

Why Uber is successful

Have you heard about Uber? Basically, it's an on-demand a car service that you "hail" via app, web or text message. The service is available in major cities in the US, including San Francisco, Boston, New York and Washington, DC, some European capitals and a few cities in Asia, including Singapore.

I started hearing about Uber on Twitter, but had never experienced it personally until recently. My friend Barb Jump had invited me to join her at the Kennedy Center. After the performance, *in the elevator*, Barb said she would get a car service to pick us up.

Barb texted Uber, Uber sent back a confirmation, and nine minutes later, Kareem (the driver) was pulling up to pick up in a town car, complete with bottled water, tissues and mints. Apparently nine minutes is a long wait time, because Barb says they are usually there in about four minutes, which if you live in Washington, means it is much quicker than waiting for the Metro.

What turned Barb on to Uber were two basic issues: she doesn't carry cash and she doesn't feel safe hailing a cab at night as a woman alone in the city. Uber solves these two issues. Since you must set up an account beforehand, the payment is charged to your credit card on file, thus there is no need for cash (or figuring out the tip, since there is no tipping). And, since you are directly ordering a car from Uber, you are not getting some random cabby. Uber also sends you the name of the driver and his/her picture so you know who to expect.

Fill a need and differentiate from the competition

Uber is successful because it found some very specific needs that were not being met by traditional taxis or car services. As its website says quite succinctly, these three needs are: request from anywhere, ride with style and convenience, and

hassle-free payment. These could also be called DIFFERENTIATORS. As a plus, for Barb (and for other women), these also translate to added safety.

The bottom line is that for a business to succeed it has to meet a need that is not being adequately met by others in the marketplace. And to be uber-successful (jeez, aren't I clever?) it has to meet those needs while differentiating itself from any competition.

Fulfill your brand promise

Everybody knows that saying something and doing it are two different things. If you do what you say you do, you are, in effect, fulfilling your brand promise. Uber's tagline is Everyone's Private Driver. I think Uber certainly lives up to that tagline's promise—anyone can set up account, "hail" an Uber from their smartphone (anywhere they may be) and get a driver whom they will recognize because Uber provides this information beforehand.

Have you experienced Uber or other companies that are succeeding by differentiating well and living up to their promise?

Top 3 most annoying LinkedIn behaviors

I just got an email from LinkedIn telling me Tom and Sue (not their real names) have endorsed me. The thing is the endorsement from Sue is worth something. She's someone I

respect and whom I have known for several years now. Her endorsement is real while Tom's is not. I have never known Tom in a professional capacity or worked with him. I know him from school and he is endorsing me for things that are not even on my profile. This leads me to my top three most annoying LinkedIn behaviors.

#3: Fake endorsements

I am really not sure why people do this. Do they want a fake endorsement in return? Is it fun to play with LinkedIn? What is it?



16/50 -grr!! by THEMACGIRL on Flickr

#2: Posting too much and about non-business topics

Yes, I guess this could be two behaviors, but in my experience they go hand-in-hand. People who post too much are also posting about extraneous stuff. Remember that you want to showcase what you do, and unless you are a veterinarian, that stuff about how kittens need extra blankets in the winter is great for Facebook but has no place on LinkedIn.

#1: Sending generic LinkedIn invitations (perennial "winner")

Stop doing this. I don't understand why people you don't know in person, who feel they would like to connect with you ,

can't seem to scare up a couple of lines to provide some context, some reason, or some personality.

What annoys you on LinkedIn? Yes, you can vent right here!

Wait—why you can't rely on spell-check

Yesterday, while working out at the gym, I nearly fell off the treadmill when I spotted the following ad from Sephora in InStyle magazine:

Sephora ad

At first, I thought perhaps Sephora was engaging in a not-so-clever play on words, since the wait could be over for a weight-less product. But I see no evidence in the copy that Sephora is highlighting any weightlessness in this product. In fact, the sub-headline says: "Finally, smoother, softer, satiny style in half the time." Clearly, the concept is about time, so the appropriate word would have been wait, not weight.

It is hard to believe that Sephora's ad people would have let this one go to print. Back when I was a print buyer in the 90s, we sent actual film to our magazines. A mistake in the film would be a major problem, and fixing it would involve high cost. Today, ad agencies send over PDF's, which are way easier to fix and re-send.

So next time you think you proofread your document and used spell-check to do so, I suggest you wait, and read it again.

Do you think the headline is right? Let me know why.

About that special offer...just how special is it?

Many businesses use special offers to try to lure customers in or to retain existing customers. Whether it is a discount for new customers, a gift with purchase or buy-one-get-one free, special offers are all over. The question is are these offers working for the business AND are they working for the customer?



