

# Is it real or is it...a robot?

Imagine you're having a party. You invite some friends and acquaintances. You crank up some music, put out some snacks and drinks, and your guests are milling around, having a good time. There's a knock on the door and Rosie, the robotic maid from the Jetsons is there. She's been sent in place of your friend Jane Jones. Jane is sorry she can't attend but she is too busy. Rosie comes in and tells you that she has been instructed to follow people she might find interesting. She then starts walking behind a couple of your friends.



Rosie Love by Doran  
on Flickr

At some point, a group of you are sitting and discussing your upcoming vacation plans when suddenly Rosie chimes in and says: My latest blog post is about how to maximize user engagement. One of your friends asks Rosie to share her top tip on maximizing user engagement. Rosie is silent. Everybody goes back to discussing vacation planning.

This scenario happens every single day on Twitter, as busy people try to participate in the Twitter conversation via robot (also known as Twitter management).

## **Are you using a Twitter Management tool?**

Last night, I was at an event (in real life) and saw someone I follow (and who follows me) on Twitter. I went over and said hi. She looked at me blankly. I explained we follow each other on Twitter. She kind of laughed and explained that she uses Commun.it, something that automatically follows people for her, and even tweets for her. So in essence, I have been interacting with a robot.

If your goal for Twitter is engagement, then having a robotic presence is a killer. I am not saying you shouldn't schedule some tweets or use something to let you find people to follow. But if you are not participating in it personally, and you are basically "tweeting by proxy," you are nothing more than Rosie Jetson—a robot bringing nothing to the conversation.

## **Perhaps you are too busy for Twitter**

My thought is that if you are too busy for Twitter, perhaps it is not the best platform for you. Twitter is time intensive, no doubt. And if you use it well, you can develop real relationships with people all over the world. If you use it robotically, on the other hand, you get very little if anything from it. You may have a long list of followers and people you are following, but if there is no meaningful interaction, what is the point?

Do you use a Twitter management tool? Why or why not? If you do, what do you get from it? Please share in the comments.

*Looking to jump start your blogging? Join me for the next **How to Write Your Blog** workshop, taking place on April 1 in Washington, D.C. For more details and to register, check out the [Eventbrite page](#).*

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# 5 mistakes to avoid on your blog

When you read as many blogs as I do, you see a lot of really great blogs. Great blogs have interesting and relevant content and they are easy to read. But just as there are great blogs, there are many more mediocre blogs.



Forehead Slap by Terry Robinson on Flickr

What separates a great blog from a mediocre one? Avoiding these five mistakes:

1. **Being hard to understand.** Perhaps it's the excessive use of jargon, or the spelling and grammatical mistakes, but mediocre blogs make it hard for a reader to get the point.
2. **Not being scannable.** Web reading is different than print reading. We tend to favor shorter sentences and the ability to move down the page quickly. In short, web writing should be scannable, that is providing readers with with lots of headings, lists, bullets and short sentences.
3. **No dateline.** I have heard the argument than by not having a dateline on your blog posts the content seems evergreen.

Perhaps. But evergreen content is always evergreen—the date shouldn't matter. In my opinion, blogs are a way of establishing timeliness and currency. If you don't have datelines, readers can't tell when you last updated your blog (which of course is your intention). If they can't tell whether your last post is from last week or last year, you are basically making it very hard to judge if you are still blogging or not.

**4. No author information or about page.** Have you ever gone to a blog and tried to figure out who the author is? Well, you shouldn't have to channel your inner Sherlock Holmes in order to find out. There should be an about page or an author biography somewhere that is easy to find. People want to know who is writing the stuff they are reading. Even on corporate blogs you could have an author biography for blog contributors (you can use great plugins like the one I use, Biographia) plus a corporate/organizational "about us" page.

**5. No sharing capability (or with limited sharing capability).** It seems unbelievable that in 2014, when it seems all brands are begging you to follow them on Facebook and Twitter, there are blogs that lack sharing capabilities. It's a plugin and it's free! What's the problem? I also can't stand blogs that only allow you to share to only one social network, especially when that network is Pinterest.

What mistakes do you see on blogs? Please share in the comments. I am sure there are more out there!

*Avoid these mistakes! Come learn how to blog with me on April 1 in Washington, D.C. You will learn what makes for an effective blog, how to come up with blog post ideas and how to connect with your audience. Details and registration [here](#).*

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# Who needs grammar?

