

Time to give thanks

It's Thanksgiving (and for some us, also Hanukkah, in a once in 70,000 year phenomenon!), and it's time to express our gratitude. It's amazing that we have a holiday devoted to giving thanks, and it is too bad it has devolved into a holiday for shopping and watching football (but I digress). Hanukkah is a holiday that celebrates redemption and miracles, and it is quite lovely that it coincides with Thanksgiving this year.



Turkeys from Boston Public Library on Flickr

In honor of Thanksgiving, and of Hanukkah, I'd like to thank you, my readers on the blog. I am truly grateful that you take a couple of minutes out of your day to read my musings. For those of you who have taken the time to comment and discuss, thank you too! Great comments are very rewarding.

I would also like to thank my Twitter friends. Over the years, I've been able to build relationships with several people on Twitter (too many people to mention, but you know who you are

right?). These relationships have led to learning, discussion and camaraderie, and I am truly grateful for that.

So, Happy Thanksgiving to all and Happy Hanukkah to those celebrate it!

Here's a video from the *a capella* group The Maccabeats, for your listening (and viewing) pleasure:

Bonus video (and one of my favorites)

The Leevees: How Do You Spell Channukkahh

How I read the news and why it matters

I am an avid news follower. I have been reading a newspaper daily since I was eight years old (really). At times, I even read two and three dailies (when I was in grad school up at Boston University, I decided I should read the *Wall Street Journal*, in addition to the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe*. The *Globe* was not owned by the *Times* then, but I digress). Additionally, I read lots of stuff online plus I watch the CBS and/or NBC evening news broadcasts when I can.



Reading the newspaper in park by Zoetnet on Flickr

When I read the newspaper, what I am really doing is scanning. I scan all the headlines first. If the headline is about an interesting subject, then I read the first few paragraphs (same goes for op-eds). I usually discard the sports section, but only after reading the main headline on the front page (it is important to know the results of the game, but I have no patience for the analysis of why).

I don't read long articles—never have and never will. I don't have the patience or the time.

Even though most people don't read printed newspapers, they are acting the same online: **They scan. They skip long form. They only read what interests them.**

Lessons here are:

- Headlines matter A LOT.
- Longer is not necessarily better.
- People will always read *only* what interests them.

In other words, keep it short and keep it interesting.

Information overload and what it means to your message

I just got back from a few days of vacation in Florida. During my five days off, which included the weekend, I had limited Internet access. I was able to access email on my phone, and use WiFi on my laptop a couple of times.

Emails galore.

Every single day I had around 70 emails—of which only two or three were addressed to me exclusively. The rest were marketing emails, listserv stuff, and subscription emails I get every day. I deleted most of these messages without reading.

Lots of stuff on my reader.

Then, there was my Feedly to check. I had limited time to read through, so I marked a great amount of as read, and looked only at a very few items.

Twitter keeps going and going and going...

If you only check Twitter once a day or so, it is impossible to keep up with what is going on. You check your @ replies and your direct messages, and what is there in the general stream at that moment.

Facebook is congestion central.

Some people post every once in a while and others post ALL the

time (like my young cousin who posts every thought and feeling he has plus every image/story he finds interesting). Mobile Facebook reminds you of people's birthdays or I would have missed congratulating my friends Jordan and Dan.

How did I deal with information overload? I prioritized the personal and business-related and skimmed the rest.

What does information overload mean for your message?

It means, quite simply, that your message is very likely to get lost.

People are getting bombarded with information from many sources, and if they don't keep up with it immediately, they are forced to ignore it and/or delete it. There just isn't enough time in the day to get stuff done (or take a vacation) and read all your emails and other messages.

How do we, as communicators, deal with this problem?

1.) Realize that **your message is competing very hard for attention.**

2.) Realize that your message may need both **reach and frequency** with the caveat that frequency is part of the problem for the receiver. Sending the same message too many times can be annoying or part of overload...but it may break through the clutter.

3.) Realize that **timing is key**. You will have to figure out when is the best time to reach most of your subjects, while understanding that you will never reach everyone at the same time.

4.) Realize that **relevance is what is most important**. If the message is not relevant to your subject, it will more easily be deleted or ignored.

Thoughts on this? How do you deal with information overload?

It may not be face to face, but it is still personal

Social media allows for interactions across all sorts of barriers, whether they be time zones, geography or culture. With Facebook, you can keep up with what an old classmate is doing, even if she is living in the remotest corner of Siberia.

Although social media has made it possible to keep in touch with all sorts of people and even to create new relationships, it has also made those relationships more difficult.

It makes trolls come out to play!

It seems some people figure because it isn't a face-to-face interaction, they can ignore you or be rude to you. That is why trolls abound on Twitter. They find things they disagree with, and then attack, often being very nasty and rude. As if they weren't interacting with a person on the other end of the Twitter account.

It makes people forget their manners

Somebody sends you a congratulations on LinkedIn, comments on your nice new profile picture on Twitter or says happy birthday on Facebook and you forget to thank them. Maybe you "don't have time." Maybe you are just rude.