Special by Dave Cobb on Flickr

I have been going to a massage clinic for a while, and through the years, its rates have climbed steadily, which makes it harder to get massages regularly. The clinic started offering a deal to holders of a local rewards card, which you buy for

\$25 and which provides a variety of discounts with local businesses. The deal was that you would get a 75-minute massage for the price of a 60-minute massage, or 15 minutes free. There is very little cost to the clinic for this deal, and the value is only about \$15.

Since I was booking a 60-minute massage anyway, why not get an extra 15 minutes, right? I did so back in February, and then I booked it again for this week. Well, I got an email back from the massage therapist telling me the deal had expired and that she would be happy to give me a 75-minute massage for the regular price. Needless to say, I was not happy. I wrote back that it was disappointing that they would have this offer on their website scheduler and then not honor it. Then, the clinic's owner wrote me to tell me that no, the offer hadn't expired, it simply was valid for a ONE-TIME USE, and since I had used it in February, I was no longer entitled to it. BUT, because I was a "loyal" customer, she would pay the massage therapist the difference (words designed to make me feel guilty...but that is a subject for another post).

Nowhere on the clinic's website does it say anything about the offer being a one-time deal. In fact, the only place referencing this is the website for the rewards card (in fairly small print). Nobody else on the rewards program has a one-time deal. It is all discounts for first time customers or ongoing discounts such as a 10% discount at a dry cleaner's and so forth.

What we have here is a special offer that a) has no clear purpose and b) does not have clear (and common) rules for usage. The result is little gain to the business and disappointment to the customer.

When deciding on a special offer, businesses need to do a bit of strategic thinking and planning. Here are some guidelines before you issue any type of special offer.

1) **Have a clear marketing goal in mind.** Are you training to attract new customers? Are you trying to build loyalty? What do you hope to accomplish with this offer?

2) **Have a real offer (with real value).** A special offer should be special, that is, a customer should be getting something that he or she really wants and that incentivizes the customer with the goal in mind. That is, if you want a new customer, then make it worthwhile for a new customer to try your service or product (hint-10% off is usually not a great offer for first-time users).

3) **Have clear rules** that are communicated to the customer BEFORE he/she attempts to use your special offer.

4) **Be prepared to honor your special offer.** When you don't honor an offer you risk alienating the customer.

5) **Have a way of tracking the offer.** If your goal was to get new customers, how many came because the offer? Have regular customers been taking advantage of the offer and is it translating to an overall increase in sales?

Whatever your special offer is, make sure it really is special, both for your business and for your customer.

Do you know what your customer's experience is

really like?

It's painfully obvious that in many companies, marketing is completely separate from customer service and on another planet from company operations. This is why we often see marketing communications that have nothing in common with the actual experience of using a product or service.

I have written about this several times before, but **as long as marketing is divorced from customer experience, companies will cultivate poor relationships with their customers.**

Recently, I stayed at a Holiday Inn Express. You know, where the marketing says that you will be smarter just by staying there. In reality, the walls were paper thin, making sleeping a challenge; the bathroom was cramped, making getting ready a challenge; and to top it off, I could smell breakfast cooking in my room, half-way down the hall on the second floor at 6:30 in the morning. Oh, and if this weren't enough, when I tried to work out in the fitness closet, I was greeted by an overheated room, with no temperature controls, and outdated, hard-to-use equipment. It didn't help that the front desk seem disinterested, and not once greeted me when I walked in the door.

I did not feel smarter by staying at the Holiday Inn. In fact, I felt taken. Their pricing for this location is on par with a hotel, not the motel they truly are.

While I was staying at this hotel I kept thinking that the hotel manager and the front desk people had never spent a night at their own motel. Or perhaps they had, which is why they were rarely to be seen and seemed so unenthusiastic about their jobs. What I know for certain is that whoever does the marketing for Holiday Inn Express wants you to believe that this place is tops. But, you will only believe it if you have a positive customer experience. **If you, like me, have a**

negative customer experience, not only will you scoff at the marketing, but you will likely become a vampire instead of brand ambassador. That is, you will take away customers rather than bring business.

If you want to have marketing communications that work LONG TERM, then you must learn about your customer's experiences with your product or service. You want to know the unvarnished truth. **If the experience is consistently bad, you have to fix the experience, not the marketing.**

Ultimately, the most amazing communications/marketing campaign can't sell a bad product or service.

We're off for the week!

Caffeinated views is taking a break this week, so there will be no posts. We'll be back next week with our usual marketing and communications insights.

Happy Independence Day and Fourth of July holiday!

