

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 naive 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?

Built on a foundation of lies

We all know political speech is rhetorical—designed to fire up support. Most political speeches are short on substance and long on promises. This is true for any party, any politician. But how often do you see a political speech that is made up of misrepresentation and falsehoods? Indeed, of outright lies? Look no farther than Paul Ryan's speech at the Republican National Convention last night. The fact checkers have been having a field day, and everyone is saying the same thing: the speech is full of lies. For example, Talking Points Memo lists the 6 Worst Lies in Paul Ryan's Speech. Even a blogger for Fox News calls the speech deceiving (although I have been told the blogger is a progressive pundit with the otherwise conservative news outlet h/t to Brad Phillips).

But we are all fact checkers now.

How can you trust a politician who lies so blatantly and yet so earnestly? (Yes, I know, most politicians lie.) It's like the bigwigs at the GOP are not aware that millions of people,

all with access to the Internet, can quickly look things up, comment instantaneously and amplify the response.

Is it an echo chamber?

On the other hand, perhaps those of us tweeting and sharing articles like the one above are really in an echo chamber. We are all talking to ourselves. The party faithful out there think Paul Ryan gave a great speech! He promised that Mitt Romney will show strong leadership, and protect Medicare (even though Romney has shown very little leadership and Ryan's plan actually decimates both Medicare and Medicaid).

What happened to Medicaid?

Actually, you will notice that the RNC is focused on MEDICARE. Why? Because Medicare is the government-sponsored health insurance plan for SENIORS. There are a lot of seniors in Florida (where the convention is being held) and seniors vote. But Romney and Ryan are not talking at all about Medicaid, which is government-sponsored health insurance for poor people. But then again, Mitt Romney has already said he is not concerned about the very poor in this country.

Did you build that?

And of course, the other deceitful thing going on at the RNC convention is the "we did build it" trope—which is based on a statement (perhaps unadvised) by President Obama about small businesses needing the support of government to succeed—that has been taken out of context.

All in all, something built on a weak foundation—and lies are weak—generally falls down on itself. But the question is unless someone points out a lie, do you know it? And more importantly, do the voters going to the polls in November have real, factual, proven information on which to make a decision?

Truth should be as important as presentation.

When people praise Paul Ryan's speech as being good—what are they saying? And if a speech can be good even though it is built on a foundation of lies, where does that leave us and our democracy?

Is social media making us more passive-aggressive?

If you are on Twitter, chances are you've seen tweets like this:

Hey smelly guy on the Metro, invest in some deodorant!

This girl at the gym is hogging the machines.

People are tapping away their snide commentary on their smartphones, knowing full well that the person they are discussing will never see these commentaries or know he or she was being discussed at all.

People seem to be avoiding a confrontation. Or maybe they are avoiding an uncomfortable conversation. People seem to be expressing anger and distaste quite passively—by sharing it on Twitter—without actually solving the situation.

Perhaps this avoidant behavior is related to technology. Over the weekend, the Washington Post ran an article regarding entitled "It's over. Didn't You Get My Text?" (weirdly, the digital article is titled differently: "The Art of the Digital Breakup"). More and more, people are hiding behind their

gadgets and avoiding talking to each other, especially about difficult things. In the article, Lisa Bonos writes:

And it's not unheard of for Facebook users to get news about their romances when the other person changes his or her status...

Bonos says that digital rejections seem easier because there is no interruption or arguments. But, it could be painful for the "dumpee" since there was no chance to interact, to ask questions.

I see it all the time (and have been guilty of myself): using email or social media to say something that we couldn't say to someone face to face.

It's affecting conversations for sure. But more distressing to me is that it seems to be affecting empathy and connection with other people. We figure that if we "like" something on Facebook, then we've connected with someone. But have we? Not really. I have seen many people who say they would rather text than talk. Some people even prefer posting things on social media to communicate with lots of people at once instead of bothering to talk to friends individually.

In the end, social media may not be MAKING us more passive-aggressive or socially awkward, perhaps it only exacerbates what was already there. And for me, social media has been the springboard to more meaningful personal connection. Sadly though, there are far too many people hiding behind their gadgets, making snide comments rather than confronting or connecting with other people.

What do you think? Have you seen the rise in passive-aggressive behavior? Does it affect you?

Sometimes, you need help

Asking for help is supposed to be one of the hardest things people do. I think it is probably harder for people to recognize when they need help.



Photo: Shark by StormyDog, from Flickr.

