

Why customer retention should be job one

It's easy to lose customers and very hard to get them back. Once they are gone, chances are they won't be back.

The reality is that there are many people and companies doing what you do. There's always an alternative for customers who are unhappy for any reason. Too many companies seem to lose sight of this reality, and they do little to ensure that they keep the customers they have.

Here's how my heat/AC contractor failed to retain my business:

Back in November, my schedule changed and I was not going to be working out of my home office. In December, I generally get a home heating inspection with my heat/AC contractor. It helps to make sure all parts are working properly and that my heat will continue through the winter. This company is a family-run place where I have been a customer for three years.

Strike one: I got a reminder card from the company in late November. I called right away to schedule an appointment. They had no open slots until LATE December, one month away. Mind you, I had just gotten the card.

Strike two: I explained to the scheduler that I would not be home because of my situation and that I was hoping for a Saturday appointment. It turns out this company does not do inspections on Saturdays, only emergency work. Then I asked for an early weekday appointment. Again, the scheduler could not accommodate me. She told me that she could not find a technician in my area that would be available for their first appointment at 8:00 a.m.

Strike three: I informed the scheduler that I would be forced to switch companies if she didn't try to accommodate me

because I did not want to have a heat inspection later than December (remember, they were already scheduling late late December). No response and no attempt to rectify the situation.

And they are out: After some research, I called another highly rated heat/AC company that not only was scheduling earlier in December (meaning they have more technicians) but would also provide guaranteed 8:00 a.m. appointments. It cost \$20 more per annual contract than my previous company, but the ease of scheduling was worth it to me.

My first heat/AC contractor lost my business not because it wasn't good at it what it does but because it made no effort to accommodate me. They seemed to forget that there are other contractors out there.

Most heat/AC contractors do not market actively. Many have websites and most work on their ratings on places like Angie's List, but they mostly depend on word of mouth. This is why working to RETAIN customers should be a large part of their business model.

Customers that stay are a continuing source of income AND of referrals.

Again, the reality is that keeping customers should be job one: Losing customers is easy and getting them back is difficult. No amount of marketing will bring back a customer that has found a better alternative.

What are you doing to retain your customers or clients? I'd like to find out what specific actions you are taking and I will be sharing those in a future blog post.

Stop! Don't start on that next project until you can answer this

It's January and chances are you are working hard to get the year off to a good start. You may be in charge of creating something—a newsletter, a flyer, an ad—that is intended to achieve a communications or marketing objective. It may be to publicize an upcoming event or perhaps to solicit support for a cause or maybe you are advocating for a policy change. We'll assume that this project is part of a larger strategy and will help further your overall communications goals.



Before you start any marketing/communications project you should be able to answer these five questions:

1. What is the main **objective** for the piece? Or ask yourself this: What do you want the audience to do with this piece?
2. Who is the **target audience**? Really, who is it? Be specific.
3. What are the top **three messages** you want to convey?
4. Knowing who the target is, what is the **best way to communicate** your message? Will you use graphics? Which ones? What kind of language will you use?
5. Has this piece been **done before**? If so, why are you doing

it again? What was it that worked or didn't work before? If not, why are you doing it now?

This may seem obvious to some, simplistic to others, but surprisingly, many people trying to create communications aren't able to answer these questions. Why else do you think we are inundated with useless letters, flyers and brochures? Even if you are a pro, doing this exercise will help you to create a better product, guaranteed!

What is your process for getting communications projects done? Please share!

Why your blog isn't being read and what to do about it

Unless you are publishing something like the Huffington Post, chances are that you have a small audience for your blog. You will publish lots of blog posts that do not get comments or are not shared on social media. This isn't because you are a bad writer or you don't have something valuable to say, it is, quite simply, because **people don't have time to read your blog.**

I have been blogging for years, and I have been following more than a hundred blogs for years too. In the past few weeks, I have been blogging less and reading less. Why? Because I am working on a project that has me working outside my home office for five days a week for about twelve to fifteen weeks,

plus I am commuting more than two hours each day. I am no longer able to be on Twitter all day, nor can I read my Feedly very often. Even though this is novel for me, it is the reality for a great many people. There are only so many hours in a day, and something has got to give. For me, and I suspect for many people, it's keeping up with blogs.

As a blogger, what can you do about it? Here are six actions you can take to avoid being forgotten:

1. **Keep blogging.** An outdated blog is surely never going to be read, and it will not help your goals or your SEO.
2. **Remember your blog goals, stick to your topic and keep giving readers good stuff.** Too many blogs go off topic too often or don't share valuable information. That causes readers to lose interest and be less inclined to stick with it.
3. **Ensure your readers can subscribe to your blog in many ways.** It may be easier for people to read your blog if they can get an email when you publish a blog post. Some people like RSS readers. In any case, you must give them options.
4. **Highlight your best posts in your newsletter** (you do have a newsletter?). Whether your newsletter is weekly, monthly or quarterly, you can use it to point people back to your blog by telling them about all the great content you have there. The idea is to get your audience to remember you have a blog, and to appreciate that you share relevant information there.
5. **Spend more time on your headlines.** A great headline almost guarantees people will read the post (or at least, scan it).
6. **Share, and share again.** (And encourage sharing by having sharing capabilities and acknowledging people who share stuff). Make sure that you share your blog post with all your networks. People are at different places at different times—make it easy for them to see your post.

