Blogging: when is it too personal?

Note: The following applies to business or organizational blogs not personal blogs.

What makes so many blogs fun to read is that they are more personal than other forms of communication. Since there are few (or no) editorial layers, most blogs are more frank and more conversational than other types of writing.

But there is a difference between showing your personality and being personal. I am certainly in favor of showing personality. If you like to compare everything to sports or music or movies, then do it. If you talk about your passions for cooking or travel, it makes you look like a well-rounded person.

There is also room for personal stories, as long as you are using them to illustrate a point or explain a position. What there is no room for, in my opinion, is really personal stuff that you would share with family and friends, but not with business acquaintances, such as a discussion of your latest mammogram or romantic break-up or philosophical musing.

Yes, I know you have a right to blog about whatever you like. This is especially true if you, like me, are a solopreneur or head of a very small company. Your business is personal...but your blog can't be. Remember why you are blogging—perhaps it is to help with thought leadership, lead generation and/or SEO. Ask yourself if the very personal post you are writing will advance or detract from that.

What do you think? Is there a line? And if someone crosses that line on his/her blog, are there consequences? I would appreciate if you shared your thoughts in the comments.

Is your message reaching the right person?

This past week, I got four or five calls/messages from a guy at a car dealership saying he had the information I requested. Trouble is, I didn't request the information. The guy most likely had the wrong phone number. His message was not reaching the right person.

If you want to communicate a message, you have to make sure that you are reaching your target audience, whether it is a one-to-one interaction or a specific demographic group.

What can we learn from the dealership guy?

First, get the details and information that you need. In this case, the dealership guy had the wrong phone number. If you want to communicate with any audience, it is important that you know where they are and how to reach them.

Second, if you aren't getting a response, check why. This guy left me four messages. The fact that I wasn't getting back to him did not seem to trigger the realization that he was calling the wrong person. For marketing communications, you may want to check the reach of the channel you are using, or whether the message is appropriate to your target audience.

Third, pay attention! If the dealership guy had bothered to pay attention to my voice mail message he might have realized he was calling the wrong person. Many marketers are, like him, going through the motions. If the playbook says, contact someone three times or run an ad for a month, that is what these inattentive marketers are doing, regardless of effectiveness.

Are you sure your message is getting through to your intended target audience?

What does April 1 mean to you?

For many, April 1 is April Fools Day, and they act accordingly foolish. For others, it is Opening Day for Major League Baseball, and they make plans to attend a game. For some, April 1 may simply be the start to a new month or the second quarter of the year.

My point is that just because for you April 1 means pulling stupid pranks on people or going to the ballpark it does not mean other people share your views. As a communicator or marketer, you have to be sure that your target audience will get or share the prism with which you see the world.

Corporations use holidays/special days in their advertising all the time. Maybe it's Easter or Christmas, or Valentine's Day or MLK Day. Those days may or may not resonate with your target audience. It is your job as a communicator to make sure that you are not losing your audience by focusing on the wrong thing.

Last week, a local DC organization (which I will not name because it certainly does not deserve publicity) thought it would get a jump on April Fools, so it pranked its membership.

In my mind, it made the organization look juvenile. I am sure to the organization's leadership it was a harmless joke—just having a bit of fun.

However you choose to celebrate April 1, take a moment to check whether your audience understands and embraces that. The Onion is expected to make an April Fools joke, but is CNN?

Know your strengths and weaknesses

I know a scholar who is very smart and informed and yet, this scholar doesn't ever ask for or listen to marketing advice. A few years ago, this person, who had written a couple books, decided to launch a website. I met with her after she had already done it. She wanted some feedback. I thought she should have a blog. But, she couldn't add one since her site had been built in Dreamweaver. I wished she had asked my opinion before she created her site.

This scholar sends out weekly email blasts. She does not have sharing capabilities on her emails. I have advised her time and again that she could get the word out even farther if she would add the ability to share on Facebook (where she has a

presence). But she either doesn't care or doesn't think my advice is worthwhile.

I have stopped giving her any advice. It is clear that she thinks she knows enough about marketing herself to ask me (or anyone) for help.

In any aspect of life it is helpful to know (and acknowledge) your strengths and weaknesses. You play to your strengths and get help in the areas you are weak. For example, say you have great ideas but can't spell for your life. If you are blogging, you know you need to get an editor to read over your stuff.

In the scholar's case, her weakness is marketing (and social media). She should acknowledge that and get help (or at least listen to advice).

We may not know our strengths and weaknesses, but we should work to find out what they are and act appropriately. Get feedback (listen to feedback!).

Thoughts?

Are you providing enough information?

You must provide enough information whenever you expect an answer from someone. It seems fairly simple doesn't it? And yet, look at this email I received a couple of days ago:

Deborah,

Hope you're well. We're looking for some freelance technical/medical writers and I thought you might be interested or might know some people. We have some general needs and a very specific need for someone in Boston.

[name]

No email signature with contact information or point of reference here. I do not know the sender—have never met him or even heard of him. Did he find me on LinkedIn, doing a web search or what? No clue.

