

Is your website a communications failure?

Perhaps you spent lots of money and lots of time creating your website. You hired experts to design it and build it. And yet, you are not seeing the results you want. Why? It could be many things, or just one thing, but here are several failures I have found:

No contact information or not enough contact information. I just visited a website this week in which the contact us is strictly the customer service line. If you want to reach the actual corporate offices (you know, to speak to accounting, HR, marketing), you are out of luck.

Omission of important information/details. This week I visited the website for an upcoming PR event. Guess what information was not available ANYWHERE: the actual location of the event.

Too much information on the home page. Some websites have a very information heavy home page to the point that it is headache inducing.

An about page that doesn't say anything. The about page is your chance to explain who you are. Why use circular language and jargon that says nothing about you?

An ugly, dated design. Makes you look out of touch or cheap or both.

You have music. Enough said.

Readers, what have you run across that makes a website fail?

Politicians, pandering and the shifting message

Although pander has some decidedly unsavory definitions (to act as a go-between in sexual intrigues, for example) I am using this definition: to cater or to indulge.

Politicians seem to be always pandering, saying things they think cater to the audience they are speaking to or trying to appeal to. We saw this a week ago, when President Obama gave his State of the Union speech and he most decidedly pandered to the people who think they are on the short end of the wealth stick in this country. Here's an excerpt:

We can either settle for a country where a shrinking number of people do really well, while a growing number of Americans barely get by, or we can restore an economy where everyone gets a fair shot, and everyone does their fair share, and everyone plays by the same set of rules.

And then this:

So let me put colleges and universities on notice: If you can't stop tuition from going up, the funding you get from taxpayers will go down. Higher education can't be a luxury. It is an economic imperative that every family in America should be able to afford.

To me it's clear Obama thinks he needs these people to vote for him in November.

Then there is Newt Gingrich pandering to the Jewish vote in Florida by saying that Romney voted to eliminate serving kosher food to elderly people under Medicaid.

Rick Santorum (and when they were still in the race, Rick

Perry and Michelle Bachmann) panders to the homophobic vote (although he probably calls it the family values vote) by opposing same-sex marriage.

We have seen all GOP candidates this year pander to the racist vote by emphasizing that Obama is an “other” (Gingrich called him a “food stamp president” and the other candidates have called him everything from a socialist to other negative descriptors).

In short, politicians will say anything to get a vote. The problem with pandering is that it assumes the audience can’t see it is being pandered to. And then there is the fact that different audiences might have conflicting needs from one another and the candidate that panders to one might necessarily offend another or end up contradicting him/herself.

In marketing, we believe in tailoring a message to the target audience. However, we also believe that messages should be clear and CONSISTENT. If a business employed a shifting message strategy, it would quickly lose customers. Why do we tolerate this shift from politicians?

ADDENDUM: Just came across this piece on CNN.com: Latinos won’t forget Romney’s anti-immigrant talk. Author Ruben Navarrette says this:

the dishonest and cynical way in which the former governor of Massachusetts has dealt with the immigration issue on the campaign trail shows that he has a problem being consistent.

Navarrette goes on to discuss how Romney held a strong line against amnesty, but now has softened his approach to PANDER to the Latino vote.

Now as he competes this week for Hispanic votes in Florida – and, on Feb 4, in Nevada, where Latinos account for 26.5

percent of the population – Romney must be hoping that Latinos have bad memories.

We don't. We never forget a slight. And, in that respect, Romney has given us plenty to remember.

'Cause it's your birthday

Wishing people a happy birthday has become uber popular thanks to Facebook. The social network reminds you that it is your "friend's" birthday and makes super easy for you to post those two two words "Happy Birthday" on his/her wall. Oh yes, some people get more creative and wish you a great day, or to have fun. Depending on the number of friends you have, you could get dozens, if not hundreds, of greetings.

