I'll have a venti and some politics please

It was not until I saw a full page ad in today's Washington Post that I realized Starbucks has waded directly into the government shutdown debate. The full page ad (right hand page, far forward, four-color, in media buying lingo) has the headline:

Sign the Come Together Petition

You can see the text on the Starbucks home page and apparently, at all Starbucks stores starting today.

019/365 by Joseph Nicolia on Flickr

Also today, in the Post's business section, Allen Adamson, a branding firm director, is quoted about this Starbucks' move:

It's always risky when brands mix politics and business.

It's quite clear that Starbucks is taking a strong political stand against the shutdown, but I am not sure it will be risky. In fact, it may be a huge win for Starbucks (and maybe for the government, if it helps end the shutdown). To my knowledge, Starbucks is the first and only national brand that is saying something publicly about the shutdown— and it's always good to be the first and only in marketing. Plus, it is using the petition to have people sign up to get updates, either by email or text. You know what that means: database expansion!

Finally, this is a political ad, but it is not overtly

partisan, and that's the key. It assumes that most people are against the government shutdown, and the ad does not point fingers at specific parties or politicians. In this way, Starbucks does not alienate its conservative or liberal java addicts. It may not be your cup of tea, but perhaps it is your venti of coffee!

Did you see this petition in Starbucks or the ad in the paper? What do you think? Wise move or not? Let me know in the comments.

Is having a point of differentiation enough?

Last night, I met a friend for dinner. He chose a Thai place that was half-way between his place and mine. Upon reading some reviews online, I found out that this is the only Thai place in the area that's Halal, that is, observes Muslim dietary rules.

When I got there last night, it was empty save for a couple of people. Few people came in until a outwardly observant Muslim family came in. When they were done eating and had left, the owner pretty much closed up shop and kicked my friend and me out. From the time we had arrived at 6:30 p.m. until we left, no more than ten other customers had been in the restaurant.

The food at this Thai place was not very good. In fact, it was mediocre. It wasn't spicy enough, or attractively presented enough or even interesting enough. They did not have Thai standards like green papaya salad or red curry. Based on the food alone, I would not go back.

The only relevant differentiator this Thai restaurant offers is that it's Halal. Is that enough? **Can you have one strong point of differentiation and have that keep your business alive? Well, the answer is yes, but there is an "if" attached.** In this case, you could have Halal as your point of differentiation ONLY IF your food is on par with other similar restaurants.

In a world where there are multiple offerings for everything (many organic grocery stores, tons of sushi restaurants, hundreds of nail salons), **you have to meet the standard or exceed it AND then find your point of differentiation.** For example, if you have a nail salon, not only do have to comply with sanitary guidelines required by law, but you should find something that your competition does not have (the most colors, the most comfortable chairs, etc.).

What do you think? Is having a point of differentiation enough?

Test post October 6-need feedback

So, Feedly is not uploading my latest posts. I am trying out alternatives. If you are seeing this on your reader, please comment and tell me what reader you use. Thanks!

How to read analytics for your blog and other great articles

In my blogging workshop, I tell participants that if they are not feeling up to blogging they can do what I call a "round-up" post. In it, you round up the best/most interesting/relevant articles or blog posts that you have come across from around the web. In this way, you provide value to your readers, without actually having to write much.

This week, I have seen lots of good stuff, but here are four very useful articles for all you bloggers out there.

(As a side note, I am still having difficulty with Feedly and my posts are not showing up, so this is a test in a way.)

All about Google Analytics

Have you wondered how to use Google Analytics? Google Analytics 101 for Bloggers may give you some actionable information.

Do you have content mission?

Joe Pulizzi argues, quite rightly, that you should have a content marketing mission statement for your small business. Do you have one?

What are the best practices for business bloggers?

Hubspot shared "What the Best Business Bloggers Do (And You Should Too)." Do you already practice this?

Using "science" to increase your social media impact

If you think there may be a better time to post to reach a

certain audience, Fast Company has some proof in "A Scientific Guide to Maximizing Your Impact on Twitter, Facebook and Other Digital Media." Read away and see if you can use these findings to help you.

