

Weekly communications #fail: homonyms, and how you say it matters

Homonyms: words that sound and/or are spelled the same but have different things

As I was reading the Washington Post this morning, on the front page was an article about a rapist recently sentenced to three life terms. In the article, the reporter said that the rapist “**reined** terror on Montgomery three decades ago...” Of course, the correct word in this context is **reigned**. Reined (restrained) and reigned (exercised power over) sound the same—they are homonyms—but have completely unrelated meanings. Yesterday, I was reading a blog post with a headline that said “too much to **bare**.” The author really meant to say “too much to **bear**.”

Granted, these mistakes are easy to make because the words are not spelled incorrectly (so spell check would not help) and they sound the same to your ear (so reading aloud would not catch it). Sadly, misusing homonyms is a common mistake. Here's a list of the most common:
<http://wsuonline.weber.edu/wrh/words.htm>

These types of mistakes are precisely why we need editors.

How you say it matters

Using the correct words is important. But how you say what you are saying also matters. If you are asking me to do something for you, being pleasant and appreciative makes me want to help you. If on the other hand you write me asking me for something you need (like an email I received a few weeks ago) that says that this thing is needed right away, and you don't say please, thank you or that you would appreciate my help, then,

I am not inclined to help you.

Being polite and considerate of whoever is receiving your business communication will result in better compliance. That's a fact. Being rude, inconsiderate or demanding, on the other hand, will result in resistance.

Round-up: Facebook's new timeline, print ads and bad bosses

Today has been one of those days, where there are tons of great articles, interesting observations and news, so here's a round-up.

New timeline on Facebook

In case you missed it, Facebook is forcing its new timeline on all brand/organizational pages by March 30th. You have a month to prepare, and here is a fantastic how-to from HubSpot:

[The Complete Guide to Setting Up the New Facebook Page Design](#)

Print advertising in major decline

It is no secret that print media are suffering, not only from the fact that most people seem to prefer to access information online, but by a decline in print advertising. The Atlantic has a graph that shows the precipitous decline over the past 60 years, most of it in the past decade. Sad news for print outlets.

Power-crazed bosses

A few weeks ago I wrote here on the blog about how ego can get in the way of effective communication. In case you want to explore this issue more, Fast Company published an article about how power can poison bosses—to the point they lose all self-awareness and empathy. Believe me, power-crazed bosses are not going to get why their communications efforts aren't working. It must be your ineptitude or stupidity—not their inability to view things rationally.

Piratz, burgers and lost pizzazz

Did you catch my blog post last week on what I consider a rebranding #fail for Piratz Tavern? Robert Freeland did, and he shared his thoughts with me (and I thought I would share them with you, with his permission of course)

Hi Deborah,

I agree with your prediction that the Corporate Bar and Grill angle Spike TV's "Bar Rescue" guru, Jon Taffer, thinks will save the sputtering Piratz Tavern will die its own death. The first article I read about the makeover had Taffer proclaiming the need for an "executive burger" joint in Silver Spring...whatever an executive burger is.

I've had plenty of enjoyable times and grogs at PT, and will miss its one-of-a-kind shtick. The thing that displaced it

attempts to strongarm pretention into a dive...an antithetical marriage, like matter and antimatter...Boom! I think Taffer missed the one about understanding a region's audience before dictating what they need.

I walked past CB&G this evening, after leaving a very-packed Quarry House across the street (where the burgers are great). It was open but dead, consistent with your forecast. Ground beef and low inventory rotation don't get along well.

Best,

Robert Freeland

We'll keep tabs on the new place, but unless "executives" develop a taste for these burgers, AND flock there religiously every lunch, I doubt the new place will survive. These days, competition is stiff for any dollars. How do you stand out from a crowd? In this case, the shtick was the attraction. Substituting a generic experience in a place with little foot traffic is a sure-fire way to lose business.

Katie Aberbach at expressnightout.com seems to agree in her post Walked the Plank. What do you think will happen?

Just because you are doing

the hiring doesn't mean you don't have to market yourself

Have you ever been to a job interview where you are not encouraged to ask questions? Have you been offered a job where you don't ask about benefits, salary or vacation/sick day policy? I would bet that if you went to a job interview and you did not meet who you would be working for, and where, and if the interviewer did not tell you a bit about the hiring organization, you would be a bit hesitant about it being a good fit for you.

