Are you asking the right questions?

No doubt, you've heard that Congress is looking into new Postmaster General Louis DeJoy's handling of the USPS. In the last few weeks since DeJoy took his post, the mail has slowed down, sorting machines have been removed and the post office has told the states to be aware of these issues in planning for mail-in ballots. DeJoy was asked to appear before the Senate on Friday, and the House on Monday.

Representative Katie Porter is very good at asking questions

On Monday, Representative Katie Porter (D-CA), used her questioning skills to establish just how little DeJoy knows about the agency that he is leading. Rep. Porter asked DeJoy if he knew the cost of postcard stamp (he didn't) or how many people vote by mail (he didn't). You can read more about it in this Rolling Stone article or this one in Vox.

Rep. Porter knew what information she wanted to obtain from DeJoy to expose how unqualified he is to lead this agency, let alone reform it, and she asked the right questions to get what she wanted.

Asking the right questions is crucial to getting what you want.

If you ask the wrong questions or not enough questions, you are not going to get the information you need.

Over the weekend, I reviewed a promotional article for a small nonprofit. The article was long and did not get to the point until the last paragraph. I re-organized the paragraphs, and added some crucial information. The nonprofit hadn't known enough to ask the right questions.

What questions do you need answers to?

When you are writing any communication materials, you need to ask the right questions. These include:

- Who is the intended audience for this piece?
- What do I want the audience to know?
- What does the audience need to know in order to act?
- What is the most relevant information that I need to communicate?

If you don't ask these questions, you are not going to produce the right information or what you produce is not going to be effective.

Bottom line: To produce effective communications, you must start with asking yourself the right questions.

Yes, there's still value in blogging

It's been a while

I haven't written a blog post in months. It's been hard to concentrate, and it's been even harder to find something to talk about when we are all consumed by the pandemic and its effects. But this morning I got a comment on a blog post I wrote well over a year ago. The post was about bad email marketing practices, and the comment came from Eddie in New

Zealand, who'd been targeted by the same spam marketer I referenced in the post. Eddie wanted to share his similar experience, and how he dealt with it. I assume he did a search about that particular spammer, and found my post, and then found the post to be relevant to him.

So thanks Eddie, for sharing your thoughts, but also for giving me an idea for a new blog post: the value of blogging.

Blogging = being found

Blogging consistently about the stuff you know best results in your website (and, by extension, you or your organization) being found when someone is looking for information on a specific topic. This is the theory behind inbound marketing.

Why I blog

I have been writing this blog for nearly twelve years for two main reasons:

- It provides an outlet for my thoughts on marketing communications
- It helps me to be found (and may lead to business)

Two things you absolutely must have to be found

Writing a blog is one of the most effective ways to boost your ability to be found, and to establish your particular expertise. There's almost no need for tinkering with your SEO if you are writing about you know, using appropriate tags, and including specific keywords. However, to really reap the benefits of blogging, you have to fulfill two things:

1. House your blog on your own website. Do not outsource it to Medium or any other third party.
2. Write what you know, and/or what you think (in other words, be original and authentic by providing something from your own perspective and experience).

Bottom line:

If you've ever doubted the value of having a blog, don't.

What works and what doesn't in our COVID-19 times

EDITOR'S NOTE: This post has been updated to reflect AP Stylebook guidance on how to write COVID-19.

Marketing and communications go on, but as discussed in the last blog post, not everything is the same in the world where COVID-19 has sickened many, scared more, and generally, upended what we consider normality. That said, some marketing works better than others.

Let's start with what doesn't work.

Here's an email that I received from a real estate agent (someone I met at a networking event and added me to her list without my express consent, but that is another story).

Hello.

Your health and safety are important to me. That's why I'm reaching out to let you know that we're doing what we can to provide the best service possible during this time, and that means being here for you.

Please reach out with any questions that you may have, or if I can be helpful in any way.

We will get through this together.

If you want to keep up to date on COVID-19, visit the CDC's website.

Stay well,

[Name]

Why is this so bad? First, the sender claims that my health and safety are important, but provides no specifics about what she is doing. Second, she is placing the onus on me to contact her. And third, she says I can visit the CDC website, and she doesn't even provide a link in her email. To me, this email shows that this real estate agent does not have any type of communication strategy or understanding, and to make matter worse, she doesn't know how to use communication tools effectively.

What does work?

1. Specificity and relevance

What is your company or organization doing *specifically* because of or in response to COVID-19.