Twitter just reminded me that today is National Grammar Day so I shelved what I was going to write (something about nonprofit communications, which I will post later on in the month) so that I could mark this momentous occasion and pay tribute to the power of grammar.

Proper grammar (and punctuation, usage and spelling) makes both written and spoken communication better and easier to understand. Without it, we are left wondering what was meant exactly. After all, if you're trying to make your point, you wouldn't want to mess it up by using the wrong possessive or contraction. And it would affect your writing if you didn't know the effect of your word choice.

Now, I am no grammar queen. That would be Grammar Girl. I recommend buying (and reading too) her very useful reference book: [Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing](#).

Another favorite reference is [Eats Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation](#) by Lynne Truss.

You really need to have at least one grammar book on your shelves or in your electronic library.

Who needs grammar? We all do! Oh, and by the way, March is National Reading Month. If you want to improve your grammar, reading (the more, the better) is the key.

*Come learn to blog with me! My next How to Write Your Blog workshop takes place on April 1 in Washington, DC. Get more details and secure your place [here](#).*

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# One action that guarantees social media success

Yesterday, an acquaintance posted a picture of an elaborate, girly birthday cake she had made for her daughter's birthday. She had written "Happy 4th Birthday to my baby" as a caption. I commented saying "Beautiful cake! How old is she?" Someone, let's call her Jane, wrote back "ummmm Deborah. She's 4." I then looked at the post and realized that it indeed said the little girl had turned four. I was focused on the picture and my eyes just skipped the "4th" and read happy birthday to my baby." So I responded: "Sorry Jane. I was looking at the picture. Excuse my stupidity." To which Jane (someone I don't know and who doesn't know me): "I know. I just couldn't resist. It just struck me as so funny!"

Now I don't know Jane, but it was pretty obvious that she was trying to make fun of me, a stranger, in front of our mutual acquaintance and all of her friends. If she had stopped for just a couple of seconds and asked herself if the comment was necessary, she may have opted to skip it. People reading it would have realized I didn't read the caption correctly or they would have ignored it.

This is pretty mild stuff, I know. But people routinely post stuff quickly and with little thought to the consequence. For a "heavier" example, there's the Virginia politician who posted on his Facebook page that pregnant women are simply "hosts" for the baby. He did this to defend his viewpoint that abortion should be illegal. When people criticized him, he

redacted the comment, but not before it made news as far away as England, as this article in the Daily Mail shows.

**Social media allows people to engage in real-time conversation, but unlike in-person spoken conversation, social media posts are public, searchable and in many cases, permanent.**

In person, we can say something dumb or insensitive, and then move on. Perhaps we apologize or explain ourselves. The comments we make are not visible to anybody else outside our conversation (unless perhaps they are recorded, and you don't know it, in which case you may have bigger problems than just saying something stupid).

In social media, we have the illusion that we are having an intimate conversation with one person or a group, but in reality, we are making our thoughts completely public.

Before we post ANYTHING to social media, **we should stop** and ask ourselves: Is this really necessary? Does this comment have the capacity to offend? How will people perceive this comment?

Now, I am not advocating that you spend all day deciding whether to say something on social media nor am I saying you need to edit and approve every uttering. That would be counterproductive. You should simply take a moment and think about what you are saying.

On Monday, Brad Phillips wrote a post called "No Word Was Ever as Effective As A Rightly Timed Pause," on his Mr. Media Training blog. His argument is that a pause in conversation has two main effects. One is to give the person who is pausing a moment to pull his/her thoughts together instead of blurting out whatever comes to mind. The second is to give the listener the impression that the person is confident enough to pause, and thoughtful enough to give a well-reasoned response.

**So next time to you are going to write a comment on Facebook, respond to someone on Twitter or even compose a blog post, PAUSE and think about what you are doing.**

*In the DC area and interested in improving your blogging skills? Attend the next How to Write Your Blog workshop on April 1. Details and registration are available on Eventbrite.*

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## **The red flags of interpersonal communication to watch out for**

There are two main types of human communication: interpersonal and mass communication. Interpersonal communication refers to communication between one person and another (or a few others) and mass communication is the relaying of information between individuals or entities to large groups of people using mass media (TV, internet, etc.).

Interpersonal communication can further be broken down into written, oral and non-verbal communication.

Can you be a good mass communicator if you aren't a good interpersonal communicator? That's the question I have been thinking about lately as I see people who work in communications jobs (PR, advertising, design, etc.) who seem to have issues communicating one-to-one. I believe the better your interpersonal communication skills are, the better you are able to do mass communication.

