

Is it a PR problem or is it a business problem?

Yesterday, I read Gini Dietrich's take on the state of the PR industry, *The PR Industry Does Need Better PR*, on her firm's blog, *Spin Sucks*. Basically, Gini points out that what people think they know about PR is wrong or misleading. It's her conclusion that what the PR industry needs is better PR.

I think what the PR industry needs is better business skills.

Have you been to a PR networking event lately? If you have, you've probably noticed a lot of young people, mostly women. These young people often have inflated titles—including account manager, account director and even vice president—after being in the industry for three years or so. Many of these PR “pros” studied PR in college. Some may have even had an internship or two.

You may also have met a lot of former journalists who have decided they will have more job stability in public relations, while using their writing skills and knowledge of what is newsworthy.

What few of these PR people have is a solid understanding of business. Few, if any, have gone to business school. Few, if any, understand basic marketing ideas like push-pull. Fewer still understand finance, balance sheets or even how to read and interpret data.

Lots of people are busy trying to figure out how to get the word out about an event, or how to have a great social media campaign, but what they are failing to see is the big picture—how public relations helps a company to achieve its business objectives.

A big part of the disconnect that currently exists between

public relations agencies and the business side of the industries served has to do with the separation between communications functions and marketing and sales roles. Even though public relations is part of marketing communications, public relations does not usually have a stake in marketing and sales processes and outcomes. Businesses may hire public relations agencies to help with image, but even then, the point usually is to increase the bottom line (i.e. sales in for profit organizations, influence or donors at nonprofit organizations).

In his article 3 reasons to find a new PR/social media agency, Scott Signore states quite succinctly the following as his third reason:

Finally, despite the evolution in the category and the number of significant changes the PR business has endured over the years, it's still about executing a communications program that helps drive business. So, look for another PR and social media agency partner if your current group is not directly supporting your business objectives.

What Scott is saying is that if PR agencies are not helping companies achieve **business objectives**, they should be fired. Fundamentally, they are not doing their job.

And yet, as I said before, too many PR professionals simply do not understand business. All public relations pros should be reading business books or articles or watching business-focused programs. Those who want to be high-level agency executives should consider going to business school.

What do you think? Is it a PR problem? Or is it a lack of business know-how?

Does your blog have a tone of voice?

We use different tones, depending on the audience we are speaking to and our personalities. Tones help define us and the content of what we are saying. For example, the professorial types always sound like they are lecturing, even when they are just discussing the weather.

Whenever we write something, we engage a certain tone. If we are writing an academic paper, we may use an authoritative tone. If we are writing an ad for a baby boutique, we may take on a cheerful tone. And of course, when we are writing blogs, we should have a definable tone. Some blogs are matter-of-fact. Others are irreverent. Some are angry (and those are generally using the blogosphere to rally against something or someone). What tone does your blog have?

Some tones to use include:

- candid
- casual
- cheerful
- compassionate
- conciliatory
- confident
- curious
- empathetic
- encouraging
- excited
- expectant
- fervent
- formal

- fun
- happy
- humorous
- incisive
- objective
- optimistic
- outspoken
- relaxed
- serious
- skeptical
- sympathetic

Some tones to avoid:

- brusque
- contentious
- cynical
- derogatory
- desperate
- doubtful
- fatalistic
- fearful
- frantic
- gloomy
- grim
- holier-than-thou
- hopeless
- lethargic
- melancholy
- paranoid
- pedantic
- selfish
- unsympathetic

Want to make your blogging better?

Attend my How to Write Your Blog workshop THIS Friday, May 17.

Details and registration here.

What message are you sending?

OK, so you don't like to blog. You hate tweeting. You refuse to put up a picture on your LinkedIn profile. And yet you have all those social media platforms. Perhaps you should get rid of them.

Here's the thing. If you don't use them—for whatever reason—don't have them. Having an old blog, and old profile or an unused Twitter makes it seem like you are no longer around or worse, that you just don't care.

Last night, I attended a panel presentation where one of the presenters said that potential employers and/or new business connections are checking out your social media profiles prior to meeting with you. Having an outdated social media presence sends a message, and it is not a good one. (As an aside, and kind of weird, I checked the social media presence for some of these panelists and I found a blog that hasn't been updated since 2009 and someone with four LinkedIn profiles with about one connection each. Hmm. That is not a great message is it?)

This is the message I am getting from you:

You say you know how to do social media but you haven't tweeted in two months and you only have 50 followers? I don't believe you.

You are a writer and you say you can help others blog but your website doesn't have a blog? You don't know how to position yourself and what a blog is really for.

You are a communications executive and all you have is a

personal Facebook page? You don't get the power of social media to educate and expand your network.

You are sending a message by having an outdated or unused profile and it may not be one that you want to communicate. An outdated or unused profile could mean that you are not comfortable on social media, that you don't have much to say, that you don't pay attention to social media or even that you experiment but don't follow through. None of it is positive.