This full page ad from LIDL is exactly right: it tells you what specific actions its stores are taking to deal with the virus and the associated issues.
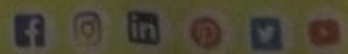
2. Segmentation

If you have an email marketing strategy, it should include the ability to segment your list into different audience types. The idea is to not send the same email to everybody on your list, but to be more targeted. For example, Boston University (where I went to grad school) keeps sending me updates, including updates about campus being closed. Well, as an alum, this is not exactly relevant to me. I am not a parent of a student or a student, so why do I need multiple emails about campus operations?

3. News/real updates

I got an email from a local bookstore that tells me that it has established a partnership with a national service in order to be able to deliver nationwide. That's news. On the other hand, Delta has sent me the same version of an email regarding how its handling COVID-19. Nothing new, no reason to keep sending me the same email. If Delta were to add or delete flights or routes, then yes, tell me. But telling me its hard on Delta's bottom line, over and over, is really self-serving, which brings me to the next point.

4. Audience-centered

What does your audience need or want right now? My undergrad university, Brandeis, did something really smart. Brandeis figured out that its audience is probably getting a bit bored being inside, so it sent out an email with suggestions for movies and television shows to watch, all featuring an alumni connection. There was no other reason for the email but to provide some relief to its audience. That is how you put your audience first.

What have you seen that works and that doesn't work? Please share in the comments.

Marketing in times of coronavirus…do or don't?

To market or not to market, that is the question today for anybody working in marcomm.

As the novel coronavirus pandemic sickens more people around the globe while upending daily routines, businesses struggle. Should they market or not? Perhaps it is even a question of *can* they market—do they have the personnel or can they even do business? On Tuesday, I walked into a local hair salon to buy conditioner, and they had no customers. Yesterday, the hair salon announced that they are closed until the end of the month.

Advertising is still going on…somewhat

Inside my print Washington Post (yes, I still get the newspaper delivered) yesterday was a flyer advertising Kohl's spring sale. On Wednesday, there were several supermarket circulars inserted in the Food Section. A couple of days ago, there was a half-page advertisement for the Wolf Trap 2020 Summer Concerts (Wolf Trap is a concert venue in Northern Virginia). But today, there are a no flyers and fewer ads overall, most for retail and a full page ad from Safeway thanking its employees (I think an image ad, portraying them as a concerned corporation).

Then, on Facebook, I was served an online promotion for the

Starz app. Also for a couple of online shopping outlets. And via email, I keep getting offers from Lands' End and Eddie Bauer (since I have shopped from them before).

It's clear that some marketing is going on *regardless* of the coronavirus, and some of it *because* of the coronavirus. But not all marketing makes sense right now.

Who should market

For some businesses, it really is the perfect time to get your message to the public. Online retailers and streaming services are prime examples. If people can't get out to the physical stores or if the bricks and mortar stores are closed, it makes perfect sense to market. People may be looking to shop online instead of leaving home, and also are looking for more entertainment.

Nonprofit and advocacy organizations should also ramp up marketing now. There may be a lot more need among and it makes sense to solicit donations or other type of support.

Who should not market

It is counterproductive for airlines, hotels and other travel industry to advertise right now. Flights are being cancelled and countries are being shut down. Also, travel may be risky as it exposes people to the virus.

Likewise, any advertisement for anything that requires a future commitment, such as upcoming concerts, plays, events, is at best, too optimistic. Most people don't know when things will get back to normal, and can't commit to any type of future plans.

Gray area

Although some businesses are open, it is risky to promote right now. If say you are big box retailer, do you really want to have a great promotion that would bring in large crowds

when the CDC is asking people to practice social distancing?

Bottom line

Marketing should be responsive to what is going on. People are worried about covid-19, but they also have ongoing needs. Marketers should weigh carefully how and what they promote.

What do you think? Should marketing go on as usual? Suspend altogether? Please let me know in the comments.

Unforced errors (in the copy)

Unforced copy errors are errors (i.e., typos, misspellings, grammatical flubs, etc.) that would have been caught if either you gave yourself enough time to take a second (and third) look at what you were doing; or you had someone else check your copy.

Many people don't notice or even care about copy errors. But if you are like me, errors just jump out at you, no matter where they are—on the TV chyron, on a menu, in the newspaper, in a book.