Here are some red flags that I have been noticing:

**Passive-aggressive/indirect communication.** Not saying what you mean or being underhanded is not effective communication.

**Jargon-laden communication.** Often people think that they will impress others by using jargon. Or worse, they assume that everyone understands what they are saying. In either case, by using jargon, people are failing to communicate simply and therefore are being ineffective.

**One-way communication.** This is a big one. It may be evidenced by constantly interrupting the other person or not listening to what he/she is saying or displaying a lack of curiosity by not asking questions. Some people carry on monologues and don't seem to be aware of or care about what others think. By not caring about or adjusting to your audience, you are not being an effective communicator.

**Not being "human."** People who don't acknowledge others or are incapable of social niceties (greeting people, asking about their weekend, etc.) are also communicating that they are not interested. Lack of interest in the person you are communicating with is a recipe for failed interactions.

If you come across this behavior in a communications professional (e.g., PR practitioner, a writer or an advertising executive) you should be wary. If someone is incapable of effective interpersonal communication, why should you trust that he or she can communicate on a larger scale?

In big media news, CNN announced it will cancel Piers Morgan Live after only three years. I'm not surprised. Last week, I watched an entire episode for the first time, and what struck me was that Piers tended to interrupt his guests many times. He continually interjected his thoughts and didn't allow the guests to finish talking. It was highly annoying to watch, and I am sure, highly annoying for the guests too. Piers seems to be a master at one-way communication. Unfortunately, that doesn't make for effective (or interesting) TV. What a

contrast from his predecessor Larry King, who was known for showing an interest in his guests.

What red flags do you notice in interpersonal communication? Do you think there is a correlation between being good at interpersonal communication and succeeding at mass communication?

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## What shoveling snow can teach you about blogging

Last week, the Washington, DC area was hit by one of the largest snowstorms we've had in four years. Some areas got as much as 18 inches of snow. Me, well I only had about 14 inches. When it stopped snowing, I opened my garage door (I couldn't open the front door because there was too much snow) and this is what I saw:



Snowy driveway, February 13, 2014

The snow was up to my knees and it was heavy. I didn't know where to start.

After three hours of shoveling, some melting and the fact the neighbor cleared his driveway, this is what my driveway looked like:



Shoveled out  
driveway, Feb. 13

So, what can you learn about blogging from shoveling out your snowy driveway?

**You have to start.**

You can't get very far if you don't start shoveling (or blogging). That driveway will not magically clear itself. And yes, you can wait for the snow to melt...but you aren't going to be able to get anywhere until it does.

**You will see results.**

Blogging, like shoveling snow, can be a hard, long process. But the results are there if you just start working at it.

**It takes as long as it takes.**

It may take you three hours or it may take you 20 minutes. My neighbor, who is younger and taller than me, was able to dig out his driveway in about 45 minutes. He also helped my other neighbor do his. There are different levels of skill and

ability, but that doesn't mean you can't do it. If it takes longer, it does.

What is stopping you from blogging? Is it that it daunts you? Is it that it is hard? Let me know. And keep an eye out for details about my next blogging workshop, to take place in Washington, DC on April 1.

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## **Please mind the details**

If you've been to London and ridden the Underground, you are familiar with the phrase "please mind the gap." It's a repeated warning for people to watch their step getting on and off the trains as there is a space between the train and the platform. It is posted everywhere inside the stations because people need to be reminded and London's transportation authority certainly doesn't want accidents.



Mind the Gap by nikoretro  
on Flickr

I wish we had a similar reminder for communications managers, especially those who deal with event publicity and marketing.

Instead of “mind the gap” it would say “mind the details.” Because it’s all about the details: the where, when, how, who, why and how much.

Common mistakes, which I have seen just these past few days:

Sending an email blast announcing an event and neglecting to include the date and time (or location).

Announcing an event and getting the dates mixed up (saying it is Tuesday, February 12 instead of Wednesday, February 12).

Website page about an event including a “more information” button for an event, but not providing any information about what the cost will be.

Details matter and they matter more when you are doing any type of event planning. Please mind the details. Double check them. Have somebody else check them. Don’t assume that people will figure things out.

Finally, realize that if you don’t provide the proper details or you provide the wrong details you are making it very hard for people to attend your event.

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**If everything is important,  
nothing stands out**

Have you ever been in a situation where a client (internal or

external) keeps wanting to add “news” to a press release or material to a brochure or more stuff to the website? “It’s important” they’ll say. “We NEED to include this. It MUST be in there.”

