogging policy.

What do you do when you can't blog?

How high is your website's barrier to entry?

Recently, I came across an article about how the Jewish online magazine Tablet is dealing with comments. It has decided to charge a fee to allow people to comment in order to make it harder for trolls to post obnoxious (and often anti-Semitic)

comments. But there is an unintended consequence, and that is that legitimate commenters will now be dissuaded from commenting as well. The barrier to entry may prove too high.

Have you ever thought about how a visitor interacts with your website? What does that person need to do to find what he or she is looking for? What information is crucial and how easy is it to access it?

If you have been seeing a low conversion rate on your website, a drop in visitors, or a high bounce rate, perhaps you need to examine whether you have created an unintended (and intangible) barrier to entry or have built a barrier to entry that is too high.

Many websites have barriers to entry. Some are easily “climbed” and some are like Mount Everest, impossible. Generally, these barriers include “mechanical” barriers such as subscription fees, sign up forms, or registration requirements. Some barriers are more subtle, intangible, but still make it hard for visitors to access your content.

Mechanical barriers: High, medium and low walls to climb

In an effort to generate revenue from online readers, newspapers have added online **subscription fees**. That’s a high barrier to entry, since visitors will not only have to sign up, but provide payment. Some websites require **registration**, generally your email and a password. That’s also a medium barrier to entry. Yet other websites splash a newsletter **sign-up** before you can read the content, but generally you can close that out making it a low barrier to entry.

There are good reasons to create these barriers. After all, you may want to grow your marketing database or get some

insight into who is visiting your website, or like many newspapers, you are looking for a source of revenue.

Intangible barriers: Creating a psychological “wall”

But barriers are not just mechanical or even visible. Your barriers to entry may be intangible and psychological. By that I mean that your barriers are tripping visitors' heads. For example, your **website navigation** may not be intuitive or clear and may make it hard to for visitors to find what they are looking for.

Another hard-to-quantify barrier is the **language** that you choose to use on your website. Many tech and government websites are flush with jargon that is *nearly unintelligible* to an outsider.

Some websites make it hard for visitors by having too much **content** or information to sort through. Have you ever landed on a page that made your eyes and head hurt from information overload (or worse, visual overload)? Then you probably know what I mean, and I bet you just went elsewhere.

How would you classify your website in terms of barrier to entry? High, medium or low? Is it what you want or are you unintentionally turning visitors away?

Are we living in a bubble?

I wrote this post back in November, and never published it. But today, I was reading the *Washington Post* and came across

Paul Farhi's column regarding the Brian Williams "scandal." In case you haven't heard about it, it involves Brian "misremembering" being shot at in a helicopter in Iraq in 2003. Farhi writes:

*NBC News went into damage-control mode a day after the public symbol of the network, anchor Brian Williams, faced a **torrent** of derision and criticism for telling a story about his wartime reporting that has proved to be untrue.*

*As **public disapproval roared on social media**, NBC sought to protect and defend Williams, its lead anchor since 2004 and the most popular anchor in the nation.*

Bolding is mine. Notice that Farhi writes about the "torrent" of criticism and disapproval...on social media. I stopped reading the article after these two paragraphs because I don't think there's a torrent, or a deluge or even a rainstorm of derision outside of social media. I think this is a *social media crisis*, where people in social media all seem to outraged by the "crisis" and where the rest of the country (those people sitting around their living rooms watching TV in the evening) couldn't care less. Notice too that Brian Williams was on TV last night as if nothing had happened. And maybe it only happened in our little social media bubble.

So this is where I started this post back in November:

When it started three years ago, I was a huge fan of Showtime's series *Homeland*. I was hooked and had to watch every episode. It bummed me out we had to wait nine months between seasons.

But when the third season started this past September, I was no longer enthusiastic. I watched the first couple of episodes and found that I just didn't like the main character Carrie

anymore. She had become way too crazy (she actually considers drowning her child!) and demanding and unreasonable. The story line had strayed so far from the initial *Homeland* that it was another story altogether. I quit watching. I no longer care.

Because I no longer care, I am no longer living in the *Homeland* bubble. The bubble is one where “everybody” is watching and commenting. Everybody just loves it. Articles and blog posts abound.

It seems that when you believe something or are a big fan of something, you surround yourself with like-minded people and views. In fact, your views are being reinforced. At times, you actively avoid being exposed to opposing views.

Notice what is going on with Uber and Bill Cosby. In case you haven't seen the reports, Uber threatened to expose the personal life of a reporter who was aiming to write an article about Uber. Several women have come forward to accuse Cosby of sexual assault. Both these cases are serious and they expose great flaws in a popular company and a beloved entertainer.

Many articles, blog posts and Tweets have been devoted to dissecting the PR and communications shortcomings shown by both Uber and Cosby. But here's the thing: does it matter? People are still using Uber. And it was reported that at a comedy show in Florida a few days ago, the comedian got a standing ovation.

There's a disconnect between the world at large and the bubble we surround ourselves with. In PR and crisis communications, both Uber and Cosby are toast. They've handled these situations poorly. But for those who don't delve into how things are communicated, who don't follow the news (and by the way, journalists are living in a bubble sometimes too), the concern is just not there. They don't care about Uber's threats because Uber gives them a convenient way to get places. They ignore the accusations against Cosby because they

find him funny.

What do you think? Are these controversies manufactured? Is the scandal for real? Are we living in a social media culture of outrage? Are we living in a bubble?

Some thoughts about comments

Right off the bat let me say I think having open but moderated comments on websites and blogs is the way to go. In the past year, several leading blogs have decided to go the no-comment route, arguing that discussions will occur on social media. That's fine, but part of having a blog is being social, and to me, social means allowing comments.