Errors can reflect poorly on you and your organization. Errors in printed or published copy show that you either didn't care enough or didn't know enough to notice. When you are producing marketing materials or anything that will have a longer shelf life than a social media post, errors will last and you must

be careful to eliminate them.

Following are four examples I found in the past ten days:

Program flyer

Error: Headline does not match with body of flyer. Whoever produced this flyer, copied the previous flyer from the January program, put in the description of the February program featuring journalist Ruth Marcus, not Ambassador Susan Rice, and then neglected to update the headline.

Talk of the Hill with Bill Press featuring Susan Rice, former UN Ambassador
Tuesday, January 18, 7 pm

Award winning journalist Bill Press talks to Ruth Marcus, a deputy editor of the Washington Post editorial page and regular columnist. With a law degree as well as her journalism credentials, Marcus was perfectly situated to write "Supreme Ambition: Brett Kavanaugh and the Conservative Takeover," which The New York Times called "impressively reported, highly insightful and a rollicking good read."

Bill Press is host of the nationally syndicated "Bill Press Show" on talk radio, and his weekly column is distributed by Tribune Media Services. A well-known political commentator, Press began his career on KABC- TV and KCOP-TV, both in Los Angeles. Over the course of his career, he has received numerous awards for his work, including four Emmys and a Golden Mike Award. Press is the author of six books: "Spin This!", "Bush Must Go!", "How The Republicans Stole Christmas", "Trainwreck", "Toxic Talk", "The Obama Hate Machine", and his latest, "From the Left."

News site

Error: A man is not "them." If you know the gender of the person, there is nothing wrong with using the right pronoun, in this case, "him." It seems that this story was updated when it became known that the victim was male, but the writer did not bother to read the rest of the sentence.

Email invitation

Error: This email is an invitation to a program taking place in March, yet calls it the April program. The organization sent out a corrected email a few minutes later. I would bet speed was the main culprit here. Instead of making this task take less time, the speediness ended up taking more time and effort to correct. Is this a fatal mistake? Not nearly, but it is increasingly common to get emails listing the wrong dates, locations, days of the week, etc.
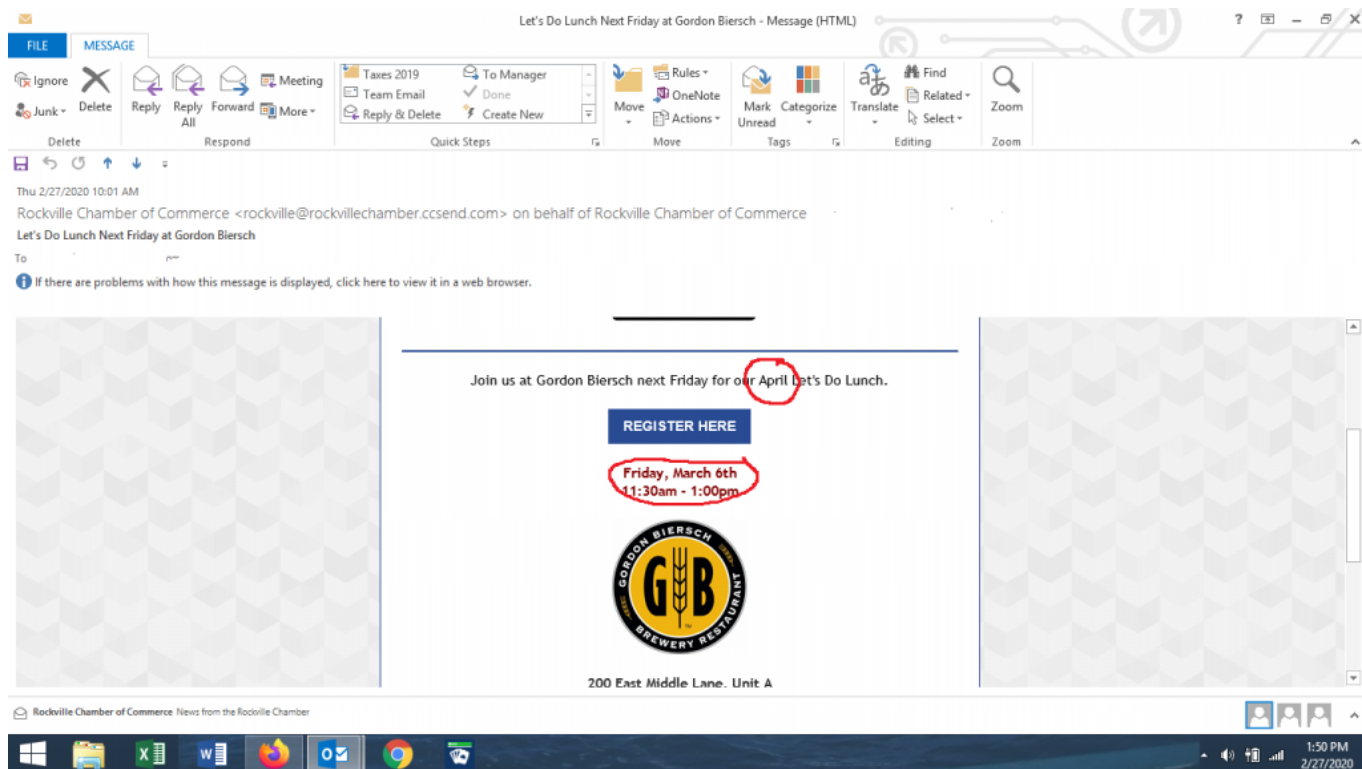
Words that sound the same don't mean the same...

