

Test post

This is a test post. I apologize for any inconvenience.

Selling “no”

If you doubt the power of advertising, then do yourself a favor and watch No, the movie by Pablo Larrain, featuring Mexican actor Gael Garcia Bernal. The movie (now available in DVD), in Spanish, is set in 1988 Chile, where the government of Augusto Pinochet has been forced by international pressure to call a referendum to see whether the public will support eight more years. Voters who support Pinochet will vote yes, and those who oppose him will vote no.

The No campaign hires Rene Saavedra (played by Garcia Bernal) to come up with a concept. Saavedra, who works for the ad agency hired by the government’s Si campaign, has a track record of edgy, successful campaigns. Saavedra thinks the No campaign needs to feature happiness, thus equating a negative concept (no) with being happy. He commissions a song about happiness and develops a “happy” logo.

As a marketing communications writer and consultant, I was very interested in seeing how Saavedra’s concepts were received by the No campaign. Since they were fighting an ideological campaign, they believed you had to make a case to the people (Pinochet has killed, tortured and disappeared thousands of people). Saavedra’s reaction is that that would not be a pleasant, nice message. The campaign recoils, saying that of course it isn’t a nice message. But Saavedra prevails, getting them to see that people don’t want to be scared and oppressed by negativity.

You will need to watch the movie to see how the opposing sides deal with each other, but suffice it to say that Saavedra was right. People respond better to a positive message, or at least pay more attention. He succeeded in putting the Si campaign on the defensive.

Where is the soap dish? (Or why UX is important.)

Several weeks ago, I told you all about the awful experience that passes itself off as the Holiday Inn Express. One of the smaller, yet super annoying, things wrong there was the fact that in the (cramped) bathroom, there was no soap dish. A stand holding the usual hotel toiletries, including soap bars, was cluttering the minimal counter space, but there was no place to put the soap once you opened the plastic wrapping. The soap kept sliding to the floor after I washed my hands.



Soap by Radio.Guy on Flickr

Just a few weeks before my stay at the HIE, I stayed at a boutique inn in the same city. Among the many amenities was a soap dish in the bathroom. It was a nice touch. It showed the inn had considered the guest's needs (and that someone somewhere had actually used soap to wash their hands at some point, which apparently the managers at the HIE never had done).

It's really very simple: You have to consider people's needs and how they do things. Providing a great hotel experience OR an effective website **DEPENDS** on whether you are considering your end user (your guest, your audience). How does a person use your product? What does a person need to navigate your site?

Have you ever been to a website where you can't find what you are looking for? I bet you have! Those websites are generally cluttered with tons of information that is not organized for the user but rather for the idiosyncrasies of the various organizational departments (Sales & Promotion says we need to include this, Legal says we have to include that).

The other day I was looking for a blog on an organizational website and I didn't see it where you would normally. I

figured it did not exist. I was wrong. It was under “publications.” Why? Because the Publications Department is in charge of the blog. Publications clearly doesn’t understand website visitors. Those visitors aren’t familiar with (nor do they care about) your organizational hierarchy!

This is where user experience or UX comes in. UX specialists are there to make your website friendly to visitors. If a visitor wants to find your calendar of events, he or she will find it easily instead of clicking through various places. There are ways to make website navigation easy and sensible.

Perhaps you are a small organization that can’t afford to hire a usability expert to assess and fix your website. Just think about the soap dish. Do you have what your visitors need? Where would they easily find it?

If you fail to think about how people actually use your product or service, then you will fail to serve their needs.

Are you reinforcing your message?

I had a conversation with a potential client the other day, and she was saying she wasn’t sure she needed to continue advertising as most of her customers came from word of mouth/referral.

Word-of-mouth and referrals are very powerful marketing forces, but they do not operate in a vacuum. Most people take their time making a decision, even when they have a referral

(or referrals) in hand. People often like to do some research themselves, even when they have glowing recommendations (just because a hair salon did wonders for straight-haired Jane does not mean they can do wonders for curly-haired Joan). This is why you need to reinforce your message.