There's this guy—I call him the shark—who desperately needs help. Except he doesn't seem to recognize that he does. The shark is a guy who hasn't quite mastered what we call "social skills." More to the point, he doesn't know how to start or maintain a conversation. He doesn't have much to say even though he is dying to connect. This guy has been attending social events for the last twenty years and instead of making friends, he scares people away (thus why I call him the shark: he circles around making you feel he is going to injure you).

He comes up to women, whether or not they seem open to conversation, and stands there, expecting the woman to converse with him. What's worse is he has nothing to say. He's awkward and seems desperate. The bottom line is he needs help.

Sadly, the shark has been using the same "strategy" for twenty years: go to an event, and hope that someone will talk to him. What he should do is try a different strategy. One in which he recognizes that what he is doing doesn't work, and then get some help figuring out what does work -either from a therapist or a dating coach.

But before you think this is about people needing therapy, plenty of businesses and organizations also have communications problems. Nobody understands what they do. Nobody "gets" their message, if they even have one. These organizations need help.

As I said before, recognizing you need help is the hardest part. Here are some clues that your organization may need communications help:

1. You've been doing the same thing over and over, and getting no results.
2. You can't explain in two or three sentences what you do.
3. You are not "engaging" with your audiences—nobody "likes" your Facebook page for example.
4. Your sales/donations are down.

You need help. Don't be like the shark, scaring your potential customers and donors away because you just don't know how to communicate!

It's not the medium, it's the message

Here I go again. Pepco can't seem to stop providing material. On Friday, I received a letter from Thomas H. Graham, Pepco's regional president. It was addressed to "Dear Valued Pepco Customer."

This letter, dated August 3 (but received two weeks later), is more of what we have already seen in Pepco's ads and public statements. The derecho was very bad. Pepco had a lot of work to do. Pepco is committed to improving reliability.

Same message, different medium.

My favorite line is this:

Yet, even with all the destruction, Pepco restored power to 90% of customers by midnight on July 4, more than 48 hours before our original estimate.

Let's rewrite: Most Pepco customers were without power for five days. Pepco did not get power to all its customers until some eight days after the storm.

Without the spin, it doesn't sound so good, does it?

Then we have this gem:

Today, we are stronger and more reliable—but no amount of strengthening to our system could have withstood a storm of this magnitude.

In other words, Pepco wants customers to be aware that Pepco

is not equipped to deal with storms “of this magnitude.”

And the letter finishes off with the same message that we have seen over and over:

Again, we sincerely thank you for your patience. I would also like to thank customers who took time to show their gratitude—shaking crew members’ hands, leaving them notes, water and Popsicles...We will continue to enhance our reliability....

Note to Mr. Graham: anybody who was able to give crew members Popsicles had to have some refrigeration. Just saying.

Pepco does not get that it does not matter what medium you use, the message is still not resonating.

Personally, I don’t feel any better about Pepco after reading this letter—in fact, I am angry that the company would waste paper, postage and money putting together another self-congratulatory and inaccurate piece of propaganda. What do you think? Is direct mail to customers the way to get across this message?

Checking out the customer experience

My last blog post was about how you have to “be open for business” if you are trying to market a destination. In other words, marketers have to be aware of what the potential/actual customer experience looks and feels like.

Last night, I attended a happy hour at a newish bar in Penn Quarter in Washington, DC. My friend and I each got a \$5 beer and sat down. The place was crowded, not packed, and the din was tremendous. We could barely hear each other. Why? Well, the room was apparently designed to bounce all noise back. There were none of the usual noise absorbers like acoustic tile on the ceiling or carpet or drapes. Instead the floor was pure concrete, the ceiling had no insulation and the walls were also concrete.

It was so unpleasant that we left after one beer. I wonder how many other people also left after a short while. If this bar checked out its customer experience they could take corrective steps to cut down some of the noise. Otherwise, I predict that within six months the place will close because no one is going to want to hang out there.

Regardless of what field you are in, marketing is not simply pushing out a message and hoping it will stick. Marketers need to understand their customers and their experience with their product or service.

Savvy marketers will check out the customer experience. Whether you do it by surveys, secret shoppers, going on location, listening to customer input on social channels—there are many ways to understand what your customers like and dislike. If you ignore the customer experience, your marketing will ultimately fail.

How do you check out the customer experience? Have you had a marketing campaign fail (or succeed) because of customer feedback?

Is your destination open for business?

If you work in destination or travel marketing, there are plenty of people that envy your job. What could be more fun than having travel as your business? After all, travel marketers get to research and report on the places that make a destination stand out. I am sure that involves a lot of fun activities like dining out and attending cultural events.

Some destinations are easier to market than others. Perhaps New York City or Washington, DC are more enticing to travelers than Des Moines or Kenosha (no offense to either of those cities).

