

Are you afraid of being yourself?

I am not trying to get all new age and self-helpy with you. Instead, I am trying to find out whether you are presenting your “real self” to the world in your communications. In business lingo, this would translate into “are you being authentic?”

With social media, there is a blurring of lines between personal and professional. My Twitter feed, for example, features lots of political commentary. Some may not agree with my political viewpoint, but it is what it is. If you choose to not work with me because you disagree with me, so be it.

It turns out that people like authenticity. They like knowing who they are dealing with. And really, don't you want to work with people who want to work with you, when they know your foibles, viewpoints, etc.?

I was inspired by the article “Best Social Media Tactic: Always be Authentic” in Inc. Magazine. Here, writer Christina DesMarais interviews J. C. Kendall, CEO of TekPersona. Kendall is known as being brutally honest in his customer/social media exchanges. He feels that it is part of his branding strategy. He says the following:

*You simply cannot avoid offending some people. **No brand should waste undue time trying to appeal to everyone.** When you are developing and supporting your brand, you are creating an expectation of what will occur through a transaction with your company. Your messaging has to focus on your target customer.*

Emphasis above is mine. I think that too many organizations and individuals work too hard to be “nice,” to appeal to

everyone. They are AFRAID of being disliked. But the truth is that not everybody will like you and that is OK. You don't want everybody to listen to what you have to say—just your target audience. Your target WANTS what you have to offer.

So, if you are afraid of being yourself, stop. Be who you are and forget about being nice to everyone. I am not saying be mean or nasty. Just be authentic.

Are you afraid of being yourself? Why or why not?

Mrs. Maxwell was on the right track, sort of

I finally watched Salmon Fishing in the Yemen last night (Netflix had me wait for this movie for about two months, but that is another story). If you haven't seen it yet, this is the basic plot: Yemeni sheik likes to fish salmon and wants to be able to do so in his country. He hires a British firm to find someone to bring his plans to fruition. British firm reaches out to Dr. Alfred Jones, of the UK Fishing and Hunting Department. Dr. Jones laughs at the idea, but Mrs. Patricia Maxwell, press secretary for the British Prime Minister insists that the project must go on, as a publicity ploy to counteract some bad news. And so Dr. Jones embarks on feasibility studies, etc.

To me, Salmon Fishing in the Yemen is a movie about the power of faith PR. Great public relations takes skill and passion.

It is not for the faint of heart, especially when embodied by Mrs. Maxwell, who is played brilliantly, and with comic flair by Kristin Scott Thomas. She is a spot-on caricature of a PR person (always working, smartphone in hand 24-7, running from meeting to meeting). In my opinion, she alone makes the movie worth watching.

Mrs. Maxwell is very adept at PR. Here's what she does well:

- Understands the value of positive publicity ("we need a good news story from the Middle East")
- Is always thinking of what story to tell
- Recognizes opportunities (when she hears there are 2 million fishermen in the UK, she sees voters)
- Knows that every audience has its news source
- Thinks visually (does the Prime Minister fish? No, well send the Foreign Minister instead)

But Mrs. Maxwell is not perfect. Here's where she may have gone a bit wrong:

- Fails to have a plan B (expects plan she has to work regardless)
- Doesn't understand the constituency (salmon fishermen are pretty passionate about their fish and will not go down easily)
- Is too focused on the end result (goes too far in general)
- Treats people like pawns

What do you think? Do PR people go too far in real life? Do you know a Mrs. Maxwell? Do we need more PR people like her or fewer? And if you haven't seen this movie, try to get it on your Netflix queue now. It may be a while.

Looks matter (or, invest in good graphic design)

Have you ever visited a website that looked as if a teenager built it by trying out every single font and programming code out there? Or have you picked up a brochure that looked like your dad's secretary typed it out back in 1962? If so, you know instinctively that looks matter.

Years ago I had a client who ran a tutoring service. He knew how to write and had written a fairly good brochure (although he was not highlighting why you should hire his company...and that is where I came in). He had also "designed" this brochure, and it looked like it. Because his brochure was "home-made" he looked small time. It wouldn't appeal to the diplomats that were his target audience. I convinced him to spend some money on professional design. He was very pleased with the end result and agreed that with a properly designed brochure, his business LOOKED professional, and seemed "big time."