This morning I read this piece on consumer advocate Christopher Elliot's site, in which he describes how he will deal with comments (especially snarky or inappropriate ones). Basically, his team (don't we all wish we had a team, but I digress) will moderate all comments and flag inappropriate ones. If someone is flagged, he/she will be informed and eventually be disallowed from commenting on the site. Seems very fair to me.

Yesterday, Mark Schaefer on his {grow} blog wrote a post entitled "I don't know my online audience and neither do you." His point, with which I most definitely agree, is that you can't rely on social media actions and presence to really know who your audience is. There are many customers and potential customers who are just not active on social media, but may be actively doing business or thinking of doing business with you. They may be talking about you (gasp!) in person or

emailing (gasp!) links but (the idea of it!) not sharing on social media. He says we can only identify about two percent of who it is that is sharing our content.

He writes:

Pick any blogger who has been around for awhile (SIC) and ask them what percent of their audience comments on the blog – they'll say it is about 2 percent.

Basically, the issue of commenting boils down to motivation. Only very motivated people are going to comment on your blog. In Elliot's case, many of those are motivated by a desire to be unpleasant or controversial. In Schaefer's example, only a small percentage of a total audience takes the step of commenting.

It's important to recognize that all a comment indicates is that a motivated person has decided to interact with you on your blog (whether for good or for bad). By allowing it, you are encouraging interaction. By moderating comments, you are encouraging good behavior. By depending on getting comments, on the other hand, you are falling into a perceived popularity trap.

A blog won't rise or fall on the number of comments that are on it, but rather on the actions that you want readers to take. Perhaps you want your readers to think about doing business with you. Or perhaps you want readers to think of you as an authority in a subject area. Whatever your goal is, try to figure out how to measure it. Your comments alone won't do it.

You are, of course, welcome to comment on this subject.

UPDATE February 9, 2015:

Just came across this article, about Tablet Magazine, and a trial scheme to ask people to pay to comment. Should cut down

on the crazy comments, but could also backfire by creating an obstacle to legitimate commenters.

Stop surprising me with your “tips”

In the last few weeks, I have been noticing an inordinate amount of posts with this type of formulaic headline:

[Insert number, generally 5 or 7] [insert hyperbolic adjective such as surprising or best-ever] **Tips to** [insert desired action, generally improving or achieving] **Your** [Insert success-oriented result such as expert knowledge or success]

Example:

5 Tips to Exponentially Improve Your Business Success

This is a headline formula sure to get attention. It is well-known that people love lists, tips and any headline with a number in it. Combine them all, and well, you have guaranteed clicks (also known as click-bait). And click-bait is exactly what these are. Very few, if any, of the articles attached to these headlines provide anything substantial. Certainly, not anything surprising. And many seem to forget what a tip is.

Although the word tip has many meanings (including the point of a pencil, to topple something) the definition most of these posts refer to is this, from Merriam-Webster:

a piece of advice or expert or authoritative information

or

a piece of advance or confidential information given by one thought to have access to special or inside sources

But here's the thing. A lot of what I am reading barely seems like advice and most of it is certainly not authoritative. For example, I read one of these articles entitled something like 5 Tips to Improve Your Writing, and one of the "tips" was "don't lie." Seriously. Don't lie is not a tip, it's a given (and some of the religious persuasion would say it is a commandment).

And then, there's an article I read last week about "surprising" ways to land a job. Here's one of the surprising ways: network. They may have well put in "fill an application" or "send a resume."

I understand why people are writing these headlines and constructing their posts like this. After all, following a formula is easy, and it usually gets attention. The problem is that when you don't deliver on the promise of the headline, people won't read anything you write anymore or at least won't look at it seriously.

Here's my non-surprising tip: avoid click-bait posts.

One big marketing lesson from

the MLK Day of Service

For several years now, there have been organized Days of Service on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day across the United States.

I love Days of Service. In 2013, I went to the big one organized around President Obama's second inauguration, where I joined thousands in putting together care packages for US troops. Yesterday, I went to the Montgomery County (where I live) Day of Service and learned to crochet squares, which will be joined together by other volunteers into blankets for needy people.



Crochet squares at
Montgomery County
MLK Day of Service

Yesterday, at the Montgomery County Conference Center, where the MLK Day of Service event was held, I saw hundreds of folks, representing various ethnicities and races, many of them children, all crammed together in a ballroom. All of them converging to volunteer in memory of Dr. King, to participate in a small project (crochet for one hour, like me) but selfless.

How do you get thousands of folks to volunteer? Generally, there's not enough budget for physical incentives (t-shirts, food, etc.) for everyone. People will need to transport themselves to the location and give up a chunk of their time. So why do people do it, year after year?

All sorts of people will take the time and devote energy to volunteering because there is payoff. The payoff is a feeling of accomplishment. They feel like they are helping out and perhaps, even making a difference.

The one big marketing lesson here is simple. **People want do things that make them feel good about themselves.**

A powerful motivation to get people to do what you want (buy a product, sign up for healthcare, etc.) is to focus on making people feel good about themselves.

Have you seen the TV commercials for Chantix (a medication to help people quit smoking)? The commercials tell the stories of individuals who decided to quit, generally because they want to live long lives for their families. They focus on how good people feel once they have stopped smoking, and what a great accomplishment it is.

We know good marketing understands and focuses on the intended target audience. Part of understanding a target audience is to know what will motivate action. Some marketers feel scare tactics work better (if you don't buy life insurance, you will be hit by catastrophic funeral costs you won't be able to afford). In my opinion, people prefer to feel good about their choices (if you buy life insurance, you will have peace of mind).

What are your thoughts? Do you respond better to positive or negative marketing?