Error: The owner of this Twitter profile used "principle" instead of "principal." This person wrote the description years ago when first setting up the Twitter account and has never bothered to review it.

Bottom line: All of these errors are small, unforced and most importantly, *avoidable*. Next time you are writing something that will be public-facing, take a breath, slow down, and hit pause before you publish. Always read over what you wrote (I like to read out loud so I can hear the errors) or ask someone else to take a look. If you made a mistake and it has already been publicized, fix it if possible.

How to be better at event marketing

Some event marketers are killing it. I have been impressed with Boston University Alumni Association's efforts. They are doing everything right: well-timed, well-designed event invitations, pre-event reminders, and always a post-event thank you email.

Not everyone is doing so well. Some event marketing, especially by small nonprofits, seems haphazard, with little planning and even smaller attention paid to details. And really, better event marketing pays attention to the details, the logistics, and the user experience.

First, plan good events

Marketing an event successfully starts with the event itself. Is it interesting or relevant to your audience? Is the date good, with few conflicts?

Photo by Karolina Grawbowska on Kaboompics.com

Entice and inform your audience

Once you have chosen the event, the date and the venue you are ready to market it to your audience. You will have to develop a description of the event that entices but also informs. Why would your audience want to come to this event? Who is speaking? Why are you hosting the event? What makes this event special or important? And you must provide all the important logistical information, such as: date, time, venue name and address, cost (including if free to attend), and ways to sign up.

Time the invitation properly

Think about how much time your audience needs to make a decision. If it is an event that requires travel and hotel reservations (e.g., annual conference, wedding), you will need to send it with a few months lead time. If the event is local, then you can market closer to the event time. However, don't

send out an invitation too far in advance because it will be forgotten, but don't do it too close to the event because your audience may already have made other commitments.

What to include in the actual invitation

Emails must have text and a link to sign up. *Do not* ever have an image/graphic-only email, since some email programs do not automatically open images and require them to be downloaded.

Again, make sure to include all the details your audience needs to decide whether to attend or not (look at the list above).

Signing up should be easy

You should have an easy way to sign up—do not make me jump through hoops such as making me scroll through multiple screens, and having to create accounts and passwords. You are not selling tickets for an international flight. Think about what information you absolutely need (e.g., name, contact info such as address and email, credit card information), and start with that. Other information (e.g., phone number, demographics, etc.) that might be good to have should be weighed carefully. Asking for too much information can be a huge turn-off.

Always acknowledge sign-ups

This should go without saying, but once people sign up for your event, they should get an email confirmation.

Calendar links!

Be sure that the software you are using has a universal calendar link both in the sign up screen and in the acknowledgment/confirmation email. Attendees should be able to download the event info to any major calendar (i.e., Apple, Outlook, Google).

Friendly reminders are welcome

Always send a reminder at least one day ahead. Include all important logistical information (i.e., start time, address, directions, public transportation/parking information, and any requirements (e.g., picture ID, cash on hand, laptop, etc.).

After the fact

Always send something after the event—it can be a simple "thank you for attending," or a survey/request for feedback, or sharing of information relevant to the event (e.g., contact information for speakers, handouts, bibliographies, etc.)

Would be nice if…

The software you use would be smart enough not to send event invites to people who have already registered. When I get another invitation to an event I have signed up for, I always think that I forgot to register or that my payment didn't go through.

