

What you can learn from coffee filters

As anybody who knows me (or sees the theme in this website), I like coffee. I brew a huge mugful every morning. For years, I have been using store brand (ok, cheaper) unbleached filters and thought nothing of it. However, I hosted a brunch in December, and was out of coffee and filters, so I bought premium coffee and premium filters (always want to treat my guests right). Brunch was great and who knew my cousin was such a huge coffee drinker (brewed three pots!).



"I love coffee" by Kristopher Winther Balling on Flickr

After I ran out of premium coffee, I reverted back to my usual (good) coffee, but still using the premium filters. And then, two days ago, I ran out of premium filters and was back to store brand. Guess what? My coffee tasted different—and not in a good way. It was more bitter.

Being a coffee lover, I had to correct this situation and

promptly ran out and bought the premium filters again. Coffee this morning tasted good. The filters make a difference.

These are tough times, and many of us need to economize. But, we choose our battles and sometimes price does not win over quality.

Let me rephrase that: quality can trump price.

Marketing lesson here is simple: price is not the best unique selling proposition (USP). This is not the same as talking about value. If you are betting that your target audience will be swayed by price alone, you will be disappointed. People may try a product because it is cheaper, but if the quality is not there, they won't buy again. In a sense, generic brands "get" this. How often do you see a generic advertised? Never, because the only reason to buy a generic is because it often has a lower price. You don't promote generic/store brand products as being of HIGHER quality than brands, just comparable in quality but lower in price.

Find what makes your product (or service) special outside of the price. If your target values that attribute, the target will buy it very often regardless of price.

In other words, it's about showing value and not about discussing price.

What say you? Are there products you buy because you think they have a higher value?

5 items that your blog must absolutely, positively have

There are blogs with lots of good, well written and interesting information that are not succeeding. They almost always lack an element or two. Like when I find a great blog post that I want to share, and I can't because there are no sharing buttons. That frustrates me because I now have to add a step or two to share the post on social media, but it also shows me that the blog post author is not looking to increase his/her audience.



Photo by kokogiak on Flickr.

Here are the five items your blog must absolutely, positively have:

1. Sharing buttons. There are so many services and plug-ins—find one you like and that shares your post to the main social networks.

2. Robust about page. People want to know who is writing the content. A shady or incomplete author profile does not create

confidence that your content is valid.

3. Subscription capabilities. Give people the option to subscribe to your blog, either by email or by RSS feed.

4. Contact information. Give your readers the ability to contact you beyond your comments.

5. Print (or PDF) button. Some readers need to read things on paper, or want to print to save for posterity that amazing insight you wrote.

Does your blog have these? Why or why not? Anything you would add? Let me know! (Oh, another thing your blog should have is a way to comment!!!!)

How to start (or restart) blogging

Having an organizational blog has loads of benefits, not the least which is it helps with SEO and it establishes expertise. And yet, many organizations have put off adding a blog, or have abandoned the blog they started. In my experience, there are many reasons for this, among them:

- Not enough personnel or hours in the day
- Not knowing what to write
- Feeling overwhelmed by having to produce something consistently

Blogging doesn't have to be overwhelming or extremely time-consuming. If you don't have someone else to handle the blog,

it is possible for you to do it. You just need to learn how to do it (and why you should).

Having worked with dozens of people who have a desire to blog but don't know how to start or what to say, I have developed a way to teach how to do it and it's my **How to write your blog workshop**. I am offering the next one on Thursday, February 28, at the Silver Spring Civic Building. The workshop is limited to 10 participants, and will be intensive and participatory. We'll discuss why you aren't blogging and why you should, and we'll get you writing. The cost is \$75, and includes materials and refreshments.

To register, visit the Eventbrite page at howtowriteyourblog3.eventbrite.com .