Often, you need to remind your potential clients/customers of why they should consider working for you. You also need to let them know the basics: how to contact you, where you are located, who you work with, how much you charge, what your services/products are.

How do you reinforce your message? You can do it several ways:

1. Have an updated, attractive, easy-to-navigate website.
2. Have marketing materials such as ads, brochures, etc. as necessary for your target. For example, if your target audience reads specialized journals, it makes sense to advertise there. If your target walks past your store, it may make sense to have brochures or information cards available.
3. Have an updated, complete LinkedIn profile and on other social media channels as appropriate.

Relying on word of mouth without reinforcing the positive referral will not always result in business for you and could actually work against you.

What are you doing to reinforce your message?

When customer service and marketing conflict

Yesterday, I wrote about how important email marketing has become to retailers. Yesterday afternoon, I found out first-hand that email marketing has become far more important to retailers than customer service, and that is a problem.



Silos by Doc Searls on Flickr

Many large organizations have no bridge among their many departments. I remember when I was working with a large financial company back in the 1990s, and the public relations department (where I was) and the sponsorship department didn't really connect, even though both were ostensibly working on promoting the brand. It seems this way with customer service and marketing.

My experience was this: Yesterday, I went to White House Black Market to return a couple of items I had bought last week. I had the receipt, and the items were unused and had their tags on (nothing wrong with them, just didn't like them once I got home). At first, this clerk was friendly, but pretty soon she was having issues. It turns out that because I did not provide my email address to the clerk who had originally sold me the items, the clerk had put in a made up email, which apparently was connected with another customer's account.

The clerk called over another associate (let's call her Ms. Crotchety since she was a very unfriendly woman), who asked me my name, and of course, this did not match up with the customer name in the system. I explained that since I had no desire to be in their system, the original associate had put in that email address because she feared that she would be "dinged" by the company for not providing an email address with purchase. Ms. Crotchety proceeded to tell me that I needed to provide my address, and that if I were in the system, the system would just populate the fields with the right information (read: I am at fault for not being in their system and making Ms. Crotchety's life so hard).

In the end, I was forced to give them my address in order to get credited (in spite of having a receipt and the original credit card). To make matters worse, at no point were these associates helpful, apologetic or accommodating. I had originally thought I would browse the sales racks, instead, I walked out angry and with no desire to shop at this store.

As many people do when they have a grievance, I took to Twitter to air my dissatisfaction with the store. Let's just say that @WHBM were far more apologetic and understanding than the clerks at the store. I bet that the folks behind @WHBM are customer service folks and not marketing folks. The marketing folks probably have nothing to do with customer service. And there, in a nutshell, lies the problem. **Marketing is operating independently of customer service, with goals that do not take customer service needs into account.**

This is an example of a marketing imperative trumping good customer service. The imperative at White House Black Market seems to be that clerks must obtain email addresses no matter what. This means that the email address itself is more valuable than the customer. That's a flawed concept. Although email can be a very powerful marketing tool, it only is effective if the customer wants to receive those emails. There is a difference between asking for an email address and

making it impossible to buy something unless you provide an email address.

What do you think? Should marketing goals (grow email list in this case) be more important than customer service goals? Can the two co-exist?

Email addresses have become more valuable

Email addresses have become so valuable to marketers that they are now offering discounts and other incentives to get them. Case in point: Ann Taylor is offering a 40% discount off your entire purchase simply for furnishing them with (any) email address. Another retailer, White House/Black Market makes it practically impossible to buy anything without getting an email address (which, the salesperson says, will be used to send you special offers only available via email).

Why are email addresses so important? Simple. It's because there are so many channels out there that it has become increasingly harder (and thus, more valuable) to target people. For retailers, fewer people are reading printed anything, a traditional place for special offers and sale notices. In general, media has become increasingly segmented. With DVRs, most people are fast-forwarding the commercials.