Don't miss out! Sign up for the next How to blog workshop, taking place on May 17. Details and registration here.

Social media amplifies everything

Social media takes a magnifying lens to everything. It makes everything appear bigger and closer (kind of like your side view mirrors).



Fun with magnifying glasses by matlock on Flickr

You've probably heard that social media serves to amplify your message. You tell your friends on Facebook, and they then share it with their friends, and so on. I have come to realize that social media amplifies more than your message. It amplifies mistakes, personality traits and business smarts (or lack thereof).

Mistakes

You used to be able to slip up and it would be forgotten. Not any more. Now, someone will catch your mistake, and put it on Twitter or YouTube. And then people will share that. And before you know it, everyone knows of your mistake. Perhaps forgiven, but not forgotten.

Personality traits

Are you an angry person? You will appear even angrier when

trying to contain your ire to 140 characters. Your nastiness will be contained and then disseminated. Are you rude? Not only will the person appalled at your belching at the dinner table know about it, but everyone else will too. Self-centered? It will be evident in endless self-promotional posts. On the other hand, if you are a connector or naturally gregarious, it will be evident because you will have 1000s of followers.

Business know-how

Do you answer your customer queries? If you don't do it regularly and quickly, it will be even more apparent on social media channels. People will complain. And since you aren't used to replying quickly, the problem will grow.

Not sure what social media is for and ignoring it? You can be sure others will not be. You will either look like a fool or lose customers.

For example, today I was looking at service providers "website." All it was a poorly formed WordPress site. There was no contact information. None. No listing of services. No reason why I should hire. In short, it was a disaster. I found a Twitter handle, and tweeted. No response. Better to not be on the web at all!

Remember that social media gives people the ability to share the good and the bad about you. Small can become big. And that can be a good thing, or it can be a disaster. Your choice!

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The two actions that will make your communications more effective

There are two actions that will improve your communications efforts. These are:

- **Listening** (really listening, not just nodding your head)
- **Saying what you mean**

It sounds absurdly simple, but chances are that you are not doing one or both well.

Listening is crucial.

Yesterday, I went to a large home improvement store (I won't name names). I was on the search for an edger/trimmer for my pocket-sized lawn. I have never bought this item and I have no idea what I need. I flagged down an associate and I explained that I have a small lawn, and that the grass is hard to cut near the fence, and that I did not want to spend too much money. So this associate points me to the high end trimmers, starting at \$100. And then he says to me: "well, you said you wanted to cut your shrubs." Huh? I said NOTHING about shrubs since I don't have shrubs. Clearly, this associate was not listening. He was also not very qualified to talk about edgers, but that is a different story.

If you don't listen, you are not going to "get" the story, whatever it may be.

The other side of the communications equation is **saying what you mean**. Lots of people (and organizations) say what they think the other person (or their target audience) wants to

hear. Saying what you mean is not burying things in fine print or in if-thens. **Be clear! And please, be sincere.** People can tell when you are not saying what you mean. And then they don't trust you.

Mattress stores don't say what they mean

A great example of communications that don't say what they mean is mattress store advertisements. Having just gone through mattress shopping, I can tell you, just ignore the ads. They are designed to entice you into the store. Once you are in the store, you find out the real deal. Generally in the world of mattress sales, the enticement is free something or the other (free box spring, free delivery, free set-up, free TV, etc.). The reality is that the pricing is structured so that you can't compare it to other stores, and there are caveats. If you get a mattress priced over \$X, then you get free delivery. If you want to price match, we have to make sure it is the same mattress (and since mattresses are made specifically for each store, there is no exact same name). If you want us to remove your old bed, then we charge you a fee. If you want the ten-year warranty, then you have to buy our overpriced mattress cover. And on and on.

No clarity. No saying what they mean. Making people distrust what you are saying. That is not communications!

It is about effective communications. Effective means that something is successful in achieving the intended result. If you are intending to sell mattresses or edgers or any product, service or opinion, you should both listen and say what you mean.

How to write your blog workshop

What are you doing on May 17? Why not sign up for my How to write your blog workshop? You will learn how to make your blog

more effective, how to come up with blog post ideas and lots of other good stuff. Details and registration [here](#).

Why you need an editor

Most people can write, but some don't do it very well. That is why most people would also benefit from having an editor.

I often edit other people's work. Most of the time, the writing is done by people whose primary job does not include writing. There are a few things I correct over and over. Here's a list:

Wordiness. Using too many words when fewer will do. In grad school, a professor of mine had us remove ten words from every assignment. It's a good exercise for everyone.

Long, complicated sentences. This is somewhat related to wordiness, but also shows that people are afraid of short, direct sentences.

Using I instead of me. I am not talking about a sentence like this one. People don't seem to want to use the word me in constructions such as "that time works for John and me." I am not sure why.

Subject-verb agreement. I hear it on the news all the time, and see it, often in long, complicated sentences. If your subject is singular, then your verb should be too. Not like this line from a pop song: "The color of her eyes were." (In this case, the subject is the color, which is singular, therefore the verb should be was.)