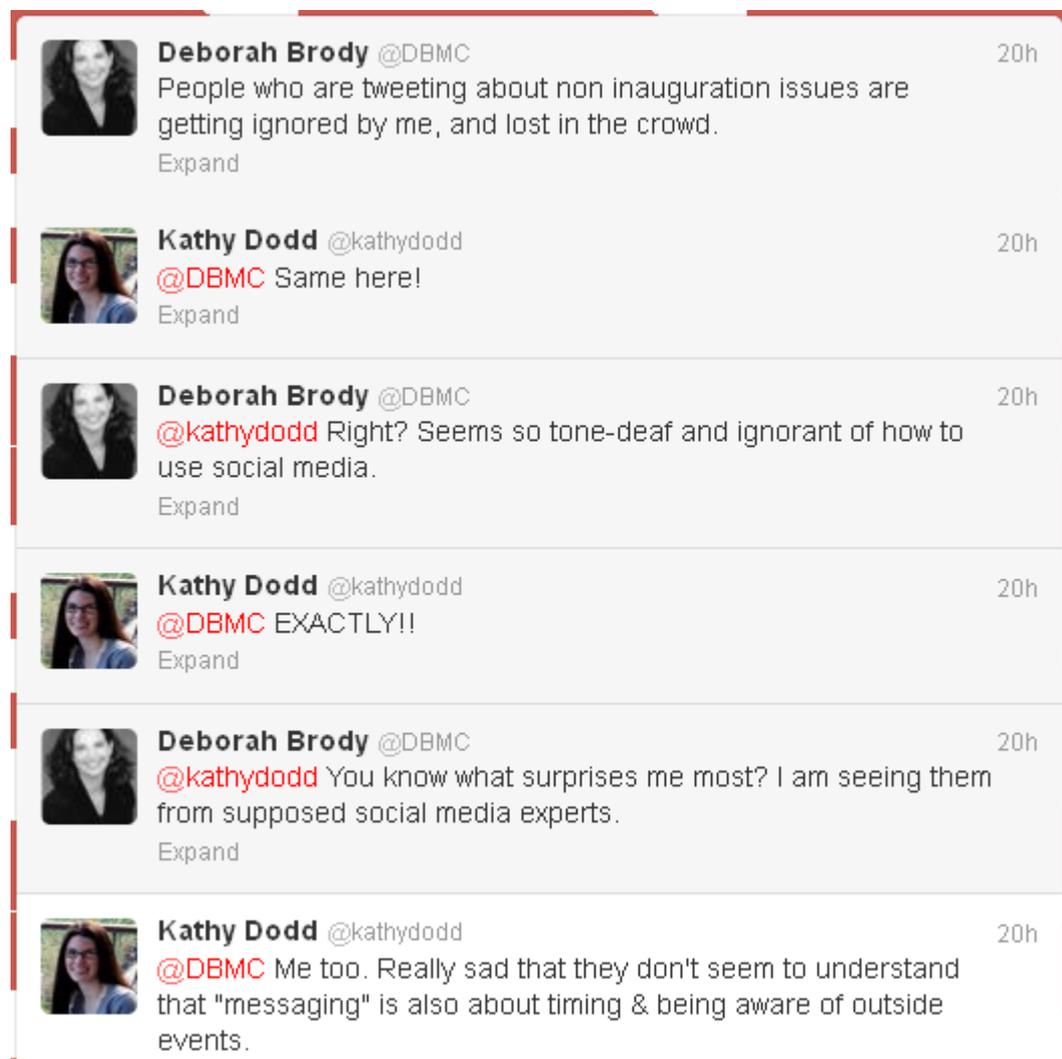
Start or restart your blog in 2013!

How to tweet like a marketer

Yesterday, about 1.1 million tweets were posted regarding President Barack Obama's Inauguration ceremony. That's a lot of tweets! People commented on everything from Michelle Obama's coat to Richard Blanco's poem to Beyonce's rendition of the National Anthem.

As I watched the Inauguration ceremonies and followed my Twitter stream (using the second screen), I noticed a social media "expert" tweeting out content management tips. Then I noticed another marketing/social media person promoting a blog post, which had absolutely nothing to do with politics, Martin Luther King or inauguration. It struck me as dissonant.

I tweeted out that I was ignoring anything not Inaugural-related, and I thought anything regarding other topics would most likely get lost. This led to an exchange with Kathy Dodd, a Washington, DC-based marketer. It went like this:



So it wasn't just me. What was happening was that those tweets were not following a main tenet of marketing communications: molding your message to the audience's needs. As Kathy said, **the people putting out these messages were not being aware of outside events or of the timing involved.**

In those tweets, there was nothing wrong with the message, but the message failed to have an impact. They came off as extraneous and irrelevant.