Bottom line

Make your event marketing better: Always think about your audience and what they need in order to make a decision and attend your event.

How to make your event go well, and why it is important

Have you ever attended a professional development/learning

event that didn't meet your expectations or deliver on its promise? I have, and I bet you have too.

Via Pexels.com

Good events lead to good things

Many organizations put on these events as a benefit to their members, or to provide an interesting take on a hot topic, or simply, to provide a learning opportunity. And events are often a great way to build interest in your organization, and to help increase membership.

But the positive aspects of holding an event disappear if the event is bad. Bad events are events that don't go as planned and don't offer what they promise.

Bad events lead to bad things

Attending an event that doesn't live up to its billing is incredibly frustrating. You've given up your time, and many

times your money, to attend what seems like a waste. You've learned nothing and achieved nothing.

Don't let your event harm your organization

Event organizers, whether professional or volunteer, need to be aware of the negative consequences of having a bad event:

- Loss of trust in your organization
- Decreased attendance to future events
- Reputation damage

Ultimately, organizations could see revenue loss. That should be incentive to prevent bad events from happening.

How to make sure your event goes well

Ensure your next event goes well with proper planning, organization, and communication.

Note that the following tips are not intended as an exhaustive list. Instead, this list reflects solutions to various issues I have experienced in the bad events I have attended.

Planning tips

Prepare your speakers: Explain what you expect them to present, how much time they will have, and who you expect to attend the event.

Review the presentations: Make sure that what the speaker is planning to present matches what you required. Review the slides.

Organization tips

A/V, computer checks: Ensure that the A/V and computer/internet connection are working *before* the event. The time to check is not just as the event is starting. This wastes time, and doesn't allow you to correct problems.

Agenda: Share an agenda, whether printed or digital.

Inform your audience: Set ground rules for your audience, and address common issues (i.e., if and when there will be Q and A, if there are refreshments available, location of restrooms, etc.)

Communication tips

Before the event: Send a reminder to those who have registered. Be sure to include the location address, date and time of the event, and logistical information such as directions, parking availability, etc.

During the event: Properly introduce yourself, the host organization, the topic, and the speaker (s). Make sure the speakers share their title, affiliation and contact information.

After an event: Send an email thanking people for attending. This email can also include an event survey, request for feedback, and sharing of any relevant information (e.g., websites mentioned in the talk, the presentation deck, contacts, bibliography, etc.)

The bottom line is that events are a great marketing communications tool when done right. Done wrong, they can be a disaster for your organization.

Don't let your story go off

the rails

A disjointed lecture

On Monday night, I attended a lecture put on by a local education nonprofit. The topic was interesting, and based on her biography, the speaker seemed knowledgeable. She started her talk by plunging the room into darkness and playing a video. Then, she got up and without preamble, started talking. She showed photographs of the subjects of her book, and talked about the people without context. She even brought up a guest who was related to one of the subjects in the book, and talked as if the room should know the person. The speaker barely talked about the subject of her lecture, making it the most disjointed and uninformative lecture I've been to in a long time.

Why so bad?

What went wrong? I am not sure what made the speaker give such a poor presentation. It could have been that she was having a bad night or that she hadn't prepared enough or that she's bad presenter.

Story time
Photo by Lina Kivaka from Pexels

Always seek best practices

One thing I know for sure: This presentation could have been much better if the speaker followed the following storytelling rules:

1) Have a beginning, middle and end

Avant-garde cinema often plays with these elements (starting at the end, etc.), but in traditional (and clear) story-telling you start at the beginning and conclude at the end. That's a story arc that is easy to follow.

2) Don't make assumptions

When you are the expert, you may assume that everybody knows what you know. But that is not so. You have to fill in details and information for those in your audience you may not know everything there is to know about your subject.

3) *Focus*

It's easy to meander when telling a story. There are also sort of side stories and interesting details about your main topic. But before you can go down a side path, you have to clear the main path. In other words, focus on the main story before you start telling tangential stories.

Bottom line:

Sure, there's more to effective story telling than this. But before you embellish a story, start with the basics.

Are you persuasive?

Have you ever argued passionately with a friend and neither of you changes the other's mind even one little bit?   That difficulty in getting someone to change how they think is the central problem in marketing communications. Whether a company is trying to get you to buy a new brand of shampoo or a nonprofit is vying for your donation dollars, marketing communications is at work trying to persuade you of why you should do what they want.