Do you like round-ups? I may start running them more often because there are so many great and useful articles out there.

Have a great weekend, and I hope your blog reader shows this!

Why SEO and content marketing are not enough

The really bad news today is that the US government is shut down (let's hope temporarily). Another piece of bad news (for content marketers) is what I learned last night at the Web Content Mavens Meet Up about findability and search, and how search engine personalization is playing into it.

Findability is key

The first speaker last night was Jill MacNeice, who is an information architect for the Library of Congress (LOC). She explained how the LOC is working to make their millions of documents and images findable by using a "findability framework" that is built around the idea that people should be able to find what they are looking for both inside the site, and from external search engines. It makes search visible and easy to find. It depends on metadata, good descriptions and URL design that makes it human readable, shorter and more shareable.

The LOC is an example of why SEO and search in general is important. After all, if people can't find you, then why are you on the web?

Personalization throws a wrench in search

But then Katherine Watier Ong, Ketchum's VP of Online Strategy and Market Insights, got up to speak about personalization and the semantic web. And if I were to boil down what she said to one phrase it is that personalization is making search engine optimization more challenging. It is no longer enough to have the right keywords, tags and content because Google and Bing and all your social media sites are personalizing the content they show you based on your profile and previous activity.

If you want to see how much information Google has about you, just check your Google Dashboard (search Google to find it). Bing uses your Facebook data to suggest things your friends like.

Did you know that you don't see every tweet in your Twitter stream? Twitter shows you what it "thinks" is most relevant to you, even from people you follow, based on your previous interactions and interests. Isn't that a tad scary? You sign up to follow someone and you may not see his/her tweets.

Katherine says the really creepy personalization is visible on LinkedIn. I have noticed that too recently. Since I liked a couple people's new photos, LinkedIn always shows me new photos and for several days. And how does it know which people I may know?

Search engines and social networks like Twitter and LinkedIn are moving toward developing a sort of artificial intelligence that tries to figure out what you are looking for and then practically jump ahead of your request, which is why you are seeing all these suggestions (you may want to follow so-and-so, you may want to check these items for sale, etc.)

All this personalization is useful for you because if not you would be drowning in extraneous information but it is really bad news for small businesses/websites. For example, search for your name on Google. For you, your name will appear at the top of your results. Now have John Doe do the same search on his computer wherever he may be living. Guess what, you will not appear near the top (unless you have a very unusual name or are someone like President Obama).

How do marketers deal with personalized results?

How do we work to cut through the personalization? Katherine suggested several actions:

- Create personas for your target audience so you can market appropriately
- Personalize your website (just like when you go to Amazon and it recognizes you) using tools like Marketo.
- Build social relationships.
- Stay on top of changes in search
- Use a content management system (CMS) that uses schema

In short, **personalization is a big challenge for search marketers.** Now, you don't only need to cut through the clutter of millions of websites, you have to cut through results that are personalized for each searcher.

If you work in marketing or communications, you need to be aware of how people find you. It is not enough to have a website and a blog. You have to understand SEO and the latest changes to search. You have to see the relationships between social media and search engines.

7 actions to keep your blog running smoothly

We spend lots of time thinking about what to include on our blog: what articles to write, what images to use, where to share our stuff. That's all important, but just as important is making sure our blogs are running well. Here are seven actions you can take to keep your blog running smoothly:

1. Install a spam detector and empty spam comments frequently: I use Akismet, and it stops 99% of all spam. Spam is placed in a spam comments folder that should be emptied regularly, preferably daily (depending on how much spam is there). The more spam you have in that folder, the slower your site will load.

2. Update your themes and plugins: WordPress does a good job of telling that which plugins and themes need to be updated but it is up to you (or your site administrator) to do the actual updating. It only takes a few moments. But before you do anything, make sure you have a backup of your site (which leads to my third suggestion below).