Twitter has often been described as one big cocktail party. Can you imagine if you were at a party where everyone was

talking about the how much fun they were having at this event, and somebody crashed the party and announced that bananas were on sale across town. Everyone would shake their heads and continue talking about the party, *no matter how much they liked bananas* because it was a message that wasn't suited to the occasion.

Perhaps the non-Inaugural tweets from yesterday were previously scheduled, we can't really know. But what we do know is that they failed to achieve their goal (selling bananas if they were the party-crashers above) for one simple reason: the people tweeting were not thinking like marketers. **Marketers want to make sure their messages get to the right people at the right time.**

Here are some tips to tweet like a marketer:

- Be aware of major events (some are scheduled and some are not) that will hold a majority of your target audience's attention.
- Time your tweets for when they are most likely to be well received. For example, if you are promoting your lunch specials, don't do it at dinner time.
- Be human, not an automaton. Remember it is *social* media.
- Don't talk at people; have a conversation with them.

What are your thoughts? Agree or disagree?

Why fact checking is a crucial skill

Yesterday, I was watching local news coverage of the Inaugural events, and a reporter stated that Barack Obama took the oath

of office using Lincoln's bible. Except he didn't. He used Michele Obama's family bible. Then, one of the anchors on this newscast said it was symbolic that the Inauguration taking place today (Monday, January 21) on Martin Luther King's birthday. Except that today is the day we OBSERVE MLK's birthday. His actual date of birth was January 15th.

These may seem like small mix-ups, but it points to a much larger problem. Journalists are not checking their facts, but rather parroting what they hear or repeating something they think they know. And then viewers repeat this information, and thus, misinformation is spread.

Most people think that what they hear on TV or read in a newspaper is vetted, and therefore true. And yet, I have seen countless examples beyond those above, of news outlets simply failing to fact-check. Add to this the increasingly sloppy use of grammar and spelling and you have a news media that is less trustworthy and less accurate than ever.

Bloggers, Tweeters and journalists need to be very careful with what they present as fact. It is pretty simple to fact check when MLK's birthday was (just Google it!). It is good to double-check information. If you can't find another source, then perhaps you should wait before you publish anything (and by publish, I mean making anything public).

Thoughts? Good examples? Share please!

Are you aiming for quantity

or quality (or both)?

On LinkedIn this morning, I saw that one of my connections (whom, by the way, I have never met in person) was asking her network how many connections were they aiming for this year. It got me to thinking whether networking should be a numbers game (quantity).

We've all heard of SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely). In that sense, to have a SMART networking goal, you would indeed have a number, as this would make it measurable.

So say you decide you want to make 25 new connections this year, and you only make 15, have you failed at your goal? What if from those 15 connections, you got valuable advice, a job lead and a new best friend?

Can you measure networking by numbers? I don't think you can, and I don't think you should.

As a business owner, I attend my fair share of networking events. I am not someone who works the room, making sure to shake everybody's hand. Instead, I generally end up talking to one or two people more in depth. I understand the value in having a wide network, but I would rather get there more slowly.

If people know who I am because we've had several conversations in person, isn't that better than trying to expand a network by sending a bunch of blind invitations "people you may know?"

LinkedIn is a great tool and as such, many people, such as the person I referenced at the beginning of the post, tend to abuse it. Too many people think networking is all about quantity regardless of quality. In fact, successful networking is both a quantity and a quality proposition.

What are your thoughts? What is your networking advice?

Getting a reality check

Last night I attended an event where the sole purpose was to get feedback on a new website from community attendees. It was fairly informal—the creators of the website asked for opinions and reactions to the website, which you did on a one-to-one basis.

I found this exercise incredibly interesting because it can be so useful. But I wonder how often it is done. My sense is that it isn't done often enough! The examples abound: websites that are hard to navigate, brochures that are pointless, ads that fail to entice, and on and on.

Get a reality check!

As a marketer or communications person, you should seek outside opinions. This is why in-house communications often employs consultants or agencies. This is why market research exists. But even (perhaps especially) if you are an entrepreneur, you should find someone to discuss your marketing, positioning or other business-related issues. Everybody needs a reality check!

There are structured ways to get a reality check. As mentioned above, you could hire a consultant (for personal marketing, perhaps this consultant is a life coach or therapist).

