

# The power to recognize advertising is not enough

Long-time readers of this blog know that I have written before about Pepco, the Potomac Electric Power Company, which serves nearly 800,000 customers in Maryland and Washington, D.C. My posts have focused on the fact that Pepco's advertising does not match people's experiences with the power company.

Last night, viewers of Super Bowl 47 were surprised to see the lights go out during the game in the Superdome in New Orleans, where the game was being played. In fact, the power was out for about 35 minutes. Entergy, the electricity provider in New Orleans said that the issue was not with them but with the stadium. As of right now, I am not sure what caused the power failure but I do know what people in Maryland and DC thought about it by their postings on Twitter: Pepco must surely be involved.

Pepco's reliability has become a joke. It has a negative perception so deeply ingrained in customers' minds that comments like: "Who knew **Pepco** was the official energy provider for the Super Bowl" by @djrothkopf or "Talked to **Pepco** and they're confident power will be restored to all parts of the stadium by Wednesday" by @timothypmurphy were rampant (and often retweeted) on Twitter on Sunday night.

No amount of advertising will fix a real, on-the-ground problem. Other organizations, such as the Washington Metropolitan Transportation Authority (WMATA), need to learn this lesson too. When you have let your customers down repeatedly, they will no longer trust you. Your advertising and your public relations will not rehabilitate your image.

In order to change people's perceptions of your brand, you need to move beyond just communications. You need to make

positive changes and be able to provide proof that you have done so. Once you have made measurable progress and you have something tangible to report, you can move forward with a communications program. Even then, bad experiences are difficult to overcome.

It will take actual reliability and good experiences with Pepco for customers to learn to trust this company. As I have said before, you can tell me in your advertising that you are working on your reliability, but if I am sitting in the dark for days on end (like I was during last summer's Derecho storm), I am going to doubt you are doing very much at all.

What are your thoughts? If you are in Maryland or DC did you also joke that Pepco was behind the power outage at the Super Bowl?

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## **An ad to promote a TV commercial...**

You know the stakes are high when an advertiser takes out a full page ad to promote a TV commercial. Of course, it's not just any TV commercial—it's a commercial during the Super Bowl.



Top quarter of full  
page cars.com ad in  
Feb. 1 Washington  
Post

Super Bowl advertising costs are at an all-time high. According to Lisa de Moraes' TV column in today's Washington Post, CBS is charging nearly \$4 million per 30-second spot. De Moraes says that due to the high cost and the clutter, advertisers are doing what they can to promote their commercials. Some advertisers are releasing the commercial prior to the game and others are giving viewers the option of choosing the ad ending.

Cars.com seems to think that producing a full page ad will focus eye balls on their commercial. Notice that in addition, the ad is promoting this website, where, in meta-fashion, they have some drama about the focus group about the impact of the ad. Let's see, based on this, I think we can expect a dramatic ad, or an ad with drama, or an ironic take on car buying, or an exaggeration. Or maybe the point is that we won't know what to expect.

I am not sure this tack works. For one, the need to advertise an advertisement seems bizarre. And second, it sets up a very high expectation that this ad is going to stand out. If the commercial doesn't meet expectations, then no one wins. The

advertiser will have spent \$4 million plus the cost of producing the video about the commercial plus the cost of advertising the ad (design, placement, etc.). I would say cars.com's investment is a minimum of \$5 million (and I don't know how much the Super Bowl commercial cost to produce or how many newspapers the print ad ran in).

Will you be watching the Super Bowl?

### **Want to learn to blog?**

If you would like to have a successful blog (consistent, interesting, and focused on your audience) and you are in the Washington, DC metro area, check out my next blogging workshop on February 28. More details and registration [here](#).

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## **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?

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## **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!!!!)

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# 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!

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## 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?

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## **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!

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## **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?

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# 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.

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## 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?