I looked up the sender based on his email address, and found out he is the president (!!!!) of what looks to be an advertising agency (very confusing website...that is another blog post) with presence in multiple states, not around where I am located.

Would you respond to this person? After looking up, I did. I sent back an email asking for more details. Guess what? He never responded.

If you are prospecting for clients or consultants or anything else, you need to provide information, like:

- Complete contact information
- How you found or know of the prospect
- What you are looking for specifically
- How to respond

Do you have an email template that you use when prospecting? What information do you provide?

Should you solicit online reviews?

There's no doubt that online reviews are influential. There are specialized review sites like Trip Advisor and then there's the seemingly all-purpose Yelp. I admit I read reviews and have been swayed about staying at a hotel or eating a restaurant because of what other people say, and that is the point.

As a business, should part of your marketing efforts be to solicit reviews?

Let's start with the fact that reviews will happen whether you solicit them or not. Sadly, because of our passive-aggressive culture, it's become more likely that an unsatisfied customer will take to social media to complain about your service. Which is to say, that if you give bad service, you will most likely get negative reviews.

However, negative reviews are always balanced out by positive reviews. If, as a consumer, you are researching anything, you will read both the good and the bad reviews. Most people will be able to identify disgruntled employees or nit-picky reviewers. If most of the reviews are positive, you will discount the few reviews that are negative. Likewise, if most of the reviews are negative, you will discount the reviews that are positive. The lesson here is that genuine, positive reviews are important.

What generates positive reviews? Good service or product! As a business, you will need to focus most of your energy on providing positive experiences for your customers. If you don't, whether you solicit them or not, you will get negative reviews.

There is a difference between feedback and reviews

I recently had my hair cut at a salon I have gone to for a couple of years. The salon actively pursues online engagement. After my appointment, I got an email from the salon asking to provide feedback. The "feedback" was actually a link to give an online review. I was in a quandary. I had a bad experience this time: the receptionist was unhelpful and confused; I was made to wait 30 minutes; and the water was cool (on a very cold day) when they washed my hair. My stylist tried to make it better by giving me a discount and comping me a bottle of shampoo. But I thought management needed to know that things were not working well. Is the best way for me to give them a one or two-star review? Is that going to communicate to the salon something is wrong?

Businesses should actively solicit feedback AND positive reviews. They are not the same. In the hair salon's case, they are confusing feedback and online reviews.

A better way to get BOTH is to say something like:

We are committed to providing the best possible service. If we did not meet your expectations, please contact (manager). We want to know how to improve our service!

If you enjoyed the service today, we'd love if you reviewed us here (link to the site).

Thanks for your patronage.

The answer then is yes, you should solicit positive reviews, but don't think of that as feedback. You need to be aware of what is wrong so that you can fix it.

What are your thoughts about online reviews? Is it part of your marketing to solicit them?

Getting "scroogled"

I am sure you have probably seen Microsoft's ad campaign against Google, where the company claims you are getting "scroogled" by Google. It is clever, and has some basis in reality. If you haven't, one of the ads is for Outlook.com, which is being presented as an alternative to Gmail. The ad implies that Google is reading your "private" email to be able to target advertising to you.

I am not sure Microsoft is the correct alternative to Google, but I think they are on to something with the term "scroogled." Google, which is ubiquitous, is desperately trying to get more people on its (useless in my opinion) Google Plus platform. To force you to join, they are now killing the extremely useful Google Reader.

I have been using Google Reader for years, and often advise attendees to my blogging workshops that they should set up a reader. I also think readers are the only way to keep up with blogs, since you may follow dozens (if not hundreds). Readers give you one place to see what is new. If you only follow one or two blogs, then getting email updates works.

Alternatives to Google Reader: Get one ASAP!

In any case, Google Reader will be gone as of July 1. Luckily, there are some alternatives out there. Here are some reviews and compilations for you to check out:

CNET: 5 Worthy Alternatives

Silicon Angle: 6 Alternatives to the Dying Google Reader

Lifehacker: Google Reader is Shutting Down; Here Are the Best Alternatives

Don't get "scroogled!"

The lesson I draw from this is that any free service is free to let you down in the end. Many individuals and organizations put all their eggs in the proverbial free basket, and will suffer the consequences when organizations like Google and Facebook change the rules of the road whenever they like. My advice is to make sure you own your own website or blog (don't depend on Blogger or WordPress.com), have your own email (which you can usually get when you have your own domain and web hosting) and have alternatives to the free behemoths, which after all have their own agenda to push and ultimately, don't care about your needs and wants.

What are your thoughts? Do you feel that Google is treating you fairly?

Blogs can help change the world

It is not an exaggeration to say that blogs can help change the world. Take, for example blogger (and dissident) Yoani Sanchez. Since 2007, Yoani has been an outspoken critic of the situation in Cuba on her blog Generacion Y. She has attracted worldwide attention and is currently on tour, as reported in the Washington Post today.

And then there is Ai Weiwei, the Chinese artist who has been using his blog (and Twitter) to document the China's governmental cover up of shoddy building codes that led to the the death of more than 5,000 schoolchildren in the aftermath

of the devastating 2008 earthquake.