What would you add to this list? What makes you read a blog post even if you don't have the time?

How to avoid going to hell

This is not a post about religion or morality. It's a post about how to get things done. It's the "secret" to accomplishing your 2014 goals and resolutions.

I am sure you know the expression "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." What that means, quite simply, is that having a good intentions is not enough to keep you from perdition. You have to act. You have to behave differently, not just think about it.



Bonfire by CP
Sutcliffe via Flickr

This is the time of the year we are busy setting resolutions and goals for the year ahead. I think this is a great exercise. Certainly, if we take a good look at what we did in

2013, we can see what worked and what didn't. We can decide to change course or stay the course, depending on how things worked out.

But to accomplish our resolutions and goals, just having the intent to do so is not enough. What you need is an action plan.

I have a friend who has the best of intentions to get together and do a "girl's night out." I know she has the intent because she tells me we need to do this every single time we have a phone conversation. But she never actually sets aside the time and chooses a date for this mythical get-together. Without an actual plan to go out, it is all just talk. It is meaningless. Bottom line is it ain't gonna happen.

The same thing happens with your communications goals. You want to blog but you "don't have the time." You want to increase your newsletter subscriptions, but you don't add a subscription button to your website or think about how to incentivize people to sign up. You want to get more publicity for your event, but you don't contact any media outlets. You want to re-do your website, but you don't conduct a survey of your current users/audience.

In other words, you have the best intentions in the world, but you are not acting. You are paving the way to get nothing accomplished.

As you survey the year ahead and you formulate your goals and resolutions, avoid having it all go to hell, and develop some action plans. Set deadlines, make dates, gather information, put things in motion.

What are you resolving to do in 2014 and how do you plan to get there?

5 big communications lessons from 2013

We are constantly learning, and ideally, making changes based on what we learn. During 2013, I learned from clients, from professional development events, from Twitter and life in general. Following are my five big communications lessons.

1. Write down communications and marketing goals and prioritize them.

You have to know what you want to accomplish in order to be able to do so. You also have to realize that you may not be able to reach every goal, which is why you need to prioritize those objectives. What is the most important thing that you want to accomplish in the new year? What would be nice to get done, but is not your top priority? If you don't prioritize, you will run around like crazy trying to juggle conflicting actions.

Where this came from: I have seen too many people/organizations that have no clear vision of what is most important and therefore, try to accomplish too much with too few resources. This is especially true at nonprofits.

2. Strategy should decide tactics, not the other way around.

Don't confuse tactics with strategy. You shouldn't let the allure of a certain tactic drive your communications. This is the "shiny object syndrome." Just because Pinterest is hot, doesn't mean it is the right place for your organization. You must think "big picture." What are you trying to accomplish and what is the best way to get there?

Where this came from: Many people and organizations get enamored with what others are doing, even if it doesn't fit in with their mission or goals. A tactic is just that—a way to achieve the larger picture goal or strategy. If you haven't defined the strategy, you can't define the best tactics.

3. Consider usability, SEO and content strategy before creating or re-launching a website.

Search engine changes such as Google's new Hummingbird algorithm have made having an organized, updated and useful website non-negotiable. Spending time planning a website, and considering all the stakeholders, will pay off.

Where this came from: Every year there are some changes afoot in "web world." This year was definitely one for search engines, which in turn has put more onus on usability (UX) and content strategy. A website has to reflect the larger organization and can't be controlled by just one small group of people. Just because IT has always handled it, doesn't mean that it is a good idea.

4. Communications presents the entire organization.

This year I consulted with an organization that thought the blog and website should be part of the publications department and other marketing communications should be handled by the corporate communications department. And those two departments didn't interact. That's a communications failure.

Why this is important: Too many organizations fail to think about how they are perceived by the public and where that public might be. You can't be doing all sorts of media relations work on one end, and have an intern doing social media and not discussing what you are trying to achieve for the organization. Anything the public has access to about your organization, be it social media, your blog, your latest brochure, a press release or an interview with your company president—it is all communications. It should be unified and

it should have one overarching goal—present your organization's best face to the public.

5. Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

Just because something is not perfect does not mean it is not good. Blog posts are a perfect case in point. You can't spend hours perfecting a post—that's counterproductive. Better to post and then fix, than have the inevitable "paralysis by analysis."