- Big businesses could hire a market research firm.

- Nonprofits can tap into their board of directors or their volunteers.
- Entrepreneurs or solopreneurs may consider joining a peer group or create an ad-hoc advisory council of trusted people.
- Smaller businesses can conduct informal focus groups like the one I attended.

You most definitely need to conduct a reality check BEFORE you launch—an idea, a product, a marketing piece or a website. Many businesses seem to be afraid of hearing that their idea/ad campaign/marketing materials may be missing the mark.

However scary or uncomfortable it may be, getting a reality check will be immensely valuable. It's easier to fix something before it is out there in the public eye.

Do you get reality checks? If so, from whom or how? Please share in the comments.

The (higher) power of a great tagline

A great tagline will help sell your product, and when it is really great, it will also make you memorable. If I say “just do it” you immediately know it's Nike's tagline. Not many companies can claim a great tagline like that one.

Developing a great (or even a good) tagline is no easy feat. You need to be succinct, clever and find the essence of what you are trying to communicate. A good tagline “tags” you—that is, it identifies you, easily and immediately.



I have been tagged—photo by Jody McNary Photography, on Flickr.

An online dating service catering to Christians, ChristianMingle.com, has come up with a really good tagline: Find God's match for you. The Washington Post's Paul Farhi has written about it today in "Evoking God has been good to ChristianMingle." Farhi writes:

It might be the most audacious, and perhaps the most presumptuous, ad slogan ever devised.

"Find God's Match for You," sayeth ChristianMingle.com, an online dating service that suggests in its advertising that its computer-generated matches are, well, made in heaven.

Farhi then goes on to report on whether the tagline can be construed as false advertising. Read the article to see why.

But whether or not a tagline can be accused of setting up false expectations, I think that a strong (memorable) tagline (one that immediately communicates your objective) is one of the strongest tools in your marketing communications arsenal.

Take a look at your tagline today. Is it powerful? Is it memorable? Does it identify you?

Are your volunteers on

message?

Nonprofits are notorious for having difficulty with communications. Many times, it has to do with lack of funds (and thus, insufficient support). What many nonprofits tend to have in spades, however, is volunteers. Volunteers are great for nonprofit organizations. They can staff an event, or help serve lunch, or provide input, or, maybe most important, help spread the word about the nonprofit.

And yet, some nonprofits don't seem to appreciate the role that volunteers play in communications. Let me give you two examples.

A chaotic, disorganized volunteer experience

Around Christmas, I volunteered to do some gift-wrapping with a DC-based nonprofit. The sign-up form indicated I was to work from 10 am to 3 pm. I arrived at 10 am, only to find a bit of chaos. The volunteer director told me to go one place, where I was promptly told to go back to where I started. The volunteer manager had limited ability to organize, and ended up wasting a lot of time. Two other volunteers were grouching along with me on how disorganized the event was. We didn't start wrapping (in a very chaotic and inefficient manner—also lacking tape, wrapping paper, etc.) until about 11 am. One full hour was wasted. No water or snacks were offered. No guidance as to how long we were expected to stay. When I left around 12:30 pm, no one even noticed or thanked me. In fact, I never got a thank you at all. I will not be volunteering with this organization ever again.

There are two different issues at play here. One is the negative impact of disorganization on people who volunteer. People (like me) who have a bad experience volunteering won't volunteer with your organization again, and worse, will tell others of their bad experience. The second issue is that

volunteer leaders are not being given the tools to make sure they provide both a message and a positive experience, quite possibly because the volunteering role is not valued.

Volunteers who don't have the right (or any) information

Just this week, someone in my network invited me to attend a business networking event run by a large nonprofit. The invitation said the price of the event itself was \$75, but attendees were required to donate a minimum of \$500 to the nonprofit during the calendar year. I pointed out that the real cost of attending this event would be \$575 to the person who invited me. He called and emailed me to tell me that the \$500 was "only if I wanted to donate" and that the event fee was "totally separate." However, the invitation clearly stated that the annual contribution was required.

Volunteers need to know the facts...all of them. But more importantly, they need to know the reason for the information they are sharing. The nonprofit above SHOULD have informed my contact about the requirements for the event, but moreover, should have told him WHY this event has a minimum contribution, why it is necessary, what the contribution is for (what are the impacts etc.).