Looks matter.

Would you go to a hospital that looks dirty? Would you trust your tax returns to an accountant who seems shady? Would you hire a personal trainer that you met while eating at McDonald's? No, no, and no. Your impressions of each of these would be negative in relation to the image you are looking for. Your image of an ideal hospital is one of white walls and the strong smell of disinfectant, right?

Dan Kohan, a graphic designer and owner of the Washington-based graphic design firm Sensical Design, says this:

*Graphic design communicates nonverbal information, the same way our facial expressions or clothing communicate when we're having a conversation. When people are presented with a magazine, say, or a website, they respond first to how it communicates visually—whether it looks attractive and professional or amateurish and cheap, whether it's easy to read, whether it draws your attention to what's important—and only then do they read the content. **So, effective and appropriate design is crucial if you want your message to be heard.***

Not only does design help make you LOOK professional, but it actually is part of your message.

Looks matter. Are you paying enough attention?

How do your customers feel?

It seems that many businesses, especially the big ones, spend much more money on memorable advertising campaigns and very little on customer service. No matter how great a business is, there will always be customer service to be done (changing addresses, paying bills, correcting billing errors, etc.). Yet, many businesses ignore the basics.

A couple of examples:

Netflix. Netflix does not seem to care much about how its customers feel. The company does not respond to Twitter mentions. It doesn't seem to be concerned about negative postings. How do I know? Well, I have had Salmon Fishing in the Yemen at the top of my Netflix queue for about six weeks or more. At first, there was a "long wait." Now, it's a "short

wait.” Bottom line is that I have watched several other movies while still waiting for Salmon Fishing. And I have tweeted Netflix. And I have wanted to email them—there is no easy way to do that.

ATT. I have been with ATT for years now. I recently upgraded to a smartphone and was told that I was eligible for the upgrade (which apparently means in ATT language they will CHARGE you for this upgrade). I called to see if they would take this charge off—and my argument was 1) I was not advised of such a charge and 2) I was told I was eligible for an upgrade. The customer service agent said he would give me a “courtesy one-time waiver” of this fee, but proceeded to lecture me that this fee was something all carriers do and that ATT would charge me it with every subsequent upgrade. He was combative and rude, and when I pointed this out to him, he hung up on me. I called back and spoke to supervisor and she told me the same thing about the charge (a bit less rudely). I repeatedly told her that I have been an ATT customer for years, I pay my bills on time, and ATT had given me no special offers. Bottom line in my experience: ATT does not care.

Netflix and ATT appear to be utterly unconcerned with how their customers feel about them. I am just one more customer.

In contrast, I flew **Delta** last month and was amazed by the airline’s interest in my customer experience. After the first flight I was sent a survey to measure what I thought of the boarding process, etc. The return flight was badly delayed due to weather in Washington. Delta sent an apology for the delay (even though it was truly not at fault) and asked how the gate agent and flight attendants acted during the delay.

Customer service and experience should be an integral part of an organization’s overall marketing strategy. If your organization does not know anything about how your customers feel, and does not respond to customer issues, you are well on your way to losing those customers.

Marketing should be both about ATTRACTING customers and RETAINING them.

Thoughts?

Are the presidential campaigns convincing voters?

Last night, on 60 Minutes, both President Obama and Mitt Romney were interviewed. Scott Pelley interviewed Romney while Steve Kroft interviewed Obama. At the end of the hour, when both candidates gave few specifics, I don't think anyone's mind was changed. If you supported Romney, you liked what he had to say. Likewise for Obama.

Beliefs are not facts but they are just as immutable

The campaigns are facing a very polarized electorate. People either support the candidate or they actively despise him. Take for example a friend of mine who is a very religious Catholic. She despises Obama because she says he "promotes abortion" She has no evidence to prove this (because there is no evidence and besides, there is a huge difference between supporting the right to get an abortion and promoting it) but she believes it, and also that because he is pro-choice, he is immoral. Someone like her will not be convinced by any campaign ad or speech.