Does this mean that birthdays are more important now than ever? Is Facebook tapping into the little girl/boy in everyone who just loves her/his birthday and the celebration of it?

I think the birthday greeting phenomenon points to several things:

Facebook has made it easy to connect without really connecting. Posting Happy Birthday on someone's wall is easy. Writing a card or an email or (gasp) picking up the phone and calling, now that takes some effort.

Facebook is ruling our lives. If Facebook reminds us, then we remember somebody's birthday. If not, it is like it doesn't exist. Some people are living their lives on Facebook—using it to announce milestones (births, engagements, divorces), snub people, brag, proselytize, look for sympathy (oh...I am so sad says the status update).

Facebook gives us a false sense of belonging. This is a corollary to my first point. We think that if 100 people wish us happy birthday it must mean something. I assure you, it means little to nothing.

Facebook has made a decision to promote birthdays, and we are all blindly following. I don't see Facebook promoting anniversaries, or job promotions, do you? We have seen how Facebook arbitrarily decides what we should care about—witness the new time line or the highlighted stories in the news feed—and we are powerless to change it.

Let me be clear—I am not against birthdays. Heck, there are fewer things I enjoy more than birthday cake (sheet cake, preferably chocolate, with some vanilla frosting...yum!). I am just against the new world Facebook is creating for us and the sheeplike way we are all following it.

If you aren't on Facebook, does it mean you don't have a birthday?

Have you signed up for the DBMC quarterly enewsletter? First issue of 2012 is coming up in February. Enter your name and email address on the upper right-hand side of this page.

Why so many ads fail

Have you ever been watching TV and seen a commercial that falls flat or that outright offends you? I bet you have. I have: the Go Daddy commercials from last year's Super Bowl, for example, were way offensive and sexist. So, how did they make it to such a massive audience? Why did they get made at all?

I think the answer lies in some nuggets from this Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation survey of black women in America. If you read through the poll (especially the last few questions about sexism and racism compared to black men, white women and white men), you see that each group views the world differently. For instance, a number that is really indicative, is that 55% of white men think the world is fair to everyone, versus 34% of black women and 47% of white women. (In my opinion, the world is fairest to white men, so therefore they think the world is fair for everyone.)

Another telling statistic is that more black women (36%) think sexism is a big problem in society than white men (12%). Again, white men do not experience much sexism, so it does not affect them as a group, and they conclude it is not a big problem in society.

Different people experience the world differently. Marketers need to be aware of this since we are often swayed by our own experience of the world. This is why certain white male politicians have no problems indicting a whole class of people for being lazy or for not believing in the American dream.

So the next time you see an ad that seems to be tone-deaf you will know that it was created by someone who doesn't understand that his/her experience is not reflective of the world as a whole.

Your thoughts?

Have you signed up for the DBMC newsletter yet? It will take about 5 seconds to sign up right there on the upper right hand side of this page.

Show and tell

Show *and* tell. Sure you can just show, or you can just tell, but believe me, doing both will be more effective. I promise.

What makes me even write about this? Well, it turns out I am in the market for some dining room furniture, and have been looking through Craigslist to see if I can find anything appropriate and within budget. In any case, I have come across a great many postings that say something like this:

Like new dining room set with 6 chairs, extension leaf. Contemporary style.

But there is no picture. No picture for me to see if I like the style or the color or anything. You have to have a picture if you want to sell a dining room set...or anything else that people buy based on looks!

Tell, and show.

Showing alone doesn't do the trick either. Some people (and many of these are marketers who paid lots and lots of money for a fine looking website/brochure/advertisement) think fancy graphics and beautiful design will compensate for a lack of content.

No. No. No.

A potential client was telling me she was looking for "sexy" copy to relaunch her website. I asked her if she could point to websites in her field that she deemed to be "sexy." She sent me to a much more attractive website than hers. But guess what, the content was just as deadly dull and meaningless as hers. It just looked better (ok, much better).

Show, and tell.