Some organizations seem to believe that if they are deigning to hire someone—be it an employee or a consultant or an agency or any type of service—they don't need to market themselves. Potential hires should just be excited that someone is offering to consider them or their services.

Companies that care about providing a good work environment are proud to let the world know about it. They even use it as a differentiator. You have probably seen organizations that tout that they were selected as a top employer for working moms, or most socially responsible organization and so forth.

There are many organizations out there, and if you are in marketing, you must differentiate yourself from everyone else. Even if you are “just hiring.”

Yesterday, I got the following email (identity is concealed):

Subject: What type of work do you do?

Body: Just starting the process to see if we want to bring in a firm as a consultant on several projects. What type of work does your firm do? Who/what are your clients?

[name]

Marketing Manager

[COMPANY NAME]

[phone/fax/email/address]

This marketing manager is not managing to market herself at all. What does her company do? What types of projects is she interested in? Why would I want to answer her? (Not to mention that you can find answers to all these questions right here on my website.)

Marketing is about making an impression. Even if you are doing the hiring does not mean you don't have to impress your potential hiree about what a good/special/professional company you are. Perhaps you are known for paying well, or paying on time, or being responsive, or having employees that have been there for decades. Whatever it is, it is what makes your organization special and different from other organizations.

Did you watch the Oscars?

Last night, I watched part of the Academy Awards (or Oscars to most everyone on the planet). I did not watch it all. And what I did watch, I didn't enjoy.

It seems quite ironic that the night meant to celebrating the best in film ENTERTAINMENT, is so un-entertaining. The jokes were not funny, the audio was off (some weird feedback on the microphones), the show was too long. Some speakers were cut off, and Billy Crystal, the host, seemed caught in some time warp.

Perhaps it is because Hollywood is out of touch (seriously, how many people in this economy could even afford a designer gown?). Or perhaps it is because the Academy is completely not representative of the population (it is mostly male, mostly white, mostly old, as the LA Times reported).

With each passing year it seems that the red carpet pre-show, where the attendees show off what they are wearing, becomes what more people want to watch than the actual awards.

So, did YOU watch the Oscars? If so, what did you think?

The weekly communications #fail: rebranding gone wrong

Yesterday, as I was reading The Washington Post, I came across this item, regarding a makeover for a Silver Spring, MD bar.

The bar, formerly known as Piratz Tavern, was targeted by Spike TV to be redone. Apparently, the bar's sales had been slumping and the owners appealed to the "Bar Rescue" show. Piratz had a pirate theme—the waitstaff dressed up as pirates, there was rum, and "pirate-themed" food. The decor was pirate-casual (you know, skulls on the wall-like).

In comes the Bar Rescue staff and Piratz Tavern becomes, are you ready for this? Corporate Bar and Grill, serving gourmet burgers to executives not interested in being pretend pirates.

Corporate Bar and Grill? Seriously? Could they have chosen a more generic name? A more generic menu? I am not a betting person, but I would bet that this won't result in higher earnings, except if they are charging much more for these

executive burgers.

Perhaps what Piratz needed was not a complete rebranding to become a generic grill, but instead, an effective way to market a quirky spot that is a bit out of the way for foot traffic. If foot traffic was the issue before, it will still be an issue now, regardless of whether the food is better.

If you have something different, I think you should exploit it. Becoming just like everyone else is rarely a way to get ahead of the crowd. Becoming more generic is this week's communications #fail.

ATT's not so special offer—a marketing #fail

ATT sent me a “special customer offer.” The letter giving me notification of this “special offer” starts like this:

Dear Deborah Brody,

You've been such a great customer, you deserve something special from us.

*That's why I'm offering you a **FREE Android Smartphone** when you activate an additional line of service with a new two-year voice agreement with qualifying monthly data plan required per phone.*

To recap, ATT will show its appreciation for my business by giving me a “free” phone, which will require me to subscribe to more services and pay more per month and only if I activate a second line.

Basically, they are offering me nothing.

The thing is, I don't need a second line of service.

I have gotten this same offer over and over and over again. Never once have I gotten an offer for a phone upgrade without ATT requiring a second line activation.

This offer is all about ATT and not at all about me. It is not even remotely tailored to the customer's needs.

ATT finishes its letter to me by saying:

Don't think twice about this one, Deborah. Call today [phone number] and get it all.