3. Backup your site by installing an automatic backup plugin: There are several out there. I have heard good reviews of Backup Buddy (not free) and I am using BackUp WordPress on here.

Mechanics working on race car at La Carrera Panamericana, Mexico, May 1954 for The Henry Ford on Flickr

4. Check your Google Analytics frequently (and if you don't have Analytics, install right away!): By checking your Analytics, you can learn a lot about what is working and what is not working on your blog. You should check the following:

- Bounce rate (are people staying on the blog or leaving immediately?)
- Page load speed (if it is taking too long for your pages to load, you are going to lose readers)
- Landing pages (where are readers going?)
- Keywords (useful to know how people are finding your blog)

5. Deal with comments: If a comment is legitimate and you use moderation (which I believe you should), approve it ASAP and respond if appropriate. People who comment on your blog are looking to engage with you. Don't leave them hanging!

6. Review your plugins, widgets and settings: Too many plugins

make your site slower. Are you using them all? Do you need them? Are your widgets still relevant? Are you using them? Do you need to add anything? And finally, check your settings. Is everything up to date and still relevant?

7. Optimize your SEO: There are several SEO plugins and they will help make your site more easily findable. I am not an expert, but making sure to include keywords and descriptions and filling out the fields will help make your site more visible.

What actions do you take regularly on your blog's back end? Please add to this list!

Top blogging lessons from WordPress Camp Baltimore 2013

What did I do this past Saturday? I attended WordPress Camp Baltimore for the second time. I think that if you blog regularly and/or help people set up blogs, you should most definitely attend this volunteer-run event, available worldwide probably at a city near you. It is well worth the low cost of admission. If you want to find one near you, check out the WordPress camp site.

WordPress Camp
Baltimore 2013

I attended five sessions out of the total of 15. There were two tracks: one directed to the developers and one to users. Obviously, what I learned would be more useful to a user than a developer.

Social media must be integrated into both your actual blog and your blog's strategy

- Google + indexes faster, so consider setting up your Google + authorship description
- You need both inbound and outbound social media plugins
- Check out the Tweet Old Post plugin to be able to use your older blog posts
- Be careful with sending people to social networks—the last thing you want to do is lead someone away from your site.

SEO keeps changing but there are several things you can do to keep your site visible

- Use the WordPress SEO by Yoast plugin—highly recommended by tons of people
- Name all your images
- Do not ever write "click here." Write a description.

- Organize your content well—Google likes organized websites—using headings, etc.
- Optimize your site so users like it
- Include rich content—pics, graphs, videos
- Watch your page speed (you may need to cache you website using plugins like WP Super Cache)
- Install and submit a site map using the Google XML Sitemap plugin

Producing your own podcast is not that hard

- What you need to produce a podcast is: a blog, hosting that provides enough bandwidth, artwork/branding materials and a podcast feed. You will also need a microphone and a way to edit your audio.
- Use editors like Audacity.
- Look into podcasting plugins like PodPress and PowerPress

Blogs and WordPress sites make content marketing easier

- Content marketing's purpose is to drive profitable (however you define it) customer action.
- Content marketing is about providing relevant, valuable (educational) and enjoyable material for your audience/user
- Remember that customers care about themselves not you
- Keyword research is key (you must know what keywords your customers would use to find your service/product)
- When you provide valuable content, the reader/user is bound by the need to reciprocate since humans have a deep seated need to return favors.
- Remember that information that is exclusive is more persuasive (this is only available for a limited time)
- Humans are more receptive to requests from people who appear to be authorities or experts.
- Read Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion by Robert

Cialdini

Thanks to the following presenters:

- AkilahThompkins-Robinson
- Byron Warnken
- Arsham and Josh from Webmechanix
- Douglas Bell
- Shane Powers

Self-monitor or ….

Do you follow yourself? It's not easy to do, but it's essential. You should be monitoring your external communications efforts or else, you just won't know what is going on.