Is your blog social?

Today, I presented "Using your Blog as a Centerpiece in your Social Media Strategy" at the PRSA Mid-Atlantic Chesapeake District Conference. It was a great session with lots of great questions.

Here's the PowerPoint presentation on SlideShare

Blog social media strategy prsamd brody slide share from DeborahBrody

Let me know if you have any further questions.

If you'd like to learn more about blogging, sign up for my next How to Blog workshop, taking place on July 18 in Baltimore. Here are the details.

How companies #fail at using Twitter

Twitter is second only to Facebook in brand marketing (85% to Facebook's 91%, according to Social Media Examiner's 2013 Social Media Marketing Report). It's safe to say that Twitter is part of most organizational social media strategies. Yet, many companies do not seem to understand how to use Twitter or how to use it to connect with their customers.



FAIL stamp by Hans Gewirtz on Flickr.
Read more here:
<http://hans.gewirtz.com/2011/03/07/fail-s>

How do companies #fail at Twitter?

1. They fail to update their profile

Have you ever gone to a Twitter profile and found a link to a blog that has not been updated since 2009? Or how about a company that does not list its current website? It takes minutes to update a Twitter profile. There is no excuse. And don't even get me started on those companies (and individuals) who are using the default Twitter egg as their profile pic...

2. They fail to seize opportunities

As on most Sundays, yesterday I watched CBS Sunday Morning (some of the best morning TV out there). There were lots of great stories, including one about a Brooklyn pickle manufacturer. It was a nice story, and gave the company great publicity. CBS tweeted out a link to the video and mentioned the company's Twitter handle. I went to check it. The company never promoted its appearance on CBS and the only mention of it was the re-tweet of CBS's video link after the fact. That is a missed opportunity.

3. They fail to use Twitter beyond self-promotion

Too many companies think that Twitter is a one-way megaphone where they can trumpet their awards and recognitions or think of it as an easy way to push out news releases and personnel announcements. While there is room for this type of promotion, if a company's stream is devoted solely to itself, it is not "engaging" with its audience.

4. They fail to understand how people expect companies to use Twitter

Related to the above, companies who use Twitter as a self-promotional news stream, don't understand people expect to be

able to interact with them. Twitter is a social media network, and the word social is there first for a reason. Social has up-ended the way that companies must communicate with their audiences. Instead of one-way communication, social media has given companies a way of having two-way communications with their customers.

5. They fail to understand that Twitter is real-time

Perhaps waiting 24 hours to return a phone call or an email is standard business practice, but it won't fly on Twitter. When somebody is asking something on Twitter (or other social media networks), they are expecting a real-time answer, much the same as if they were having an in-person conversation. Answering a Twitter @ query hours or days later is ineffective and completely inappropriate to the medium.

6. They fail to understand "social shame"

Companies who disregard/ignore/fail to check @ messages on Twitter are unaware of the concept of social shame. Like it or not, individuals turn to Twitter when they have a problem, figuring companies want to preserve their reputations and will respond or try to fix the problem. Many companies don't seem to understand the amplification involved in social media. If I complain about a company, my followers may see it but people who use Twitter's search function will also see it.

What other company failures on Twitter have you seen? Please add your thoughts in the comments.

UPDATE July 9, 2013

Failure can include auto-tweeting replies. Seems that Bank of America has been doing that, quite inappropriately, according to this story on Consumerist.

5 keys to successful content marketing

Yesterday, the PRSA-National Capital Chapter hosted a panel on content marketing and public relations. The panelists—Michael Laxineta (Custom Briefings), Bruce Namerow (Interactive Strategies) and Anne Holtz (Home Innovation Research Labs)—did a great job of explaining what content marketing is, how it works and how to make it work better.

Michael Laxineta said he believes that the “PR profession is the original content marketer.” He says that 91% of business-to-business marketers are using content marketing, and that the biggest challenge is providing engaging content. Bruce Namerow said that content drives anything, and that brands now are their own publishers.

Content marketing has many benefits, including brand awareness, nurturing leads and building relationships. Anne Holtz said that prior to embarking on a content marketing strategy, Home Innovation Research Labs was doing great stuff, but people did not know about it. Having a strategy in place has helped get traffic to its website.

In order to develop a successful content marketing program, you should consider these five key steps:

- 1. Make sure that your content marketing is in line with both your business and communications goals.**
- 2. Understand exactly who your audience is and what information they need.**
- 3. Do keyword research so that you are using the terms and**

keywords people actually search.