Pretty but empty does not sell your product or service. People

need information—both visual and intellectual—to make a buying decision.

How do you find vendors (or employees)?

Inbound marketing vs. outbound marketing—which is better?

Clearly, if you are a business looking for customers, inbound marketing, where people come to you, is better. If potential customers find you, without you having to go out to find them, means something is attracting them to your offering.

Outbound marketing is where you are spending time and money to find prospective customers who are not otherwise attracted to your offering. It is harder and more costly.

Lately, I have seen a variation of inbound marketing, which is the attempt by businesses to find vendors (not customers) by asking people to apply for the job. Similarly, some employers find employees by advertising a position and accepting resumes for it, which often results in receiving an overwhelming amount of resumes where a high percentage of the applicants are not suited for the job. This is why some employers hire headhunters, who search for someone fulfilling the exact qualifications the employer is looking for.

Today I came across this posting:

I am launching a small site for my new business and I am in need of a copywriter to polish the content on the site.

It is a small project about 5 pages tops.

If you're interested please send me a description of your experience, contact information, and your hourly rate.

No resumes please. Convince me.

When I saw this, I was intrigued at first and considered "applying." Then, on second thought, I asked myself why this person would put up a posting like this. First of all, she describes it as a small project. This is probably code for low-budget. And then, that last sentence: Convince me. She is looking for someone to blow her away. It doesn't look like a promising situation because it seems this person is looking for someone to write amazing copy at a cut rate price, which may be good for her but not very good for me.

Is this how you find vendors? I don't. I have found vendors by using several ways:

- Asking trusted sources
- Searching for vendors who do what I need (for example, doing a Google search of flooring sales in Rockville)
- Using ratings websites like Angie's List

In this way, I am in control of the vendors I contact. And for the vendors, it is inbound marketing, which is more efficient.

What do you say? If you are a vendor, do you (should you) respond to these queries? If you are looking for a vendor, is this the best way to go?

More about reading; and thoughts about the Costa Concordia

The last post here was about why writing skills might be in decline, and my assertion that it is because people are not reading enough. Today, Gini Dietrich writes in her Spin Sucks blog that reading fiction is beneficial to your career because, among other benefits, it helps fine-tune your social skills, especially your empathy.

So, in addition to helping you recognize good writing, expose you to new worlds, teach you new vocabulary and ways of seeing, reading can help you build better connections and be better at work.

Yet, reading alone will not result in a fabulous, well rounded writer/emotionally intelligent being. **You have to practice. You have to interact.** Someone whose nose is always in a book, and who never emerges to deal with the real world is probably not going to be very emotionally intelligent. Also, if you never write and get edited, your writing is never going to improve.

The Costa Concordia, in case you haven't seen the news in the past two days, is a luxury Mediterranean cruise ship that ran aground near Italy, and sank, killing at least six people onboard. Last night, on the CBS News, it was reported that the crew did not initially inform the passengers appropriately about the impending disaster. They downplayed the danger, and that led to chaos. Some passengers took matters into their own hands.

It seems that people's first reaction to bad news is disbelief. They act as if nothing is wrong. Perhaps that's what happened to the Costa Concordia's crew. Unfortunately,

this type of disbelief can lead to tragedy. There is a also desire to minimize problems.

This is why crisis communication training is so important. When crisis happens, reliable information is key. Denial and misinformation will make a bad situation worse.

Any thoughts? Please share in the comments.

Why is writing well a disappearing skill?

Sally Falkow writes today in her blog, The Proactive Report, that good writing should be considered a primary public relations skill. I agree (and I wrote about that in my post Qualities of a PR Pro).

The question is not whether PR people should know how to write well, but why they don't. April Finnen (@AprilFin) , who writes the blog One Person Shop, said in a Twitter exchange with me:

"I think a big part of it is that good writing comes from good thinking, and that's becoming harder to find."