I picked up (and read) *Writing to Persuade* by Trish Hall to see if I could learn how to make my work more effective.

Hall's persuasion bona fides are that she was an editor of the *New York Times* op-ed page. The *New York Times* op-ed page regularly attracts high-profile and controversial viewpoints, and due to its influence, receives a high volume of submissions. Those submissions needs to be culled and edited, and that was Hall's job. Having to make decisions on what

pieces to run made Hall more aware of what makes an interesting and readable piece.

In the book, Hall discusses both what makes a persuasive op-ed, and presents writing tips.

To be persuasive, Halls says a piece should:

- Have a specific and strong point of view
- Tell a story, and personalize it
- Show knowledge of your audience and really listen to what they say
- Find common ground where possible
- Play on feelings more than statistics and facts
- Show empathy
- Not be argumentative.

Hall suggests that your writing should:

- Have proven/checked facts to bolster your viewpoint. Hall says you should always use reliable sources of information and have more than one source.
- Be specific
- Avoid jargon
- Cut unnecessary words.

The book is quite repetitious and is really geared toward op-ed writers looking to have their pieces accepted for publishing. Hall's writing tips are not really about being persuasive, but rather about being clear, something I endorse (I especially like her insistence on avoiding jargon). Hall discusses the psychology of persuasion in the last part of the book, something that would have been better put up front.

Although I found that Hall presents some solid ideas about persuasion, she gears it very specifically to submitting op-eds, even discussing how to butter up editors. I thought this book could have easily been a long article. Instead, she pads the book with the story of her journey to becoming a

journalist/editor.

The bottom line is that I am not persuaded that this book should be your guide to better or more persuasive writing. You will pick up some good tidbits though. If I were recommending whether you should buy or borrow this book, I say definitely borrow it. That's what I did!

All the marketing in the world won't save your brand from bad customer service

Marketing helps people to *know* brands, but it doesn't make people *like* brands. People like brands that provide quality, value, and a good experience. That good experience comes down to customer service. If the brand's customer service is bad, the experience is bad, and the brand is tainted. It is really that simple.

Why I will never shop at Ulta again

A couple of years ago, I bought some nail polish at Ulta, and I asked before I paid if it was returnable. I was told yes. It turns out I had a similar color at home, so I returned to the

store, original receipt in hand, and was asked for my phone number. I said I wasn't in their system, I had the receipt and I wasn't giving them my number. The clerk was unable to do the return. I went home and called Ulta customer service and was told I should be able to do a return with just the receipt, no problem. I ended up going to an Ulta in another county and doing the return there. I vowed never to shop at my local Ulta again. And then last week, I was in the shopping center where the Ulta is, so I decided to go in. I bought some makeup. When I got home, I realized the makeup was not what I wanted. I went back to Ulta, again with original receipt in hand, and makeup in its box, untouched, and got the exact same answer that I had gotten two years prior. They needed a phone number. Again, why? I am not in their system and a phone number will not bring up my account. I got a manager, who somehow managed to get around this "phone requirement."

What a difference

Contrast that with my experience at Sephora, another cosmetics store, a few months ago. I had a faulty mechanical eyeliner pencil but no receipt (I was hoping they would fix the issue not take back the item). The clerk was able to look up the transaction using my credit card, and gave me a credit, no further questions asked.

Making it difficult to make a return is a huge customer service problem

Most stores will do returns quite easily if you have a receipt. Some stores will give you a store credit if you don't have a receipt. The only stores that seem to make it hard to do returns are small, local boutiques, and Ulta. Customers want to be able to like what they buy and return it if they don't. Most businesses see the benefit in customer satisfaction.

When you have to market to overcome your failings

Ulta advertises discounts all the time. Sephora never does. Perhaps Ulta needs to get people in the door with incentives because it knows that the experience is less than ideal. This is not to say Sephora is perfect (far from) but it seems geared toward a better customer experience than Ulta.

You will choose to do business where you feel less friction

Many people shop at stores like Nordstrom because its policy is to accept almost all returns without exceptions. This makes for a more relaxed shopping experience. If you know you can buy whatever it is and then return it if it doesn't suit for whatever reason, you will buy. If, however, you think there will be a problem, you will not buy because you don't want to deal with the friction.

Here's the bottom line: If your customer service is bad it

doesn't matter how good your marketing is.