Where this plays in: Some organizations can't move forward because they are afraid of making a mistake. So they cling to the old and fail to embrace change. Sometimes you won't know that something is not working until you launch it (I'd say Healthcare.gov is a perfect case in point). It's easier to fix something than to start from zero.

What did you take away from 2013? I'd love to hear from you about the lessons you learned from clients or from within your organization.

I'll be back next week with some marketing/communications resolutions. Until then, I wish you all a very happy holiday!

I can't follow you and that is a problem.

Just a quick post this morning.

My schedule has been really tight lately and it's been hard to find time to go to the gym. So I decided to buy an exercise

video to get a quick workout at home. This morning I popped what purported to be a dance plus cardio “complete” workout in 30 minutes. OK. The presenter, a “celebrity trainer,” says she can’t teach us non-dancers to dance in a video, but that we should at least be burning calories. Fine. After her two minute” intro,” she gets right into it. No explanation, no instruction, nothing. After a few minutes of trying to follow what she is doing—again, with no cues—I gave up. So much for my idea of working out at home.

What’s the communication lesson to learn from this exercise video #fail? Well there’s two:

1. Don’t assume that people understand you (especially if you are basing it on your presumed celebrity). Provide instructions.

2. Don’t fly in the face of convention, especially if it is really not necessary. Conventions are there for a reason. People expect certain things, and during exercise instruction, I expect...instruction. Just like in every exercise video and show I have ever watched, and certainly every exercise class I have taken, the instructor GIVES INSTRUCTIONS. The instructor cues the next move. The instructor counts the reps.

The bottom line is that when we are trying to teach anybody or present new information, we have to work at explaining it so people will get it. We can’t assume people will just get it. We can’t assume people will just follow.

Now, the question is, can I get my money back?

Can the 60 Minutes brand recover?

I have been a loyal *60 Minutes* viewer for years. Every Sunday night at 7:00 p.m. you'll find me watching CBS (unless of course there is a football game...).

This season, I barely recognize the program that I used to love. First, there was a bizarre disjointed piece ostensibly about humpback whales but I was unclear on the point. Then there was an infomercial for Lamborghini, where Scott Pelley pretty much used *60 Minutes* in order to test drive the world's most expensive car.

A couple of weeks ago, we learned how Amazon will be using drones to deliver packages (maybe), and in the process the Internet behemoth got lots and lots and lots of publicity.

Then, there's the political stuff. Lara Logan based her reporting on an unvetted and unreliable source to excoriate the Obama administration's response in Benghazi. She has since been "disciplined." And last night there was a fluff piece on the NSA. CBS promoted the NSA piece as the first time journalists have ever been let into the secretive agency. In fact, the "journalist" in question was John Miller, a former intelligence guy.

Given the controversy surrounding the NSA and its tactics in light of Edward Snowden's revelations, you'd think *60 Minutes* would want to try to find out what is actually going on. Instead, Miller barely questioned Keith Alexander (the head of the NSA). He actually fed him lines, to the effect of "so, you don't actually listen to people's conversations." There was no counterpoint to Alexander's assertions. No push back. No interviews with people opposed to NSA tactics. Miller seemed to agree with everything Alexander said. Both men thought it

was “weird” that Snowden would cover himself and his computer screen when working on it at night. He probably was aware that he was being spied on by the NSA! Esquire has a great piece on it, worth a read: [60 Minutes Weird NSA Propaganda Wasn't Even Good Propaganda](#).

In my opinion, *60 Minutes* has failed its brand promise, that is, to provide tough investigative journalism or original reporting on interesting subjects (in fairness, Bob Simon's piece last night about Egypt's Copts was good). Will *60 Minutes* be able to recover? If it continues on this editorial trajectory it will not. There was a lot of angry and dissatisfied chatter on Twitter about the NSA story. And there has been pushback on the Benghazi report and the Amazon piece too.

News organizations depend on trust. If you don't trust them, there is little point to what they are doing. You would never pick up a tabloid and believe everything you read there. You know its gossip and its meant to entertain. But when you watch *60 Minutes*, you expect well researched stories. Well, maybe not any more.

Thoughts?

UPDATE:

The New York Times Media Equation column has an excellent look into this:

“When 60 Minutes Checks Its Journalistic Skepticism at the Door.”

Get off your high horse (if you really want to communicate)

We've all met people who are desperately trying to make sure everybody knows how smart or how powerful or how well-connected they are. These people do things like sweep into a room and speak very loudly, making sure they become the center of attention. They may also love to name-drop. And sometimes they think that by using sentences packed with big words and jargon, you will be mesmerized into thinking they really know what they are talking about.

But the opposite always happens. The harder people try to impress you, the more you tend to see through them. Same thing happens with your written communications—blogs, websites, letters, whatever. If you try to impress, especially by filling your writing with jargon and big words, the less you are communicating.



