Before you write your next blog post, ask yourself this

You want to grow your blog. You want to write consistently. You want to be shared widely.

All bloggers do. But not all bloggers succeed.

With all things being equal, (posting well written, well research, thoughtful, grammatically-correct and spell-checked posts) what sets successful bloggers apart?

Successful bloggers know the answer to this question:

Who will read this blog post?

In other words, they know and understand their **target audience.**

If you know your target audience, you will write the stuff that is relevant, useful and/or interesting to them.

Let's say you are a plumber who blogs about plumbing issues. Who is your target audience? Is it potential customers? Or is it young plumbers who want to learn the business? If it is the former, then your blog posts would perhaps be focused on what causes plumbing issues and do-it-yourself tips to keep plumbing working well. If your target audience is young plumbers interested in learning the tricks of the trade, you might write about how to get customers or how to find the best plumbing supply vendors.

If you don't define your target audience, and think about their needs, you will have an unfocused blog, and you will end up reaching no one.

So before you write your next blog post, ask yourself **who will want to read this?** If the answer is not a member of your

defined target audience, think twice about posting.

Blogging resolutions, goals and actions for 2015

It's hard to believe that we are in January. Of 2015. After clearing the haze left from the year-end holidays, and eying the still empty 2015 calendar in front of us, what better time to consider what you want to do with your blog this year.

In order to do something (bigger, better, more, less)—anything—with your blog, you should consider creating your very own 2015 blogging plan, which should include setting blogging resolutions and goals, and then listing a series of actions to get you there.

To me, a resolution is the guiding principle (for example, I want to be a better writer) while goals are a measurable way of achieving results (following the example, publish five articles during the year). Actions are simply the steps you take in order to get there (again, per example, research publications).

So here's your bare-bones 2015 blogging plan:

1. Set a blogging resolution for the year (or as some people like to do, a focus word/phrase)
2. Set a series of goals (make sure they are specific and measurable) to help you achieve your resolution
3. List the actions you need to take to get there

Blogging resolutions (choose one or write your own)

- Blog regularly and consistently

- Get better results/generate leads/improve thought leadership
- Increase blog readers
- Restart a blog
- Upgrade/change the focus/redesign the blog
- Be more focused on your area of expertise

Blogging goals (Pick and choose which would help you attain your blogging resolution and then add the specifics)

- Create a blogging schedule/editorial calendar that includes topics, authors, target amount of posts, keywords, etc.
- Write a mission/vision statement for the blog
- Set aside brainstorming time each month to generate blog post ideas
- Spend more time on each blog post paying attention to grammar, spelling, fact-checking
- Create better headlines for each blog post that will result in (more attention, more readers, better sharing)
- Implement a blog promotion plan to reach target audience
- Include graphics, video and/or audio in most or all blog posts
- Write a target number of blog posts per week/month/year
- Experiment with a different format (podcast, vlog, live blog)
- Determine specific call-to-actions to include with every blog post

Blogging actions (everybody should do most of these)

- Update your blogging software, themes and plugins regularly or as needed
- Review your current plugins and explore new or different versions (Do you still need all of them? What functionality is missing from your blog?)
- Review your sharing capabilities (Any new social networks you want to include? Noticed any good sharing

plugins on other blogs?)
- <u>Update your copyright line to reflect 2015 (do this now!)</u>
- Research your "competition"
- Set your 2015 Google Analytics goals
- Study your Google Analytics (if you don't know how—search for a tutorial or class)
- If you use IFTTT, review and update your settings
- Create graphics "warehouse" (whether server or cloud-based) where you can access and store your own pictures, images, infographics, video, etc.
- Research and select an image subscription service
- Determine your blog loading speed and if it is slow, find ways to improve it
- Make your blog responsive already! Do you see many people without smartphones around?
- Update biographies, about us pages, gravatar pictures

This is by no means a complete list. What would you add? What are your blogging resolutions and goals? What specific actions do you take to keep your blog running smoothly?

Happy New Year 2015! Here's a virtual toast to you achieving great things with your blog this year. If you've never had a plan for your blog, make 2015 the year to start!

Do you fly a brand?

Do you ever choose to fly an airline because of its brand identity? Or, do you choose your flight based on

schedule/price? I bet it's more than the latter than the former, but if all things are close, you may choose the brand you like the most.