I answered:

Certainly true, but I do think many people just don't do enough reading either (maybe that's related to lack of thinking...)

To which April responded:

“Agree. If you can find a curious PR pro who reads everything, pretty safe bet they’re a good writer.”

In my opinion, writing well is disappearing because people are reading less. Why is this happening? It may be because they are not curious, not interested, not thinking, working too hard, or any number of other reasons.

If it is lack of curiosity or good thinking, as April says, how are these PR “pros” going to come up with strategies to drive a message?

I can’t tell you how many PR people I have met who don’t ever read books for pleasure or even a daily newspaper. How many PR firms offer grammar and writing courses for their associates? How many PR pros today were English majors in college? Fewer and fewer thanks to the devaluing of liberal arts education and the rise of career-focused majors. If all you studied in college was how to create a PR campaign, but you never read a classic novel, how are you going to appreciate the power of language to convey meaning and emotion?

Do you have thoughts on why good writing is on the decline? Please do share!

Testing strategies and the dangers of assumptions

The Metro in Washington, DC is again considering hiking fares (news story in today’s Washington Post). For those of you who don’t live in this area, Metro raised its fares a little over a year ago. Additionally, it made fares even more complex

than they already were (there is no flat fare here in DC: there are regular fares and peak fares and the fare changes depending on the distance you are traveling) by adding a peak-of-the-peak fare. None of these changes were popular in 2010, and I assure a fare hike won't be welcomed in 2012.

Why am I discussing this? Because of this statement by Metro's General Manager Richard Sarles in the Washington Post:

Metro officials, however, are promoting the simplification of fares as a plus. The new fare structure would eliminate the "peak-of-the-peak" rate, in which passengers pay a surcharge for riding the subway during the busiest weekday periods. It was implemented with the last round of fare increase, in 2010, to ease crowding and encourage riders to use trains just outside the peak periods, but the strategy failed, Sarles said.

"We weren't accomplishing our policy objective, and we were just complicating the fare," he said.

Basically, Metro thought that by increasing the fares at rush hour fewer people would use the train and this would reduce crowding. But that shows a basic lack of understanding of rush hour—people leave work at around the same time and that is what causes crowding—not the cost of the fare.

The strategy was based on an assumption, and was not successful as proven by ridership numbers. Metro is wise to discontinue this policy. **Strategies (and tactics) that don't provide intended results need to be ended.** This is an important point for marketing and communications. How many times do you see a company engaging in the same tactic/strategy regardless of whether it is accomplishing its objective?

Testing will help. And questioning assumptions will help too. Many people ASSUME things like: if we advertise, people will

know about us.

Basing strategies on false or untested assumptions will lead to stupid, costly mistakes like Metro's peak-of-the-peak fare.

What assumptions are you operating under? What strategies are you basing on those assumptions? Are these strategies really accomplishing your objectives?

My advice is to question both assumptions and strategies, and correct course if they are not working.

Can two or three words guarantee business success?

The two or three words that may well guarantee business success are any of these options:

Happy holidays, Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, Happy Hanukkah, Happy Kwanzaa, Happy Thanksgiving, Season's Greetings, Best wishes.

not to mention the two most effective words in business:

THANK YOU

Two to three words that work to show other people (customers, clients, vendors, business associates) that we are thinking of them. That we value the relationship. That we do not take them or their business for granted.

This year, I received a season's greetings card from my eye doctor! That was a first for me...I think most doctors take one's business for granted.

Think about whom you received greetings from, and from whom you did not. Any surprises? Also, if you ordered gifts or other merchandise online, did you receive a thank you for your order? If you didn't, would you buy from that retailer again?

If I feel my business is not valued, why would I continue to do business with that vendor/merchant/consultant/individual?

Perhaps sending a greeting or saying thank you is not enough to GUARANTEE success, but it will help prove you think they are important to you. Making sure your customers and clients feel valued will help make it easier to continue to do business with them.

What say you?