Email reaches people somewhere where they are likely to be—on their computer or other Internet-connected device. And because

people can easily opt-out of receiving emails, marketers have to work harder to make it worth their while. And then there is the added benefit of not having to pay postage or printing costs, making email marketing a lot cheaper to produce.

What does this mean for marketing communications? It means that messaging has to be more targeted, more concise and centered around providing a very tangible benefit to the consumer. Email marketing maybe cheaper to snail mail marketing, but it also easier to stop.

The bottom line is that marketers want email addresses and consumers want real value for the intrusion.

Have you noticed more retailers asking for email addresses? What incentives have you seen?

5 tips for Friday on editing your own writing

I think having themes like **5 tips for Friday** is a great way to keep you blogging, and I suggest that in my blogging workshops. I saw somebody's 5 tips today, and I thought I would try my hand at it.

As a writer, I have to edit my own work. Truth is, it is far easier to edit other people's work. You very rarely see your own mistakes right away—be it typos or more serious errors.

Here are five tips to make sure you present the best piece of writing you can:

1. Take a break between writing and editing. A few hours will do, but a whole day, if possible, is better.
2. Read it out loud. Your ears may “see” mistakes that your eyes don't.
3. Pay attention to homonyms (words that sound the same like than and then and their and there). Are you using the right word?
4. Go back and cut out ten words per page. Excess words often clutter your meaning.
5. Make sure most (if not all) sentences are in active voice. If they aren't, change them.

What is your best tip for editing your own writing? Please share in the comments.

Does going for a run make you want to smile?

Yesterday, I took advantage of a gorgeous low-humidity, warm (not hot) day and went for a run along the C&O Canal in Potomac. There were several people along the trail, some walking, some biking and some running like me. Some people smiled, nodded or said hi as I passed. Some people ignored me

completely (like the bikers who passed me without a warning or even a look back or the runner who pointedly looked straight ahead when passing in the other direction).



Smile! by Rob Kleine on Flickr

Some people are social, and some are not.

It's not just when you are out running on a gorgeous day. It's when you get in an elevator, walk along the street, go in a store, and so forth. Some people will always greet others, and some will pretend they are in their own little fiefdom. Some people are naturally social and some are not. Some people feel connection to those around them, and some do not.

Some of this has to do with factors other than sociability. Perhaps someone has just received bad news or is lost in thought about a pressing problem. Perhaps there is a language or culture barrier.

The same is true on social media. Some people are naturally

good at social media and some are not. You can see it by how often they post, how often they like posts, how often they re-tweet, **how often they interact**. Of course, some people will defend their lack of engagement on social media by saying they are “too busy” and they “don’t have time.”

Then there are those like someone I know named Jon, who blocked off his Facebook wall to avoid unwanted communication and has even asked me to “untag” him from a conversation because he did not care to hear what other people had to say about something he had been involved in. Or the people like Jon, who avoid commenting on posts because they don’t want to be dragged into a conversation. My question to Jon and others like him is: why are you on Facebook? Why are you on social media at all?

Here’s the thing: If you don’t want two-way communication (or even multi-lateral communication), DO NOT get on social media. It is not all about you. It is about the other people too.

People who like to control what others say or with whom they connect, are not naturally good at social media. We see the corporate CEOs who have been forced to open Twitter accounts by their communications advisers and who then do not tweet or respond to tweets.

Getting on social media is about being social. It is about being responsive. It is about interacting. It’s about (the hated, overused term) engagement. You can’t automate your social media interactions. You need to be present, social and say hi.

Smile! You are on social media.

Hosting a speaker or a panel? Read this first.

Have you been to an event where the speaker did not meet your expectations? It may not have been the speaker's fault. He or she may have not been well prepared or well chosen for that particular event. Having been asked to speak at a few different events, I can tell you it is up to the host to prepare the speaker.