Last week, I took my first flight on Virgin America. I was going out to San Francisco and Virgin flies from Washington to SFO at least twice a day. I had heard good things, and I thought that Virgin, like Southwest or JetBlue, was a lower cost carrier. Well, it really isn't. Virgin charges a comparable price to the other major carrier (United) flying to San Francisco from this area. And like United, Virgin charges for bags. Unlike United, Virgin charges for in-flight movies ($8 a pop). Virgin also charges for food, snacks and for premium (like Honest Tea) and alcoholic beverages. Pretty much the only thing that you can get for "free" is water, coffee and soda. But you order all of these items on demand, from your seat, via an in-flight on-screen ordering system. You want more water, you "order" it.

And there are other differences. The seats are leather, there's more legroom, and the cabin has a purple light. The flight attendants seem a bit younger and "cooler" than most, and there is definitely no in-flight magazine (because print is so yesterday). But what is really different is the safety video. Take a look:

http://youtu.be/DtyfiPIHsIg

Read more about how this video heralded a new brand strategy for Virgin America in Fast Company.

It seems that even though Virgin America basically nickels and dimes its passengers, **people enjoy flying with the airline**. It just feels different—more fun and more hip. Even the vibe at the airport was different. Virgin shares a terminal with American at SFO. The Virgin side had funky chairs and work tables (with plug-in terminals). Lot of people were working at their laptops, with headphones on. Very few (if any) screaming

children. Only one wheelchair request. The feeling was more tech-y, hip and relaxed. The American side felt darker, more stressed, more old-school.

The real difference may also be customer service. Our flight out of Washington-Dulles was delayed by two hours due to the huge storm that hit the Bay Area last week. The people at the podium immediately set to help out anybody who needed/wanted to change their flight plans. One of the crew brought out snack carts and gave out free water and snacks. Everybody seemed calm. There was no grousing. A woman in the waiting area across from me told me she travels Virgin to California all the time for work. She told me it was rare for there to be a delay. She herself had connections out of SFO, and had to change her flight. She got on the phone with Virgin, and they were able to accommodate her. She was going to leave the next day, but when she left, she did not seem upset. The airline had taken care of her. The delay was not Virgin's fault, but rather Mother Nature's. Virgin worked hard to lessen the impact of the delay and to accommodate its passengers (or guests as they call them).

Now, would I fly Virgin again? Most likely. I would know to bring food on-board though, and maybe a movie on my smartphone. It would still depend on price and schedule, but all things being equal, Virgin wins out. It just felt better.

What about you? Do you fly an airline because you like what it stands for? Let me know in the comments.

UPDATE

I just came across this post on the Wonkblog on the Washington Post, which lists airlines on how often they lose your luggage. Virgin America is last on the list (loses the least amount of luggage). Now that may be because fewer people check their bags, or because Virgin is better. Either way, it is a good reason to fly an airline.

No pain, no gain (or, are you relying too much on assists)?

Every time I go to the gym I see at least one person hanging on for dear life on the Step Mill. In case you don't have them at your gym, they are a "workout escalator." Essentially, the workout consists of climbing moving stairs. Lots of people lean on the bars (yesterday I saw a woman whose upper body was horizontal, putting all her upper body weight on her arms) when the "correct" or more efficient way is to use the bars simply for balance and let your lower body do the work of climbing the stairs and keeping you upright.

When you lean on the bars you are effectively **getting an assist.** You are trying to minimize the pain. But, as they say: no pain, no gain. Though it may look like you are working hard, you really aren't. You aren't getting the cardio you think you are and you aren't burning the amount of calories the machine tells you.

The same thing happens on social media when you rely on programs to post for you. You are getting an assist that makes you look like you are working hard when in fact you are not. Plus, you are not getting all the benefits of social media either.

There are many social media apps and programs designed to give you an assist. We may need that automation in order to keep up with the pace of social media, which is 24-7. The problem is when we rely on these assists for all of our social media presence and we forget to inject some of our own effort.

There's an account I have been following on Twitter for a couple of years. I say account and not person because almost

all the tweets from the account are links to blog posts (old blog posts at that). And I have seen the same five or six blog post links tweeted out over and over and over and over. There is no personality there. There is no discussion. There is no interaction.