You then end up with a press release that is three pages or longer; a blog post that could double as a PhD dissertation; and a website that will give readers a headache. I will bet good money that everybody out there has come across this type of thing.

**IMPORTANT**

Rubber Stamp by Enokson on  
Flickr

But, the thing is it doesn’t have to be that way. Most things are really not that important. The client only thinks they are, usually because someone else (a donor, a higher up, a PIA person) has some stake in that particular bit of information (or “content” as we are now referring to it).

**Here’s the bottom line: if you include all the so-called important stuff, nothing, and I mean nothing, will stand out. And then all your efforts will be wasted.**

Instead of including everything and anything, as a communications person you will need to step in and do the following:

1. **Prioritize.** Among those important things are the ones that are extremely important, right?
2. **Assign different information to different areas.** Perhaps one important bit is appropriate to a press release and the other should go on the blog.
3. **Edit.** And then edit again. Be ruthless. Remove excess information if you want your message to be heard.

Thoughts? How do you handle lots of “important” information?

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# Is your website really working for you?

I am assuming your business/organization/service/product has a website. If not, well, that is another story. For the purposes of this post, you do have a website and it is functional. It may even be pretty (I mean “well designed”).

But, and this is a big but, **does it have all the information that your AUDIENCE needs?**

I have been working on a project that involved getting information about documentaries from various sources, including the filmmakers’ websites. The information I needed was fairly basic: synopsis of the film, year made, how long it is (running time), name of director and other people involved in production and country of origin. And guess what, even though virtually every film had a website, precious few websites had anything resembling basic information. Some listed awards or screenings. Some listed reviews. Some had blogs (not always updated) that talked about the filmmaking process. But basics—which are needed for anybody that is planning to screen a film—LACKING.

And that is not just limited to film websites. Have you ever gone to a restaurant website looking for a menu or for hours of operation and not found either? Have you tried to find a phone number from a service provider’s website and be forced to email or look for another provider?

It is truly astonishing how many websites lack basic, useful

and needed information. Many sites get so caught up in bells and whistles (don't get me started on websites with flash or self-playing video) that they forget their basic mission is to provide information. Information that their target audience (read: potential customers) wants and needs.

**Your website is not working for you if your target cannot find the information it needs.**

Of course, this leads to another conversation that has to do with planning and strategy. Websites are not simply pretty things to make sure you have an internet presence. They play a big part in your communications and marketing efforts.

Before you build a website (and before you do anything communications-related), **you must be able to answer these four questions**

1. Who is your target audience?
2. Why would they visit your website?
3. What are they going to do when they are on your site?
4. What information does your target audience absolutely, positively need? (Hint: it is always the stuff that is most basic—address, hours, location (map), telephone number, contact person/people, pricing, etc.)

What do you think? And more importantly, have you checked to see if your website is working for you?

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**Don't be a fashion victim...you**

# will freeze!

We are in our third straight week of sub-freezing weather here in Washington. The Potomac is frozen and so are some people's brains apparently. I am talking about the fashion victims. There are two major categories:

- Stuck in the past
- Too cool for school

Those that are **stuck in the past** unpack their winter coats from the time machine closet. Take for example a lady I saw on the Metro the other day. She was sporting an oversize circa 1980 LL Bean barn jacket. I didn't see her shoes, but I would not have been surprised to see some Bean duck boots on them. That, in conjunction with her mullet hair cut (I am totally not making this up), made me stare in amazement. I kept thinking that this woman was desperately ready for some new clothes, and a makeover.

Don't be that fashion victim! Know when to refresh your image. Perhaps you need a new website. Perhaps your logo colors could change. Or that Times New Roman you have been using in your print materials could be upgraded for something a bit more modern.

You know some people are totally **too cool** when they go out in subfreezing weather with no socks on. Apparently (and since I am not so cool) wearing socks is never fashionable, even when there is a wind chill factor of -15 and snow on the ground. I most often see young women fashion victims. They are wrapped up in their not so warm coat, no hat (that apparently is also not cool) and walking around in ballet slipper shoes with no hosiery of any type. I did also see a skinny-jean wearing dude with boat shoes and no socks...in January in Washington DC.

Don't be so fashionable that you can't dress appropriately for the weather. Or in communications, don't do things because

everybody else is doing it or because it's so cool. Sure, all the home decor people are crazy about Pinterest, but perhaps your law office just doesn't have the visuals for it. Maybe orange is the new black, but your elderly audience needs heavy, large black type to read what you are saying.

The only one that gets hurt by being a fashion victim is you...