Both Sanchez and Ai Weiwei live in repressive societies where the government controls mass media. Both were able to use blogs, because they are self-published mass media outlets, to get their message and thoughts out to the world. By providing an alternative news/opinion source, not only to their fellow citizens, but to the world, they are shining a bright spotlight that would otherwise not exist.

Blogs are powerful. They allow you to communicate your thoughts to people everywhere around the world. You can use words, photos, video or even music with few barriers, at a low monetary cost (and sometimes, even free).

If you really want to make an impact, there is no better nor a more direct way than on your own blog.

To advertise or not to advertise

Yesterday, somebody on Twitter asked me whether she should advertise on Facebook. I asked what she was trying to accomplish. Her answer was to get more readers to her blog. Is that enough information to decide whether it is worth it to advertise? Not at all.

Let me preface the following by saying that I don't believe that you should do advertising on a case-by-case basis. It is much smarter to look at your overall marketing communications goals and have a plan to meet them. Advertising is a tactic

that you should use to bolster your strategy.

Goals (measurable is better)

First, you have to figure out what your goal really is. In this case, the blog owner could say she would like to increase her readership by 10% (that is, if she has the numbers for her current readership). But the real question is why? Why does she want more readers? What will having more readers mean? Depending on your type of organization, it could mean increased sales or donations or votes.

Target audience

Second, you have to figure out exactly who your audience is and where you can find them.

Budget

Third, you have to figure out your advertising budget. Throwing a few dollars here and a few dollars there is not a budget. Advertising is an investment in your business. How much are you able or willing to invest?

Trial

Fourth, once you have done your homework (if you know your audience, you have a target, you have budgeted a certain amount) then you are ready to try advertising.

Tracking and measurement

Lastly, once you are running a campaign, you will need to pay special attention to your metrics. Where are people finding you from? How will you track it?

Figuring out how to do advertising is not a science. There is art to it. I know, I was a media buyer eons ago, and I learned that some things look great on paper but don't work out. You can analyze CPM (cost per thousand) all you want, but

sometimes, you have to let your instinct guide you. Also, just because something is affordable, doesn't mean you should include it in your advertising plan. Sometimes, you don't know until you try it!

If you want help figuring out your advertising plan, contact me. Advertising planning is a process, which should be part of your overall communications plan.

Lost in communication: the sad story of the Lost Boys of Sudan

Last night I watched the 2003 documentary The Lost Boys of Sudan. The Lost Boys are a group of young men who managed to escape a brutal massacre of their people in Sudan and walked across the dessert to end up in a refugee camp in Kenya. Many of the boys lost both parents or entire families and some have no idea what happened to their families. Some Lost Boys were repatriated to the United States, and this documentary focuses on two of them.

The documentary deals with the difficulty these boys have adapting to the United States. Nobody seems to tell them what to expect or how to navigate anything. Santino, one of the boys featured in the film, drives a car without a license or insurance and ends up hitting another car. He ends up in court where the judge tells him that it doesn't matter that he is in the process of getting a license, he is still responsible for not having one and driving anyway. His confusion and upset are palpable. He is earning \$7 an hour, and now he has more than \$500 in fines. Nobody explained it to him and he had no way

of knowing.

Can you imagine being transported from a refugee camp in Africa to Houston, Texas? It must have been an extreme culture shock for these young men. And yet, they are greeted by two YMCA workers that speak to them in colloquial and fast English, even though the boys speak limited English, and it is not their primary language by far. And that is just the language gap. The film doesn't say much about these YMCA people, but it seems that they are clueless about the vast differences between someone from Sudan (who has survived trauma and has been living in a refugee camp) and someone who has been living in the U.S. all his or her life.

In the film, the boys are taken to an apartment, told that their rent will be paid for four months "while they get on their feet," and seemingly, expected to fend for themselves without much guidance at all.

The documentary is a study in the contrasts between Americans and the Africans. Americans exhibit a very sheltered and ignorant view of the world. The Africans quickly learn that they are different—not only from the white Americans but from the black Americans too. Their skin is darker, their culture is different.

As well-meaning as the YMCA and the others involved in the resettlement project were, they failed (miserably in my opinion) to consider how to properly communicate with the Lost Boys. Good communication bridges differences. Bad communication forms barriers.

Tainted with cultural blindness, the Americans did not so much as consider how hard it would be to adjust to American society, or really, what it takes to navigate day-to-day interactions. The boys had never had jobs or earned money or paid rent or dealt with car insurance. And yet, they were left to deal with everything by themselves.

What is worse is that the boys came to America expecting to get an education. In the film, it seems their sponsors thought they should be grateful to get low skilled, low paying jobs.

Because expectations were not properly communicated and because the Americans did not take into consideration the needs of the Lost Boys, the film documents a story of struggle and disaffection rather than of triumph and happiness. As hard as their lives were in Africa, it is not easier for them in the United States.

To me, this documentary illustrates perfectly how communication will fail if you don't consider your audience and its needs. Even the first decision of what language to use to communicate is a poor one. Communicating in English to people who barely speak the language is a recipe for failure.

Are you considering your audience when you communicate? Or are you so focused on your message you are not checking to see if it is being received?