I don't have to think about this at all. I know it is not an offer for me.

ATT, your marketing is a big, fat #FAIL.

The weekly communications #fail

Every day I see something in the communications world that either irks me, peeves me or just plain amazes me, and not in a good way. There's so much that I am making it a weekly rant on the blog.

This week's communication fail has to do with sharing... social sharing that is...and how hard it can be to do.

The communications failure for February 17th: Sharing done wrong.

Here's what I have encountered this week:

- **No sharing buttons whatsoever on a blog or major news site.** (In fact, I found no sharing buttons on a post about how to communicate effectively, I am not kidding.) This needs to stop. If you have a blog, you have to include the ability to share.
- **Sharing buttons that share the name of the blog but not the name of the post.** Why would I share something called say, Deb's blog and a URL and expect people to read it? If it said something like "Why sharing buttons are crucial" on Deb's blog, then yes.
- **Sharing buttons that share the name of the post but not of the author.** It's about giving credit where credit is due. There are so many sharing buttons out there, it's hard to find the right one.

If you are a blogger, do yourself a favor: check your sharing buttons right now.

First, have a message

In an op-ed piece in today's Washington Post, Eugene Robinson argues that Mitt Romney, erstwhile front-runner for the GOP presidential nomination, lacks a message. Robinson writes:

Criticism of Mitt Romney for lacking a coherent message is grossly unfair. He has been forthright, consistent and even eloquent in pressing home his campaign's central theme: Mitt Romney desperately wants to be president.

He goes on to say, that in spite having many differences of opinion with the Obama administration, Romney hasn't articulated an overall message. Robinson expresses it like this:

My point is that even Romney's sharp disagreements with Obama's policies don't add up to a philosophy or a vision. They're more like what stuck after a bunch of random tough-sounding positions were thrown at the wall.

What are you fighting for?

It is not enough to be *against* something. You have to be *for* something. You have to stand for something that makes it clear who you are and what you will do. This is true for all politicians, nonprofits and even businesses.

Imagine if Coke were just the anti-Pepsi. That would not be enough. Instead, "Coke is it," Coke is the "real thing," Coke likes polar bears. You get my drift.

Having a positive (in that it not an "against" message) central unifying message cannot be underestimated. In fact, if the GOP loses in November it will be because the party has failed to articulate something other than they are against Obama.

Romney, and any other politician, would do well to take a step back and figure out what it is he wants to say, really. In his case, he needs to articulate better why his position (and the GOP's) is better for the economy, in positive terms. What exactly does Romney think the problem is, and more importantly, what is the solution.

Did Komen know much about its supporters?

Given the tremendous amount of negative press, critical comments and social media outrage regarding Susan G. Komen for the Cure Foundation's decision to stop funding Planned Parenthood, we may be able to conclude that there is a rather large disconnect between the foundation's leadership/decision makers and its donor/support base. In fact, the decision has been received so poorly that it points to a top down decision-making approach that seems wholly ignorant of what supporters want.

It is an axiom of marketing (and of fund-raising) that you should understand and know your target audience. How can you market (or raise funds from) people you don't know? This is why marketers often use focus groups, surveys and other methods to determine just who makes up the customer/client/donor base.

I participated in the Komen Race for the Cure for two years. I am not sure if I ever got a survey from Komen. I did get tons of emails selling me Komen merchandise, which is why I unsubscribed and stopped supporting the organization.

Of course hindsight is always 20/20 but I believe that if Komen had done more to understand who supports the foundation

and why, it may have avoided taking this decision and the huge firestorm of bad publicity that has followed. Perhaps every time someone gives a donation or signs up for a race, Komen (or any other nonprofit), could send out a quick survey. In Komen's specific case it could have been as simple as a question asking:

Which of our programs do you feel has the most value? (along with a checklist).

Perhaps if Komen had been aware that many people think Planned Parenthood provides good services, it would not have been so quick to pull funding and so ignorant about the potential outcry.

There are multiple lessons to be learned from the Komen debacle (PR and crisis communications matter, for one), none the least of is: **KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE** (customers, clients, donors, supporters)... and remember you work for them, and not the other way around.

Have you signed up to get my enewsletter? All you have to do is enter your name and email address on the upper right hand side of this page. Your name/email will not be shared.