Imagine if this guy had come back to me and said this instead: Yes, you are right. You will be required to donate \$500 during the year, which by the way, you can give in several installments, not all at once. That money will be used to fund our X initiative, which helps X number of people. Also, you will be assured of meeting some awesome business leaders at the event, and we will be having other events during the year.

I suspect that this volunteer was only told to recruit people to come to the event. He didn't get any additional information or a script or any other tools that would help him not only recruit attendees, but spread the message about the work the nonprofit is doing and will do with additional funds.

Volunteers can help with a nonprofit's tasks. And volunteers help communicate the nonprofit's message. Are your volunteers on message?

Why would you highlight that?

It's great to highlight your USP (Unique Selling Proposition). In fact, you should. You should communicate to your target audience what makes you special or different than others, especially if you are in a crowded marketplace. A couple of days ago, I came across this ad in the newspaper:

Free Pickup & Delivery
Includes Moving Furniture, Rolling and Relaying Your Rugs!

Hadeed

ORIENTAL RUG CLEANING
& IN-HOME/OFFICE SERVICES

*If You Stand On It,
Joe Hadeed Stands Behind It!*

GRAND OPENING! of our RUG SALES SHOWROOM!

Every Size Available! 2x3 All The Way to Embassy Size!
Incredible Selection with a 3 Million Dollar Inventory!

**RUGS
30%-50%
OFF!**



Scan This to See Our Entire Inventory!

889 W Maple Ave. Vienna, VA 703-962-6984

25% Off
First Cleaning
OR
50% Off
Initial Cleaning
With a 6-time service package
Maid Service

*Expires 1/19/13. Not valid w/any other offers.

Any 3 Areas (400 sf) **\$99***
4 to 7 Areas (600 sf) **\$169***
8-10 Areas (1000 sf) **\$269***

Wall to Wall Steam Cleaning

*Expires 1/19/13. Not valid w/any other offers. Basic steam clean

10% Off

In-Plant Rug Cleaning

*Expires 1/19/13. Not valid w/any other offers.

5% Off

In-Plant Rug Restoration & Repair

*Expires 1/19/13. Not valid w/any other offers.

\$80
Each Bathroom Floor Coloring & Sealing Available Upon Request \$99 minimum order.

Tile and Grout Cleaning

*Ceramic & Porcelain only. Expires 1/19/13. Not valid w/any other offers. Residential only.

\$85 Off
Whole House Air Duct Cleaning (Per System)

Dryer Vent Cleaning only \$95

*Expires 1/19/13. Not valid w/any other offers.

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Rewards Program

All Loyalty Cards Come Preloaded with \$50-\$3000!

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All Hadeed Employees Go Through a Rigorous Background Check by UNITED STATES HOMELAND INVESTIGATIONS INC.

Have Peace of Mind Knowing That All of Our Employees Are Professional & Courteous with No Criminal Background! Drug Free & Authorized to work in the U.S.

You Must Check Out Our New Website!

889 W Maple Ave. Alexandria, VA 1-703-466-9704 | 301-637-1163

Find a complete listing of all our convenient drop-off locations at... **HadeedCarpet.com**

above has numerous claims for your attention: special pricing, free pick up, new showroom, new website AND that they have vetted their employees. In short, there's too much. They sell rugs but they also clean rugs.

Besides having too much information, the fact this company is making sure you know that all their employees are checked out—that they have no criminal background, are drug-free and authorized to work in the US—is problematic.

The problem is that this company is bringing up a question that perhaps was not even on their customers' minds. Sure, it's good to say employees are carefully vetted, but to highlight that they have been submitted to a "rigorous background check" makes me wonder if a) they have had a problem with dishonest/criminal employees before; 2) whether this particular industry has a problem with criminals (and if so, why?) or 3) is this the most important thing I need to know about this company?

What do most customers want to know before they contract with a carpet cleaning company? That's the key question. This ad does not answer that. It tells me price is important as is location. I should be enticed by free pick up and delivery, and that I should rest assured that none of the employees I deal with are "illegal immigrants" or druggies or have a criminal background.

What you choose to highlight in your marketing communications pieces should be relevant to your audience's needs.

Your thoughts?