Role of undecided voters

We've been told that the outcome of this election lies in the hands of the "undecided." Campaigns are spending inordinate

amounts of money trying to sway these voters (if they do even vote). After seeing a group of undecided voters on the PBS Newshour, which interviewed them after each of the conventions, I am not certain that undecided voters can be swayed. Those PBS undecideds seemed to be seeking the perfect candidate, and neither Obama nor Romney measured up. Undecideds may well be perfectionists who are unable to prioritize issues and accept that neither candidate will be perfect, and therefore can't make up their minds.

In short, I think that very few things that happen between now and Election Day will change voters' minds. Minds are made up, and any "mistakes" candidates make will further solidify opinions not change them. You would think, for example, that there would be outrage about Mitt Romney's manipulation of his tax returns. Instead, those who support him say he has merely complied with the law and those who don't see further proof that he is a rich person trying to protect himself from taxation.

What do you think? What can campaigns do to sway voters?

Can you sell on social media?

All sort of companies sell (sponsored Tweets, for example) on social media, so a better question is should you? In my opinion, the answer is no.

Wedding crashers

Think of it this way: you are at a wedding reception. You are busy chatting with relatives you haven't seen in ages while

enjoying one or two glasses of champagne. Then, someone (think of this person as a wedding crasher) pops up, out of nowhere, and starts discussing health insurance options with you. First, you know this person is not invited to the wedding. Second, this person is a buzz kill. Right?

Time and place

Same thing happens when you are on Facebook or Twitter and someone you don't know is talking to you about something you don't want to discuss right then. And the truth is you may be interested in the product or service being offered, but the time and place are all wrong. It is wrong because you are on social networks to be social. You are not there to shop.

Are you pushing?

This is not to say you can't market or communicate with target audiences on social networks. If your emphasis is brand awareness or image building, I think social networks can be hugely helpful. But selling is a "push." And people don't like to be pushed when they are relaxed.

Perhaps this is a personal bias of mine, but I don't like being sold in general. The other day I was doing a bit of shopping at Tysons Corner (and I was in the buying mode), and I got hawked walking from store to store from the various vendors who sell their wares from carts. I found it hugely annoying (one of them even asked me if I was lazy because I didn't have a manicure and she was selling a manicure kit).

Do you think selling on social networks is effective? Have you bought something that was advertised to you on a social network?

Fostering creativity and other ideas from Ad Week DC

Yesterday, I attended the first day of Advertising Week DC, a yearly event that is hosted by the Ad Club of Metropolitan Washington. The theme of this year's week is "awe," as in awesome. It quickly became an annoying trope used throughout the day. I think what the organizers were trying to tap into was creativity—because that is what drives awesome campaigns, ads and/or concepts.

Of the nine presentations I attended yesterday, three stood out in regards to creativity.

Mad Women

The first was a presentation by Jane Maas, who has written a book about women in advertising during the 1960s called *Mad Women*. Ms. Maas started her advertising career as a copywriter in the days when most women in advertising were secretaries. We've seen those days portrayed in *Mad Men*, and apparently, according to Maas, the portrayal is not far from the truth. People in the advertising world back then were busy smoking, drinking and having sex. Of course, people today are busy doing that, just not at the office. Drinking heavily at lunch was *de rigeur*. She gave the sense that advertising work was freer from constraints back then. There was more loyalty from clients, and ad agencies were willing to experiment. Perhaps the experimentation was fueled by alcohol, regardless, there seemed to be an attempt to push the envelope and see things differently.

A cool office...and CEO

Andrew Graff is the CEO of Boston agency Allen & Gerritsen. Graff spoke about how he has created a pretty cool environment at his agency, which is designed to foster creative thinking.