Misusing words. Often, people think they know what a word means, but they really don't. (I am working on compiling a

list of these...)

Using jargon and/or big words. The more jargon you use, the more I think you don't know what you are talking about. I also don't think using the word utilize makes you seem smarter. Read this excellent article from Content Management on how to get rid of jargon.

I know most people can't afford to get an editor. Heck, I don't have an editor for this blog either. Next time you write something, look it over for the items above. If you are unsure, ask!

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Are you being coy?

Someone I know posted this update on Facebook:

"A real game of yuck this week."

Who knows what she meant. I am sure you have seen similar coy or opaque statements that just beg followers to ask for more information. And that is what the poster wants...you to ask for details. This may or may not be a good tactic to get attention on Facebook. It certainly is a bad tactic to use if you are trying to get attention in your email marketing, your blog posts, and other marketing content.

Say you have an email newsletter you send to your clients. You

write:

Spring is a lovely time of year. Good things happen in the spring, it is a time of renewal. Tulips are blooming and spring sales are everywhere.

Unless you want to get people upset at your opaqueness, there is little use for being coy in marketing communication. Instead, you should know what you want and ask for it. Instead of rhapsodizing about spring in your newsletter, why not figure out what action you want your target audience to take (this is your **call to action**, in marketing terms). Don't make your audience guess. Tell them, clearly and precisely. Here are a few examples:

- Spring means renewal! Time to renew your subscription to our newsletter
- Spring classes are starting. Here is how to enroll in our next class.
- Spring sales are on! Check out the reduced prices on our newest product

These are all **specific actions** you want your audience to take.

Are you being coy in your communications? Why not start being direct and asking for what you want?!

How to blog workshop on May 17

Sign up today to get your early registration discount to my next How to Blog workshop taking place on May 17. For more details and to register visit howtowriteyourblog4.eventbrite.com .

10 reasons people don't blog

I have been training people on how to blog for nearly a year now. In that time, I have had the privilege of working with dozens of people who want to blog, but haven't been able to for various reasons. Among the most common reasons given are these:

1. Don't have the time to blog (also phrased as blogging takes up too much time)
2. Don't know what to write about
3. Don't have sufficient ideas or material
4. Don't think anyone wants to read my thoughts
5. I am not a good writer
6. Don't know who is going to read my blog or how people will find it
7. My organization insists on a long chain of approval to publish anything
8. I don't have buy-in from top-level executives at my organization
9. Don't see the point or purpose in blogging
10. Don't know how to set up a blog

Do any of these sound familiar to you?

How to write your blog workshop on May 17

If you struggle with these common blogging issues, check out the three-hour hands-on **How to write your blog workshop** I am offering on Friday, May 17, starting at 9:30 a.m. It takes place at Link Locale in Arlington, VA, near the Clarendon Metro stop. If you sign up by May 1, you get the early registration price of \$70 (regular price is \$79). For more details and to sign up, visit howtowriteyourblog4.eventbrite.com.

What you can learn from John McCain

Do you watch Meet the Press? If so, you have probably noticed that Senator John McCain has been a frequent guest. He's also been on the other Sunday shows like Face the Nation. According to The Washington Monthly, as of 2009, McCain had been on Meet the Press 54 times. Since then, I would say he has been on many more times, making that number 60 or larger.

Other people appear quite frequently too. In fact, based on Sunday show appearances, you would be excused for thinking there are only about 10 senators in the U.S. Senate. Other frequent guests are Senators Lindsey Graham, Chuck Schumer and Dick Durbin. (As an aside, it seems that male senators appear more frequently than female senators...). Back in the 90s, when I first started watching Meet the Press with Tim Russert, the go-to senator was the Senator Orrin Hatch. In fact, I stopped watching MTP because it seemed like Sen. Hatch was always on!

Is John McCain a more important senator than the other 99? No. What he may be is more media savvy. And he is a proven commodity. The Sunday shows know they can count on McCain for making strong pronouncements or taking controversial views.



Sen. John McCain (photo by Medill DC on Flickr)

There's a few PR lessons you can learn from John McCain.

- 1) Be the go-to person on your areas of expertise (McCain's areas are mostly immigration, foreign policy and defense). Some may say this is being a "thought leader."
- 2) Make yourself available and say yes to invitations. (My guess is that MTP knows that it can get McCain pretty much any time.) If you turn down an interview, the producer will simply go on to the next person on the list.
- 3) Have clearly defined, strong messages and/or positions. (MTP knows what it will get when it books McCain.)
- 4) Once you are in, you are in. (McCain does not have to prove anything or do much to get invited on the shows.)

What do you take away from McCain's frequent appearance?

Check out my guest post at Fletcher Prince's blog

Honored to be featured on the Fletcher Prince blog, discussing business cards as a budget marketing tactic.

Have you looked at your business card lately?