I am sure the person who manages this account set up a program that will tweet the top blog posts every certain amount of time. This person pretty much set it and forgot it. This person rarely if ever has any exchange with anybody, never re-tweets, and only responds to direct tweets days later (if at all). ***This account is entirely reliant on social media assists. So although there is a social media presence, there is no social media benefit.***

Social media requires effort and attention. Get assists if you must, but don't forget that over-relying on assistance means that you aren't making as many gains.

What are your thoughts? How do you handle your social media accounts? Do you follow accounts that are completely automated?

Would you make a good Etsy

seller?

In Sunday's *Washington Post* there is an interesting interview (How to craft a successful career) with Chad Dickerson, CEO of Etsy. In case you've never had the urge to shop for handmade jewelery or other crafts, Etsy is *the* place to do that online. On Etsy, thousands of artists and crafters can sell their goods to a national/international market. It's a model that is working to the tune of $1.35 billion in sales.

The part of the interview that caught my eye as a marketing communications professional was this:

Q. What do the best sellers on Etsy have in common?

A. The best sellers on Etsy have really great photography. They also tell stories about themselves, how they're inspired, how they make the things they sell. Those are the keys to being successful on Etsy.

In other words, to market yourself successfully you have to have a standout image and a great story. Your graphics and your storytelling ability is what makes you stand out from a really crowded marketplace.

This is true everywhere, not just on Etsy. If you are shopping for a product online, you need to be able to see what you are buying (**the power of image**) and know why this product is better than the rest (**the power of storytelling**).

Perhaps if you are struggling to get "eyeballs" to your blog or website or buyers to your bricks-and-mortar business, you need to take Chad Dickerson's insight to heart. Perhaps you need to assess the power of your graphics and your story. Are they strong? Are they setting you apart from our competition (in a positive way, of course)?

Oh, and the other thing(it *should* go without saying) is that

to be a good Etsy seller you have to **have a good product that people want to buy.**

What makes you buy on Etsy or anywhere else? Do you assess the strength of the graphics? Do you read the description and/or story?

Thanks are not only for Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving is two days away. If you are like me, you've gotten lots of email and regular mail from companies and organizations you've done business with or have donated money to. Some are simply expressing thanks, and others are reminding you that some people won't be able to eat on Thanksgiving (so give more money). Others are using Thanksgiving as a differentiator—sending holiday cards now instead of Christmas/New Year's.

There's nothing wrong with this, and I appreciate getting thanked or remembered at least once a year. But perhaps businesses and organizations should consider how to thank customers and supporters year-round.

So many times, we conduct a business transaction and afterwards there's nothing. What's particularly galling is when you donate or volunteer, and you hear nothing from the organization. A couple of years ago, I volunteered at a huge Christmas event. Not only was it very disorganized (which showed a lack of appreciation for volunteers' time) but there was no thank you, formal (follow up email) or otherwise. I

haven't been back since.

A thank you—a show of appreciation—is an important marketing tool. I wrote "Why a thank you is good marketing" here five years ago. I still think it's true.

So thank you! I appreciate that you took the time to read my thoughts. I am especially thankful for those who have shared my posts and/or taken the time to comment.

Happy Thanksgiving to those celebrating! I wish you and your families a happy and relaxing holiday.

More is not a smart communications goal

It's like I am hearing the Pointer Sisters' *Jump (For My Love)* song on repeat. It's that refrain "more, more, more." I get emails urging me to get more website visitors. I see accounts on Twitter that claim they can get me more followers. I see announcements for webinars on how to get more blog readers.

Enough!

More is not a smart communications goal. <u>More is meaningless without qualifiers</u>. Yes, I want more Twitter followers. But I want followers that are genuine (as opposed to spam) accounts and who have an interest in what I am saying. I want more blog readers who will find what I write useful and may then share a post or sign up for my newsletter or hire me to do work.

But more in and of itself does not mean much. If a Facebook page has 4,000 likes but none of those "likers" shares information or buys products, then what is the point? If you

have thousands of Twitter followers but are never re-tweeted, are you having an impact? If you get hundreds of website visitors but there is no "conversion" then what did you accomplish?

We see ploys for more all the time. You see TV stations running sweepstakes and exhorting people to "like our Facebook page." You see link bait. You see forced sign-ups for newsletters before you can read an article or blog post. All these are trying to get more without caring exactly who those people are.