Empty Podium by Karin Dalziel on Flickr

If you (or your organization) is hosting an event featuring speakers, here are a few things to do:

1. Determine exactly what your topic is and whether you have a theme you want to highlight.
2. Make sure you understand your audience. Who will be coming to your event and why? If it is a professional development event, for example, what level of understanding does the

audience have about the subject?

3. When choosing your speakers, make sure their experience matches your topic and audience. Recently, a friend attended a talk where the speaker's understanding of the topic was BELOW the audience's. Generally, the audience wants to learn something.

4. Prepare your speakers. Give them all the information they will need for the event, including date, time and location. I know several speakers who have been late to an event (causing them to get frazzled) because they were confused about how to get there or the exact start time. Tell your speakers how many people are expected, who they are and what you told the audience to expect.

5. Talk to the speaker a couple of days before the event. What will he or she be talking about exactly? Does he or she need any special equipment?

6. Have a plan B (or be prepared for things to go off track: missing presentations, faulty AV equipment, missing speakers, etc.)

7. Prepare you audience by giving an introduction of both the speaker and the topic. Make sure the program handout includes the speaker's bio and contact information. When introducing the speaker, stay topline. Nothing is more boring (and more time-wasting) than having the host read the entire biography to the audience.

The bottom line is that most speaking events don't go well because the host has not done a good job of choosing or preparing the speakers. This is particularly common in volunteer-run organizations. However, if you are charging for your event, and you are associating your organization's name to it, it is imperative that you take the time to make sure the speaker is given the best shot at success.

What would you add to the list above? Does your organization have a list of speaker guidelines? If so, what does it include?

Things on my mind

For some reason, I have had a hard time getting a post done this week. I wrote two lengthy posts, but ended up saving them as drafts. They may appear later on. Some of my ability to focus this week has to do with having too much on my mind. I thought I would share some of what has been bugging me (and sadly, this is but the tip of the iceberg).

Courtesy is waning

It seems to me that we are seeing a huge drop in courteous behavior. In the last few weeks alone, I have seen it both personally and professionally. On the personal side, I have left messages for friends that have gone unreturned. I have been cut off in the middle of a sensitive conversation. On the professional side, I have sent proposals that potential clients don't even acknowledge.

Angie's List won't leave me alone (or, is trying too hard and being annoying)

When I moved into my house a couple of years ago, I joined Angie's List. It was helpful when I needed to find different contractors (plumber, fence installer, etc.). After getting most issues fixed in my house, I found I was using Angie's List quite infrequently. And then, one of the contractors I found on it (and who had decent recommendations) turned out to be one of the worst experiences I have ever had with any service provider. So I let my membership lapse. This was in

December of last year. Since then, without fail, I have received offers EVERY week (and sometimes every day) from Angie's List for discount membership...ranging from 20% to 40% off. I have stop reading the emails and just delete them. At some point, Angie and every other vendor, needs to realize it is not about the offer. You could give me Angie's List for free, and at this point, I am not signing up. Oh, and I see their constant advertising every night on the CBS Evening News, which leads me to believe that Angie is lying when she says that nobody pays to be on Angie's List. She cannot be making the type of money she is from yearly membership dues alone. And, vendors have told me that in order to show up higher in the rankings, they are asked to pay.

Customer service is marketing

A few weeks ago I had problems with my web host, Host Gator. In three separate instances, my website and email went down for a total of a few hours. I asked them for a credit (after not getting any information from them on restoration of service). They ignored it. Even after I told them in their survey that they would not be getting any referrals from me, they didn't seem to care.

Another service provider who has been very slow in her service has had the nerve to blame me, in writing, for her delays. Apparently she doesn't realize that even if it is the client's fault (and in this case it isn't) you don't blame the client. By shifting the responsibility and accusing me (the client) all she is doing is making sure I will not use her services ever again, nor refer her any business. How you treat your customer is marketing, as Lisa Gerber points out in this blog post.

On the other hand...

I have been impressed with the responsiveness and interest I receive for this blog from some great folks that I have only

met on Twitter. Thank you!