First, he has given his staffers tons of perks, like free breakfast every day and pet health insurance. Second, he has built an office environment where people can work in different locations—cafe, sofa or cubicle. Third, he has implemented a mentorship program where he is being mentored by a 23-year-old. This has allowed Graff to understand how another generation thinks. The main points here are that people should enjoy coming to work and that work should not be structured in a traditional way. Graff says that if you are someone who needs a lot of structure to work, you won't be happy at Allen & Gerritsen (nor would you likely be hired). **To be creative—to think differently—you have to be able to see beyond structure.**

Cannes award-winning campaigns

The last program (before the kick-off reception) was a reel of the winners of the 2012 Cannes Lions International Advertising Festival. What's great about being able to see these diverse campaigns is that it showcases creative and impactful work from all over the world. A couple campaigns really stood out to me.

One was to save a library in Troy, OH. The people who were in favor of closing the library were saying that it was a tax issue. To counter that narrative the save-the-library folks came up with a social media campaign saying that they would be burning all the book once the library was closed. Folks were outraged at that suggestion. Then the save-the-library people said that closing the library was equivalent to burning books—effectively shutting down the taxes argument.

The other campaign that I thought was very creative was to encourage employers to hire workers with Down Syndrome. The campaign showed well known advertising (this was in Italy) but replaced the people in the ads with people who have Down's. It was designed to make people see Down Syndrome in a more positive light.

What are you doing to foster creativity?

Lately, I have noticed the lack of creativity in commercials. It seems as though the same ideas are cycled over and over. Chances are that ad agencies are not fostering creativity as much as they are kowtowing to clients who are unwilling to take risks. There is no creativity without some degree of risk.

Why doctors shouldn't handle patient communications

Thank goodness we all have something we are good at, and I hope we are doing whatever that is. After an incident this week, I hope doctors have the good sense to hire somebody who can handle communications for them (but maybe good sense is exactly what was lacking).

The letter

Here's the scenario: I received a letter from an ophthalmology practice I have been going to for the last two and half years. The letter introduces a doctor who is joining the practice. It goes on, in glowing terms, to describe the many qualifications this doctor has (apparently, with the exception that the new doctor roots for a basketball team the lead doctor does not).

The last paragraph is all about self-congratulation—let me quote:

I am proud that at X Ophthalmology, our dedication and skill has (sic) been recognized in Washingtonian's Top Doctors, The

Washington Post Super Doctors, Consumer Checkbook's Top Doctors, and on Angie's List. Together, we will continue to provide the highest level of medical care in a warm and supportive environment. We look forward to assisting you and your family with all of your eye care needs.

The website

Now, let me add that my doctor is neither the letter's author or the new doctor. So, I went to the practice's website, which still reflected her name and not the new doctor's. I called and asked if my doctor was still at the practice. The answer was no. I asked why the website wasn't updated. The answer was that it had happened very quickly (by the way, not so quickly that they did not have new letterhead printed on which the letter was sent). I asked whether they thought it might have been a good idea to inform my doctor's patients that she had left the practice and how to best contact her. I didn't get a satisfactory response. Clearly, this practice was just going to wait for patients to call and then tell them, which is not very thoughtful.

The letter and the website don't match.

In my opinion, this shows a classically inept way of handling communications because it fails to think about the target audience's needs. The lead doctor obviously thinks that patients will naturally want to stay with him and his new doctor, who after all, is the recipient of prizes and all sorts of post graduate degrees from prestigious universities. It does not take into consideration that people form personal relationships with their doctors and that a doctor-patient relationship is based on trust. I have already developed trust with my doctor, and I like her.

A better way: provide the information that your audience needs

The appropriate way to handle communications in this case

would have been to introduce the new doctor while saying that my doctor had chosen to go to another practice. It would have also been good to update the website at the same time the letter was sent, making sure the new information was available by the time people got the letter. Additionally, the fact that this practice thinks it is more important to send a letter than to update a website shows a minimal understanding of how people get their information these days.

Perhaps for people who understand communications my comments seem fairly straightforward. Apparently, this doctor has no clue, and why he should probably stick to making medical decisions.

What do you think? Have you had similar experiences?