Your communications goals should not be simply to get more. Your goals need to be specific. For example, you may want to reach more people in a certain geographic area or in an age group.

Are you being bombarded by vendors trying to get you to get more? If so, what are your thoughts about it?

Are you CAN-SPAM compliant?

A couple of weeks ago, I went to a networking event and met a public relations "professional." We exchanged business cards. I sent him a follow up email (nice to meet you, etc.) to which he didn't respond. Instead, he added me to his enewsletter list. I was peeved. This guy, who didn't have the basic courtesy to respond to a personal email, just threw my email into his marketing list without asking me. I quickly opted-out.

Other than being rude, was this guy doing something illegal? Was he being compliant with the CAN-SPAM Act (the very good acronym for *Controlling the Assault of Non-Solicited Pornography and Marketing*)?

The CAN-SPAM Act aims to reduce unsolicited direct marketing email. There are several parts to making your business compliant (you can read the seven main requirements on the FTC website and you can download a PDF with all the pertinent information).

If you distribute an electronic newsletter, you need to be CAN-SPAM compliant. You can get booted off most of the email marketing platforms if you are not, and most of them make it easy to comply.

According to the Act, the main requirements for compliance are these:

- Don't use false or misleading header information
- Don't use deceptive subject lines
- Identify the message as an ad
- Provide a physical location address
- Provide a way to opt out of further mailings
- Honor opt-out requests within 10 days

It turns out that CAN-SPAM does not spell out who can be added to your email list (opt-in). In fact, the requirement is directed only at opting out. You must include a way to unsubscribe, and you must honor that request quickly. However, if you do business with Canada or the European Union, things are a bit stricter. Both Canada and the EU require people to OPT-IN by giving consent. If you have a newsletter, I suggest you familiarize yourself with the opt-in laws for North America and Europe.

So, it seems rude PR guy was, in fact, compliant with CAN-SPAM requirements since his newsletter did have an opt-out. Had I been Canadian though, he would have been in trouble.

Here's the thing, just because something is legal, does not mean it's right. Although the US does not have the same stringent opt-in requirements as Canada or the EU, marketers should be aware of why those requirements may be a good idea. People don't want unsolicited email. It clogs up inboxes, which are already being inundated with real spam (somehow, these laws do not seem to inhibit the scammers and spammers).

Why not make sure you are asking people to opt-in to your enewsletter instead of only asking them to opt-out? All you have to do is have a sign-up form on your website. You can also ask people if they want to be added. Seriously, don't you want to communicate with people who are interested in your message instead of annoying people and then forcing them to opt-out?

What are your thoughts? How do you handle subscribing people to your newsletter?

UPDATE

Upon further research, I came across a section in the FCC website that seems to imply marketers should get consent to send emails. It says:

Giving Your Consent

Under the FCC's rules, texts and commercial email messages may be sent to your mobile phone if you previously agreed to receive them. For texts that are commercial, your consent must be in writing (for example, in an email or letter); for non-commercial, informational texts (such as such as those by or on behalf of tax-exempt non-profit organizations, those for political purposes, and other noncommercial purposes, such as school closings) your consent may be oral.

For commercial email, your consent may be oral or written. Senders must tell you the name of the entity that will be

sending the messages and, if different, the name of the entity advertising products or services. All commercial email messages sent to you after you've given your authorization must allow you to revoke your authorization, or "opt out" of receiving future messages. You must be allowed to opt out the same way you "opted in," including by dialing a short code. Senders have 10 days to honor requests to opt out.

Notice it says your consent MAY be oral or written. It does not say it MUST be. So, it is unclear to me if as a marketer, you HAVE to ask for consent.

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7 actions that will give your event more mileage

Having attended a couple of professional development events in the last few weeks, I noticed that the organizers did little to guarantee people would a) enjoy the event and b) talk about the event (and by extension, the organizing group).

Event planning is a skill, and it is not easy. Too many volunteers and committee members think all they need to do is choose a date, book the space, order food and drink, and publicize the event. But those are the basics. To get more mileage from an event both for the attendees and for the presenting organization, you need to do more.

Here are seven actions that will help you get more mileage from your next event.