It makes people think actions have no consequences

Recently, Mark Schaefer from Schaefer Marketing Solutions

wrote on his {grow} blog about how his blog posts have been ripped off, copied wholesale without attribution. I have heard of other bloggers like Schaefer, who've found their content attributed to other writers or on other websites without attribution. People and organizations who plagiarize stuff they find through social media or on blogs seem to think it's there for the taking, as if they can do what they want with absolutely no consequences.

The thing is although social media interactions may be virtual, they involve real live human beings at both ends. Social media is not an excuse for engaging in behavior you could not get away with in person.

What do you think? Do we need to put the personal back in social media? Or is it societal?

It may be all about likeability

There's all sorts of analysis going on right now about Tuesday's election results. Chris Christie, a Republican, got re-elected as New Jersey governor with a 30% or so margin over his opponent. In Virginia, Terry McAuliffe, a Democrat, won the governorship with a razor-thin margin of 2% over his opponent Ken Cuccinelli.

If you have been following the Virginia race, you know that Ken Cuccinelli is very conservative. He has publicly-known views against abortion, birth control access, equal rights for homosexuals and he denies climate change. He is also very vocal in his opposition to the Affordable Care Act known as Obamacare. Apparently, many people in Virginia share these

views, but not enough people to catapult him into the governorship.

Pundits have been saying that Cuccinelli lost because he was outspent by McAuliffe. Some say it is because of how the nominating process took place (no primary, just a convention of the party faithful who tend to be more to the right of the general voting population).

I think that one of the reasons Cuccinelli lost is because he is not likeable. You could never imagine hanging out with him. He rarely smiles and when he does, it is not a "real" smile. Contrast that with Christie. Christie is a big bear of a man—hugging people left and right. He is a huge fan of Bruce Springsteen and not afraid to let that be known. You could definitely see yourself having a beer (or two) with Chris Christie.

Cuccinelli is a sour, judgmental kind of a guy. He doesn't approve of many things and he has made it his mission to rid Virginia of these things. His rigidity is antithetical to likeability. Christie, on the other hand, is more pragmatic. In spite of his party's opposition to Obama, he embraced him (literally and figuratively) in the aftermath of Sandy. His pragmatism helps boost his likeability.

The Washington Post reported that Cuccinelli did not call McAuliffe to concede or congratulate him after the election and he says he will *never* call him. That sounds like both sour grapes and lack of sportsmanship. Not likeable.

People don't elect people they don't like. It's that simple. It goes beyond politics and policy and it comes down to likeability. I think George W. Bush won against John Kerry because Bush is the more likeable person. Kerry seemed very patrician and detached (not unlike Mitt Romney, if you think about it) while Bush had his Texas twang and swagger.

How does this translate into marketing and communications?

Simple. Focus on the likeability of your product or service. Don't advertise a product by denigrating the user or a potential user. People like positivity, and they are turned off by negativity.

It's not random that Facebook asks you to "like" pages/companies/products. If you like something, you want to find out more about it, right?

Do you want to improve your blogging? Attend the How to Write Your Blog workshop next Tuesday, November 12 in Washington, DC. Only five spots are left, so register today!

What are the goals for your blog?

Whenever I have a workshop or a presentation on blogging, someone asks how you know if you have a "successful" blog. And my answer is always the same: **you define your success**. You set the goals for your blog and if you reach those goals, then you have success.

Start with having SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, timely) goals, **emphasis on measurable and specific**.

Goals could be:

- Get a certain number of readers each day
- Get readers to click on links or go to a certain page on your website
- Get readers to subscribe to your newsletter or to your RSS feed
- Stimulate discussion or get comments

- Get shares on social networks

Once you have goals, you will track these using an analytics program such as Google Analytics. There are many resources out there, but I found this post by Jeff Sauer very helpful: [Google Analytics 101 for Bloggers](#). Although I use Google Analytics, there are other programs out there (some free, some not). There may be a better choice for you, as Tom Ewer writes: [Why I Use Clicky Analytics](#).

What are the goals for your blog? Are you actively tracking them?

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What makes for a great blog?

How many blogs do you read or follow? I have about 100 on my blog reader, and I read dozens more (OK, it is an occupational hazard). Now think about the blogs you read regularly, what do you like about them? If I were to hazard a guess, the number one thing that makes that blog great (for you) is

Relevant and/or interesting content

You would not read it if it did not offer you the information you like to read about, whether your thing is food, politics, journalism, PR, beer or any number of other subjects. But there are other reasons blogs are great.

Great blogs are:

- **Shareable** (no sharing buttons, no new readers)
- **Interactive** (allow for discussion in the comments)
- **Findable** (not only on by search but also on your main website)
- **Pleasing to the eye** (design does matter)
- **Scannable** (headings, bullet points, lists all help)
- **Well written** (or well spoken if a video or audio blog)

What would you add? Please tell me what makes you read a blog regularly.

I will be introducing a new feature where I rate blogs based on these attributes. Watch for it soon!