I have followed my own blog (first on Google Reader, and now on Feedly, though that may change) for years. Why? Because I want to see how other people see my blog. I want to make sure it is showing up and how it appears when it does. This is how I knew there was a problem with Feedly and my blog feed (detailed in this post—read the comments please). I subscribe to my blog via email too, to make sure Feedburner is operating as it should.

When I send out email campaigns, I send it to two different emails of mine (one is Gmail and the other I monitor via Outlook). Again, I want to make sure everything looks OK. I try to check them on my smartphone too.

Although you can't monitor for every iteration (for example, I don't own an iPad or Apple anything), you need to know how

your communications are showing up in different environments, as best as possible. Perhaps you can recruit some volunteers to check for you (trusted friends or colleagues who don't mind giving you a had). Imagine that you are not optimizing your email for smartphones, and most of your audience reads it on that platform. If you don't know you aren't optimized, you can't address it.

Too many marketers (agencies included) don't bother to monitor their own communications. There's a rather prominent PR agency whose blog is a disaster, but apparently, no one has thought to check it as an outside reader, or follow it or even try to share it on social media. Then there are the countless email marketing messages that are not only not optimized for mobile or for social sharing, but that are RIFE with mistakes (grammar, spelling, content).

You must monitor yourself or direct others to monitor on your behalf. If not, you risk not knowing how people actually see you.

Are you monitoring your communications? If so, how do you do it? If not, what are you waiting for?

Before you send that email…

In the past day alone, I have received four marketing/communications emails that are indicative of a huge amount of carelessness or ignorance or both. In each case, spending a bit more time checking the following would result in a more effective email.

Check you spelling without depending on spell check

"Your invited to join us" was in the subject line of one email and in the the body of another. Depending on spell check without actually reading your email will let this type of ignorant email go through. In case you're wondering what is wrong with that line, please read this sentence.

Check dates carefully

I got an invitation for an event taking place on Monday, September 20th. Except that September 20th is a Friday. And it turns out the event is actually on Monday, September 16th.

Be careful with automated replies

As you read yesterday, this blog's feed was not appearing in Feedly. I wrote Feedly and I got an automated response (I didn't realize it was automated at the time) telling me that it was due to a capacity issue. Feedly's Twitter person told me this:

> *it is not a capacity issue. That is an old automated email. I have asked our dev lead to look into this. Expect and answer today. -Ed*

I realize that sometimes it's necessary for customer service to send an automated response due to volume or because of the need to acknowledge communication. But, email communications should not be misleading or just plain wrong.

The bottom line is check and then check again!

Email marketing may be very effective, but if you send out the wrong information, with incorrect spelling or grammar, you will not only not achieve your communications goals, you will appear ignorant and/or careless.

You may not see this post

Google's decision to kill Google Reader has impacted more than our ability to have all our blog feeds in one easy-to-access place, it has impacted many blogs and their ability to be read at all. You see, Google did not give anybody a real alternative to Reader. Some jumped in, like Feedly, making it easy to transfer your feeds to their readers. For some users of Google Reader, it was hard to decide which of the many alternatives out there to use, so they didn't transfer their feeds, and now, that ability is lost.

In the past few weeks, I started to notice that this blog's feed was taking several days to update on Feedly (which is the alternative I chose). Then, the last two or three posts NEVER updated at all. I wrote to Feedly this morning, and their customer service rep told me that it is a capacity issue on which they are working. In the meantime, people who are looking for this blog on Feedly think I haven't written anything in two weeks. And you may not even see this post.

The demise of Google Reader may turn out to be a disaster for many smaller blogs like this. Unless Feedly steps up, and all readers out there have the capacity that Google offered, blogs will be affected. Once you aren't present, you disappear from people's minds. With the plethora of blogs and other content available, the competition is intense. To have cut through the clutter and made it on to people's Google Reader only to be demolished by an nonexistent "transition" is not only a real shame but could be a destroyer of business.

I am not sure what to do. I will continue posting my content

to Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook as appropriate, and people are free to subscribe via email (and that updates instantly as the post is published).

If you are reading this post, what do you suggest?