Merry Go Round by Mike Rawlins on Flickr.

As Mack Collier wrote in his blog post, “You Don’t Look Smarter by Making Others Feel Stupid.”:

Make your ideas more accessible and empower your audience to

learn at a pace that's comfortable to them. Remember that if your words make the reader feel dumb then the reader might decide that you're not an 'expert' after all

So, if you think that throwing big words around will result in you looking smarter, you are dead wrong. (P.S.: I LOVE that quote from Albert Einstein: "If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough.")

It reminds me of a time when I was visiting a friend in Florida. She had a little baby at the the time, and she had another friend visiting who also had a baby with her. Both women were in the pool and both babies were naked. They asked if I wanted to get in. I said I really did not want to be swimming in baby pee. The friend looked at me and said that baby pee was sterile, and that I needn't be concerned. She added she knew this because she was a physician. Yes, she called herself a physician. To which I promptly replied: "Oh you're a doctor. What is your specialty?" (I think she was a dermatologist, but I don't remember.) I couldn't get over that she thought calling herself a physician somehow made her more authoritative.

In everyday conversation we visit our doctors and have our lawyers—not our attorneys—draw up contracts. When someone asks us where we live, we don't say we "reside" in a certain neighborhood. If someone asks why we are taking night classes, we usually say we are trying to learn more about the topic, not "augmenting our knowledge base." If we get a new gadget, we tell people how much it has changed our lives, not "it is a disruptive technology."

So, next time you want to appear like you know what you are talking about, get off your high horse and use the words most people would actually use in conversation.

3 kinds of networking and only 1 works

A few days ago, I got an email from a “friend” asking me to attend one of those sales parties masquerading as a wine and cheese with friends. This person has had no interaction with me in a couple of years. Why would she think I would be interested in helping her out and attending her “party?”

Have you experienced this? Someone reaches out to you when she or he needs something from you. Not before and not after. This person doesn't understand how networking works.



Girl Scout Friendship
Circly by Kimberly K on
Flickr

Basically, there are three kinds of networking:

1. Networking rarely or not at all. You have an incomplete LinkedIn profile (bonus points if it is missing a photograph),

you have never posted anything on Twitter or even Facebook, and you rarely, if ever, attend networking events in person.

2. Networking only when you need something. You lost your job, and you had not been networking at all. Suddenly, you need connections. You start networking like crazy. Or, your kid is selling cookies for a fundraiser, so you hit up all your Facebook friends for support even though you never so much as like a post or wish anybody happy birthday. (Or, like my “friend” above, you need to make some extra money for the holidays.)

3. Networking all the time. You are conscious about keeping up with people. You actively attend events and maybe even participate in planning them. You are active in social media, and post updates to LinkedIn frequently (but not with annoying frequency). You Tweet and you connect via Facebook. You share stuff your connections post.

Guess which one works the best...yes, that would be number 3, always networking.

Networks are about relationships and relationships take time and nurturing. The only way to build a strong network is to invest time and effort. Whether you do it in person or on social media, you have to devote energy to it.

If you don't build relationships at all, well then you don't have any. If you haven't nurtured your relationships, why do you expect those people to help you?

The lesson here is simple. Nurture your network before you need it. Don't abandon it, ever.

Why you need to have a style

When writers talk about style they are rarely talking about fashion. They are talking about editorial style. They discuss whether to use the Associated Press Style or the New York Times Style or Chicago Manual. There are probably four or five major published style guides that people follow. In journalism and by extension, public relations, most people adhere to the AP Style. In government circles, people tend to follow the Government Printing Office (GPO) Style. (Here's a great article on Roll Call about the chairman of the GOP Style Board.)

There is one reason to have an editorial style: consistency.

Consistency helps unify your writing. Let's use a common example. It's Chicago Manual style to write Web site (two words, web is capitalized always). It's AP Style to write website (one word, lowercase). **Either way is correct.** But if you use AP in one press release and then Chicago on a white paper, you are being inconsistent. Worse would be to use both styles in one document.

Choose one style and stick with it.

Organizations should develop style guides editorial and branding/image purposes. These written documents (in this case, the oral tradition just won't do!) will help to make sure everyone in the organization is on the same page, bolstering organizational consistency.

Editorial guides should cover issues like:

- Word usage (website versus Web site; do you say chairman, chairperson or chair?)
- Punctuation (use em dashes or not?)
- Preferred date and time usage (do you say April 24 or April 24th?, 6 PM or 6:00 p.m.?)

Branding/image guides should clarify issues like:

- Logo size and positioning
- Organizational colors
- Acceptable fonts

There are a great many resources on the web, and even templates to follow. Large organizations like the World Bank have style guides that you can download.

If you don't have an organizational style guide, this year-end may be a great time to develop one or make it a goal to develop one in 2014.

[yop_poll id="3"]