*Want to have a great blog? Sign up for the next **How to Write Your Blog** workshop on 11/12/13 in Washington, DC. Get all the details and register today (early registration prices available until Friday, November 1 at midnight).*

What not to do on your blog

If you ever watched the TLC show What Not to Wear, you know some people choose to wear cringe-inducing outfits when left to their own devices. It generally takes an ambush by the show's hosts, disapproval of the person's loved ones, and a look in the three-way mirror for the fashion-challenged individual to consider changing his/her look. In other words, sometimes you need an outside perspective.



What? by Judith (judepics) on Flickr

Here's my outside perspective on what you should not be doing on your blog:

Pulling a bait and switch. You tell readers you have five tips for doing something but in reality you want them to buy your e-book or webinar. Not cool.

Selling. You can funnel your readers to something you are selling, *after* you have given them value. In other words, your blog post is not advertising copy.

Letting down your readers. If your headline promises the ten best ways to do something, then you should deliver those ten tips.

Making readers cringe at your inability to use spell-check (or understand grammar). We all make mistakes, and we all forgive

one or two typos and grammatical slip-ups, but there's a limit.

Not understanding how people read on the web (or on mobile). Your post consists of a single paragraph, no breaks, no bolding, no graphics, no bullet points, nothing. And it is really long. The web makes people *scan* content (so make your content scannable!).

Closing off comments. Why be social if you don't want people to interact with you? You can and should have a comment policy, and you don't have to approve every comment, but do have a way for people to interact with your blog post.

Being jargon and buzzword crazy. Few things make me want to scream as much as a blog post filled to the brim with buzzy phrases and cliched jargon ("try to find your sweet spot by selling the c-suite on the low hanging fruit...").

What would you add? Tell me in the comments, which I moderate but always check and respond to!

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The 6 Truths of Content Creation

Between content marketing and content strategy and content creation, content is everywhere. These days, it seems like the

one thing that will solve your communications and marketing problems is content. And really, who hasn't heard the phrase "content is king?"

The truth is it's not enough to write some stuff, call it content, and post it on your website and social networks. You've got to work a wee bit harder than that.

Here are the six (hard) truths of content creation:

1. It's not enough to create content—you have to have a **reason behind it** (also called "content strategy").
2. It's not enough to create content—you need to have **quality content**, which means that it should be useful and/or relevant and/or interesting. And don't forget, it **MUST** be well-written (yes, grammar matters).
3. It's not enough to create content—you want **content that attracts attention** and gets shared. Boring, irrelevant stuff is not going viral any time soon.
4. It's not enough to create content—you need to make sure that people can **find it** (thought about SEO lately?) and can **share it** (where is your "tweet this" button?).
5. It's not enough to create content—your content should **help** (answer questions, give relevant information) your customers, supporters or advocates.
6. It's not enough to create content—you need to **measure it** (don't you want to know what is working and what isn't?).

What rings true to you? Let me know in the comments.

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Why customer communication is marketing

Not every business needs to spend lots of money on marketing communications (ads, PR, etc.) but every business should spend time/effort/money on communicating with existing customers. Why? Because these businesses probably depend on referrals for their livelihood.

Even if you don't have a marketing budget (although you should have some dollars set aside for your website and social media efforts), you must budget for customer communications. Keeping in touch with current customers is a serious no-brainer. There are several ways to do it, depending on the size of your customer base: newsletters (electronic or print), postcards, letters, blogging on your website and even phone calls.

At a bare minimum, your existing customers need to hear from you once a year. And yet, how many businesses do not communicate with customers at all?

Let me give you a personal example. I bought my home insurance from an agency recommended by my real estate agent. In the three years I have had this insurance this is the number of times I have heard from the insurance agency: zero. Not once. This past week, I got a policy renewal that listed a 20% increase in my premium. I called the insurer to find out what happened. It turns out that there has been a statewide, across-the-board increase, which, by the way, was announced in February. Except that I didn't know. Because my insurance agency did not bother to inform me.

Since my agency does not communicate with me at all, I will be shopping for a new agency this week. I have no need to be

loyal to the agency because they have shown absolutely no loyalty to me as a customer. They haven't kept me informed about insurance changes. They haven't inquired as to whether I need any type of other insurance. They have never even asked me if I am satisfied with my insurer.

Having a customer communication program is marketing. It can help maintain current customer relationships and it can lead to referrals. It keeps your business top of mind. The company that painted my house knows this, which is why it sent a card at Christmas. My heat/AC contractors send out postcard reminders in the spring and fall that it is time to have the system checked. The mechanics send discount coupons and reminders it is time for service on the car.

Set up a customer communication program

The first step is to develop and/or refine your **customer database**. You must collect basic customer information: address, phone number, email.

Assign a **budget**. Call it marketing or call it customer retention or call it a referral program. Just budget for it.

Decide how many times per year you will have contact with your customers, taking into account factors including your budget, how you will communicate with customers, and the nature of your business. If you are a seasonal business (you sell Christmas baskets or you do taxes for example), then you could send out your communications once a year. If you depend on having informed customers (you deal with investments), you may need to have a monthly or even weekly newsletter.

Decide what **type of information** your customers need.

Line up the right **vendors** (printers, direct mail companies, e-marketing, etc.)

Do you have a customer communications plan? If so, what do you

take into account?

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