Whatever destination you are marketing, however, you should make sure it is open for business. This means having places for people to stay and eat, and actually being open.

Yesterday, I went to Hagerstown, Maryland. My destination was not the city of Hagerstown, but rather the Premium Outlets located there. Once I was done shopping, I decided to check out "Historic Downtown Hagerstown." I figured I would stop by the visitor center to get some information about what made Hagerstown historic and then perhaps get a refreshment of some sort.

I drove into Hagerstown, and I noticed that there were few if any people on the street. Everything seemed closed. I went into the visitor center at 3:45 pm, which was lucky since it closes at 4 pm on Sundays. The only person there was the clerk. I asked if anything was open and he told me that most restaurants and other businesses in downtown Hagerstown are closed on Sundays AND on Mondays. I picked up a few brochures and left. Needless to say, I was not going to be able to get any snacks so I just headed to the highway and back home.

Hagerstown's Convention and Visitor's Bureau's website does not mention that downtown Hagerstown is closed on Sundays. Also, their tagline seems to be "Let's make some Maryland memories 75 miles away from Baltimore." I am not sure why anyone would think that's a good way to market a destination (hey, its more than an hour's drive from a big city!).

Most people who take day trips do so on the weekends-Saturdays AND Sundays. If a town/city is dead on Sundays, there is no reason to visit. If you want to market your city or town as a destination (historic or otherwise), you must be open for business.

Would you make a separate trip to visit a place if you found it was not open on the day you visit? Let me know your thoughts.

But why are you doing it?

Yesterday, none other than the Social Media Club DC (SMCDC) put out a tweet asking people to "show some love" to their Facebook page, because unlike their Twitter feed, it had "only" 3,000 supporters. I responded: "Twitter and FB are totally different platforms and thus have different audiences. Where are you giving/getting more value?" To which SMCDC responded: "It's hard to compare since they are so different, but just in case people want to be exposed to our content in a different form..."

First of all, social media is not JUST a numbers game. Having more followers/supporters/likers doesn't mean anything if you haven't decided what you want from those people. Are you

trying to show increased interest in your product? Then the metrics may help with that.

You have to ask yourself WHY you are doing what you are doing. What are you trying to accomplish? Are you advocating for a cause? Trying to sell product? Raising your profile? In SMCDC's case, is the content on Facebook different than Twitter? Is it more appealing to a certain demographic to see it on Facebook? What are the advantages of having more Facebook followers?

Young people who understand the tools of social media and can adapt at warp speed to the newest and greatest (in other words, they get the what), generally do not have enough business experience to really understand the why.

This morning I came across this article on Inc. Magazine: 11 Reasons a 23-Year-Old Shouldn't Run Your Social Media by Hollis Thomases. Most of Thomases' reasons have to do with the knowledge that experience delivers. You become a better communicator with time, for example. She writes:

Social media is not the be-all and end-all. It's a marketing tool—part of an ever-growing arsenal of ways to bring your company to your prospective customers' attention.

I would also add that young hires/interns/recent college graduates don't understand STRATEGY. Tools are to be used tactically, as part of a larger strategy. If you just look at the tool (we need more followers on Twitter), without thinking about WHY, then you are just using the tool for no purpose at all.

Thoughts? Please share in the comments.

Is your personality getting in the way of your communications efforts?

In its most basic form, communications happens when there is a dialogue between two people. Yet, how often do we see miscommunication instead of communication? Or one person shouting down the other? Or one person getting offended? Often, personality is behind miscommunication.

Over the weekend, I watched part of a panel presentation regarding civility in politics on CSPAN. One of the panelists said that civil communication only occurs when one person speaks and the other listens (and vice versa). It seems pretty straightforward, but in most communications efforts I see every day, it isn't happening. In many cases, it comes down to personality traits that impede true communication. These are:

- Arrogance
- Self-involvement
- Narcissism
- Insecurity

Your personality can make or break your communications efforts. Arrogant people will dismiss or debase your concerns, questions and input. Self-involved or narcissistic people will only focus on their own concerns. Insecure people will exaggerate their own accomplishments and/or put down yours or seek a way to make you look stupid.

I see examples of these personalities every single day on Twitter (people who never engage with other people are self-

involved or those who don't credit others may be insecure). And corporations are not immune, since corporations are run by people (although they aren't people in spite of what Mitt Romney may think).

WTOP conducted a poll which found that Pepco's customers were more dissatisfied than those of other utilities. In my opinion, this has to do with Pepco's arrogant communications efforts (generated by a company led/managed by arrogant people).

Do you agree? Are there other personality traits that affect communications? Please let me know in the comments.