4. **Personalize the content to your audience needs. It is not about reaching everyone but about reaching your niche with the information they need.**

5. **Make sure your content is mobile-ready.**

Perhaps content marketing is just a fancy new term for what we used to call integrated marketing communications, as my friend Karen Addis from Environics Communications said. Whatever we call it now, it is still smart to reach your audience with the information they require to build a relationship with your organization or to buy from your business.

Why you need to be extra careful with your email marketing

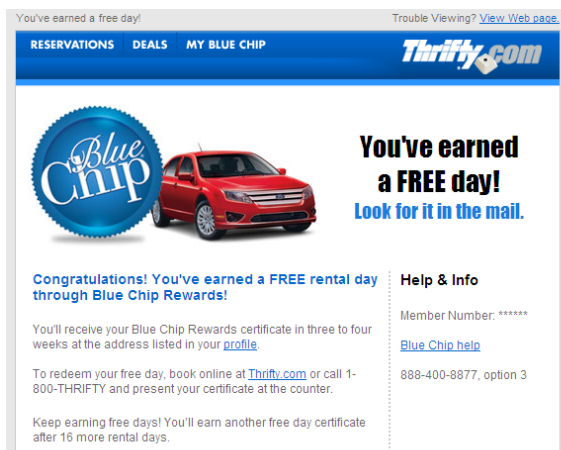
Regardless of all the stories about email being dead, it is still around and it is still used for marketing purposes. Think about the amount of email you get every day. How much of it is personal (and by that I mean addressed to you from a real live person, whether it be to discuss weekend plans or the latest changes to the document you are working on)? I bet only a small fraction falls in the latter category.

What makes email marketing so effective is that it targets people directly and sends the messages into a place they are likely to be every day—their email inbox. **Successful email marketing is personalized and customized.** Email marketing

gives you the ability to address email to individuals by name and send them the news, offers or other information that is relevant to them.

And yet, today I got an email with the following subject line: David, connect with [name of marketer]. Yes, you are personalizing, but you screwed up my name. I could have deleted it had I not recognized the sender.

And yet, on Friday, I got this email from Thrifty:




The screenshot shows an email from Thrifty.com. At the top, it says "You've earned a free day!" and "Trouble Viewing? [View Web page.](#)". The navigation bar includes "RESERVATIONS", "DEALS", "MY BLUE CHIP", and the Thrifty.com logo. The main content features a "Blue Chip" logo, a red car, and the text: "You've earned a FREE day! Look for it in the mail." Below this, it says "Congratulations! You've earned a FREE rental day through Blue Chip Rewards!" and "You'll receive your Blue Chip Rewards certificate in three to four weeks at the address listed in your [profile](#)." It also provides instructions: "To redeem your free day, book online at [Thrifty.com](#) or call 1-800-THRIFTY and present your certificate at the counter." and "Keep earning free days! You'll earn another free day certificate after 16 more rental days." On the right side, there is a "Help & Info" section with "Member Number: *****", "[Blue Chip help](#)", and "888-400-8877, option 3".

Then, on Saturday I got this one:

Please accept our sincerest apology. [Trouble Viewing? View Web page.](#)

RESERVATIONS DEALS **Thrifty.com**



Please accept our apology.

Dear Valued Customer,

This morning you received an email from us offering you a coupon for a free rental day through Blue Chip Rewards. **Unfortunately, this offer is not valid.** You will not be able to book this offer online and you will not be receiving a coupon in the mail. Please disregard the email you received. We're very sorry for any confusion our eagerness may have caused.

If you have any questions regarding this email, please contact Customer Service at bluechip@thrifty.com. We sincerely appreciate your understanding in this matter. We value you as a customer and we look forward to saving you money down the road.

Thank you for choosing Thrifty.

I am not sure how many people got this email, but since I happen to rent a few times a year, I thought the first email was for real and an offer for me personally, even though I don't have a Blue Chip account. The second email—addressed to “Dear Valued Customer”—did not make me feel valued at all. Thrifty is now telling me that it screwed up and that the offer it sent is not valid, without doing anything to compensate for the mistake.

Are you screwing up the goodwill?

How many times can you screw up and keep goodwill? The difference between screwing up in a mass advertising campaign is that it is impersonal. When you screw up on email you have addressed a client/customer/prospect directly and personally, you have to be more contrite. Since you have the ability to be personal, then be personal! And be more careful.

It is about opting-in. Don't give them a reason to opt-out.

The reason that we use email marketing is because, generally,

it is opt-in. That is, people have signed up to receive our messages and want to get them. There is goodwill. But if you fail to personalize, send out erroneous offers, or the wrong offers, you are jeopardizing that goodwill and giving your list a reason to opt out.

Thoughts?