3 Rs: Who to avoid on social media

My Google reader has more than 100 subscriptions. On Twitter, I follow more than 1000 folks. I also have connections on LinkedIn and pages I have liked on Facebook. All in all that is a lot of content to which I am exposed each day.

I have come to realize there are three types of content providers that I just don't have time for. They are the raconteurs, the recyclers and the reprobates. They seem to be everywhere and I just want to avoid them!

Raconteurs

Raconteurs like to make a fuss. They are there to criticize

anything and anybody just to get a rise out of their readers. There is one writer in particular who is such an extreme example of this that I recognize him from his blog titles alone (things like “Are we really better off today?” or “The Gender Gap is a Myth”) which are designed to perk your interest because they AIM to be controversial. The sad thing is many raconteurs are seeking controversy not to enlighten but to rile up.

Recyclers

These are not your environmentally-friendly folks, looking to reduce, reuse and recycle cans, bottles and paper. Instead, these are idea recyclers. They are so devoid of original thought that they recycle ideas posted by other folks and pass them off as their own. A couple of weeks ago, the big rage on Twitter was an article from Fast Company on how to be more productive. Now, there is nothing wrong with re-posting or retweeting that information (heck, we all want to get more out of days it seems). What is bad is taking the content but changing the title, taking only the main points, or whatever and passing it off as your own post. There’s a blogger, often featured on a blog I read regularly, who is a mistress of this format. If it was all over Twitter yesterday, she is posting about it today.

Reprobates

Reprobates are people who just post nasty stuff—either because they think it is amusing or because they are seeking to shock. Mostly, they love to use obscenity in their tweets and their posts. The more f-bombs they can cram into a paragraph the better. Reprobates also make inappropriate remarks about serious or sensitive topics— like the CNN guy who called the Democratic National Convention “The Vagina Monologues.”

Do you have some of these in your content stream? Do you have types of bloggers/Tweeters that you avoid? Let me know in the

comments.

How to make it out of Turkish prison (or avoid going there in the first place)

I finally watched Midnight Express last week. I know—EVERYBODY has seen it already (it came out in 1978, so I am merely 34 years behind the times). However, I am very glad I didn't see it before my trip to Turkey back in 2000, or I would have had more than a second thought or two.

In case you are like me, one of the last two people who haven't seen this movie, let me give you a basic plot summary. Billy Hayes is visiting Istanbul in 1970 with his girlfriend Susan, and right before leaving decides to smuggle some hash out of the country. He gets caught and then gets thrown in a Turkish jail. Jail is no picnic and Billy is desperate to get out but not his parents' money or the US consul can really help him. Turkey wants to make an example of him (if not of their prison system). He goes through hell (torture, hunger, madness, losing friends, losing hope, even ending up in a ward with demented people), until he is finally able to find a way out.

While I was watching, I kept thinking that Midnight Express is really a movie about communications, and how when communications fail, stuff goes very wrong. It is also a movie about how cultures clash. If Billy had been just a bit more culturally sensitive, he may have avoided being put in jail in the first place. It's clear that Billy is the typical "ugly American," thinking that he can behave in another country as

if he's in the United States. He is also ignorant or very naïve about the Turkish legal system. Smuggling hash through the airport makes him nervous, but when he is discovered, he almost treats it as a joke. He doesn't know Turkey considers this almost a capital crime.

By the way, Midnight Express is based on a true story. This really did happen.

To make it out of a Turkish prison (or deal with a communications problem), you, like Billy Hayes, could do well to:

Learn the lingo: Midnight express is a jail term for escaping jail. Billy doesn't seem to quite grasp this concept.

Speak the language: If Billy had bothered to learn some Turkish, he may have understood what was being said.

Understand that your culture is not the predominant one: Billy feels entitled. People should understand English, and they should treat him better just because he is American. But the opposite happens—he is singled out for brutal treatment.

Know when to speak and when to be silent: Billy could have spared himself a lot of trouble if he kept his mouth shut. Instead, he rages against the prison guard and gets badly tortured.

Did you see Midnight Express? Do you agree that Billy could have saved himself a lot of trouble or was he doomed just by doing what he did?