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 build 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 the 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 <u>all</u> 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, it 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 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.

Making blogging easier

The reason I created the How to Write Your Blog workshop—which I just presented on Tuesday at the Silver Spring Civic Center—is because I have spoken to many people who think blogging is hard or that it takes to much time. I have found blogging to be fun, and wanted to teach people that it doesn't have to overwhelming.

The workshop leads you through reasons to blog to writing a blog post. We discuss keywords, categories, tags and headlines. We discuss what you should and should not do on a blog. And what most participants find helpful is the part on generating blog post ideas.

Out of the three hours allotted to the workshop, we spend 20 minutes writing a blog post. The idea is that when you realize you can write a whole post in 20 minutes, it seems doable and perhaps even easy.

One of the participants said that breaking up the process into its parts makes it seem less stressful, and that is exactly the point.

My colleague Lisa Newman took photographs of the workshop and created this montage:

If you missed the workshop this time around, you may want to sign up for my enewsletter so that you can find out when it's being offered again.

Pepco does have a communications strategy: go on the offense

Yesterday, I wrote about Pepco's latest print ad, where they find customers who think Pepco does really well. And today, in the Washington Post, there's an article entitled "Pepco defends its response to derecho storm, saying it "mobilized quickly."The article makes clear that Pepco wants to change the perception that it responded slowly and badly. It says:

> *Pepco vigorously defended itself Monday in its first self-assessments since last month's derecho storm, saying it responded aggressively and effectively to restore power to nearly half a million customers left **sweltering in the dark**. **The electric company** accepted limited responsibility for software glitches that affected tens of thousands of calls*

for service and for its inability to give customers a better
sense of when their power would be restored.

Apparently, Pepco has decided that its communication strategy
is to aggressively tamp down on any criticism of its service.
What a contrast from Verizon, which today has a letter to the
editor in the Washington Post where it apologizes for
disruptions to 911 calling that occurred in the aftermath of
the derecho.

The problem with Pepco's communication strategy is that, as I
have pointed out before, it doesn't acknowledge reality. In
this case, the reality is customers were rightfully
frustrated. By not recognizing genuine complaints, the
company is effectively hedging against doing anything to fix
those problems.

What do you think? Does this strategy work for Pepco, or does
it further deteriorate its public image?