1. Designate volunteers to be organizational ambassadors/greeters. You will need more than the person

greeting attendees at the door. These volunteers, who should be good representatives of your organization, will welcome people to the event and make sure they know where everything is located (food, restrooms, seats, etc.). But more so, ambassadors should introduce attendees to each other.

Why this gives you more mileage: Your attendees will feel welcomed. They will meet at least one person (the ambassador). This makes your organization look welcoming and more enticing to non-members.

2. Prep your speaker(s) and/or presenter(s). Make sure everybody knows what to say so there is no pointless repetition. Divide up introductions appropriately. Make sure announcements and other information will be shared.

Why this gives you more mileage: Messaging is important and gives attendees useful information. By prepping your speakers, you are ensuring your organization looks professional.

3. Use social media. Invite your attendees to tweet about the event (and give them a hashtag) or post summaries to their blogs and other social media.

Why this gives you more mileage: Social media amplifies. Enough said.

4. Have someone monitor social media during and after the event. Make sure to respond to any questions or comments (especially if there is a problem—maybe the AC is not working or the Wi-Fi is spotty). Retweet and publicize your attendees posts.

Why this gives you more mileage: Again, it amplifies, but it also shows your organization is responsive and embraces social media.

5. Be sure to incorporate time for Q&A, and make it organized. Q&A shouldn't be an afterthought, and it shouldn't be a free

for all. Organizers should make sure to designate a time for questions. Whether you decide to have a microphone for the audience or take questions via social media, you should make it easy for people to interact with your presenters.

Why this gives you more mileage: Your audience will get more clarity on issues and, again, it makes your organization look responsive.

6. Create a recap of the event and post it to your blog/website and your social media networks. The recap of the event could include a summary of the presentation, contact information for the presenters, and photos of the event (and if you post photos on Facebook, people could tag themselves).

Why this gives you more mileage: Your recap is now shareable content for your website, blog and/or newsletter. Attendees will have something to reference if they want to talk about the event.

7. Email all attendees a thank you and evaluation survey shortly after the event. You may also include a link to your recap (see above).

Why this gives your more mileage: You will have yet another opportunity to interact with your attendees while getting useful feedback. You could even have an offer for new members or discounts to future events.

What would you add? What has been your experience when attending professional development events?

The 5 essential skills for great web writing

Web design keeps changing

The wonderful Leslie O'Flahavan gave a great presentation/workshop last week about new web design trends and how they affect web writing. You can download it here. Some of these trends include infinite scrolling (like on the Time Magazine website, where you can just keep scrolling down through endless articles) and the large-type front page (like this, on this page with A to X Writing Advice). There's also a trend to include pre-made shareable content (usually pre-written tweets).

***How* people access a website has to be considered**

Then there is the need (this is *not* a trend) to have everything visible and rendering appropriately on any device people happen to be using to access your website—desktop, laptop, tablet or smartphone. Type has to be readable. Although these issues are solvable by good design and web architecture, web writers have to consider these when deciding how to present which information.

Web writing is not quite the same as writing for print

Since most every business, nonprofit and news organization is on the web, web/content writing is probably the largest type of writing being done today. Yet, it is not as if you can just take your print materials, digitize them and call it a day. Clearly, there is a lot to consider when you are writing for the web.

What makes for a good web writer?

Can just anybody write for the web? Not really. I think people

can be taught how to write for the web, but not everybody has the ability to be like Leslie and be able to see what is going on in web design, spot trends and realize how these new changes affect web content.

The five essential skills of a great web writer:

1. The ability to spot the trends. This also means keeping on top of UX (user experience) and other issues that affect how websites are designed.

2. Understanding how the new design trends affect what you write. It's not enough to spot the trends. You need to be able to see how those trends impact what content should be included and how it should be written.

3. Ability to write in short and long formats. As Leslie describes in her presentation, there's the snack and then there's the meal. You have to be able to write short, snappy headlines but also be able to write longer, more "meaty" content.

4. Ability to synthesize information. You are called on to write short descriptions, whether it be for pre-made tweets or web page headings. In order to do this, you must be able to take a lot of information and condense it. It's helpful if you can explain things simply too.

5. Visual and design sensibility. Being able to understand the role that visual and design play in how a website is read and viewed is key, as the ability to work with graphic/web designers to make your content look appealing.

Have you noticed website writing has changed? Have you seen websites that look great but read poorly? What is your experience with web writing?