

Make it easy

How many times have you gone on to a website, and tried to find a phone number or a specific person to email and couldn't? Have you ever gotten lost in a phone tree? Have you wanted to comment on a blog but had to jump through hoops?

If you have experienced any of these situations (and chances are you have, more than once), you are feeling exactly how difficult it can be to communicate with a company. Some companies and organizations make it especially hard to communicate because they don't want to hear from you. Other companies and organizations are simply clueless.

Let me give you a specific example. I was a member of an organization, and my one-year membership expired. I got an email that went something like this:

Thank you for your support of the XXXX. Just a friendly reminder that your membership expired on XXX. Please contact us to renew your membership, or visit our website to renew online: <website link>

Your support will help us build upon our existing programs that speak directly to our mission of XXXX.

For questions about membership please contact XXX, Development Manager, at <email address>.

Thank you again for your continued support.

There is nothing WRONG with this email, per se. But it doesn't make it easy for me to renew. Why?

- It only provides one way to contact a person—via email (no phone).
- It doesn't tell me what my cost will be.
- The website link sends me a very slow loading page that

a) is not a form; b) requires I have an account or create an account.

In many cases, businesses and organizations don't test their communications channels to see the interaction and whether it is easy to use or navigate. Remember that people are pressed for time and will give up quite easily unless they are EXTREMELY motivated.

The easier you make it for people, the more business (or donations, renewals, exposure) you will have.

Are you making it easy for people to connect with you?

Who should handle your newsletter?

If you have an organizational newsletter, who handles it? In my experience, it probably is one of the following:

- Administrative assistant
- Intern
- Volunteer/Development assistant or coordinator (for nonprofits)

And yet, an newsletter should be part of your communications and marketing efforts. At the very least, your communications/marketing people should take a look at the newsletter and check for the following:

- Consistency of message

- Use of logo and tagline
- How it fits into the overall messaging/communications campaign
- Timing (is it coming out too close to other communications?)

Of course, someone needs to be the final editor and proofreader. In the past couple of weeks, I have received an newsletter that has had date mistakes (saying an event is on Wednesday instead of Tuesday, with Tuesday's date) or with location mistakes or even speaker name mistakes.

The best way to handle an newsletter is to have an editorial calendar—created by your communications department—which can adjust for any special events or needs that arise each month. Your admin or intern can write the content, but it must be checked before sending out. Every single time.

An newsletter is a valuable communications tool, which when done right, can help your organization. When done wrong, it can reflect badly on your organization and make people unsubscribe.

How do you handle your newsletter? Do you have any good tips? Please share them in the comments.

How not to sell

Here we are—it's Black Friday, and plenty of businesses want your business. Between extended (way extended) hours and special deals, people are being lured in to buy. Most of these people have a very specific need in mind (a Christmas gift for their child or a flat screen TV for the family room) and are going in with focus.

Which leads me to an experience I had on Tuesday (the day I went to the mall, because, frankly, there is nothing I need so much that I will fight people and crowds today). It was a classic case of how not to sell.

I went in to a shoe store—with the intent of shopping for SHOES. I selected a couple of pairs and asked the clerk for my size. She said “We are having a sale on our handbags—20% off.” I nodded. Then, she brought the shoes out. I slipped them on, and found that they were a bit loose in the heel. She hadn’t been paying too much attention to me, and finally asked me how they fit. I said they were loose. She offered to measure my foot...I declined (I already know my shoe size). Then I selected another pair. She brought them out, and she told me the store has a great deal on socks...get a hole in them and get them replaced for life. I nodded once again. I left the store with no shoes, socks or handbags.

The salesperson was trying to sell everything except what I wanted. Most likely, “corporate” told its people to upsell and gives a bonus/commission for every non-shoe item sold. But, in this case, this particular salesperson lost sight of what her job is in essence—to sell shoes. In order to do so, she would have had to focus on what I wanted. She could have asked if I was looking for a casual or dressy shoe or whether I needed a wider width, or offered an alternative suggestion when I told her the shoes she brought did not fit. **Instead, she ignored my needs and focused on her script (mention sale on purses, mention lifetime warranty on socks). How not to sell, plain and simple.**

To sell, you have to focus on what your customer wants. That is also plain and simple.

How you can shine

Lately, I feel that we live in a very mediocre world as it relates to communications and writing. Open up the newspaper most days and you will find a few articles that seem as if they were written by a teenager. Online, I see typos and spelling mistakes galore. On social media, I see a lot of rude behavior, I suppose reflecting the loss of civility evident everywhere.

But, as with all problems, there is an opportunity—an opportunity to shine. Because we are surrounded by mediocrity, working to be better will make you stand out.

Here are few ways to shine:

Mind your grammar, spelling and typing: Perhaps you need an editor or just a better review of your writing. And, if you aren't really that good at grammar, perhaps take a class or read a book to improve your skills.

Skip the passive voice: There is nothing like reading long passive sentences. It kills your writing. If you don't know what I am talking about then you never had a teacher who corrected your passive voice and made it active.

Avoid the cliches and jargon: Another dead giveaway that screams laziness and even stupidity is the overuse of jargon and cliches. People hide behind these words. For instance, the following excerpts are from a job description (let me know if you understand what this person does for a living):

- Stakeholder relationship management
- Standardizing processes, roles and responsibilities
- Outreach strategy
- Virtual collaboration

Be polite: If someone writes you an email or leaves you a

voice mail, respond. If someone comments on your blog, thank him/her. On Twitter, acknowledge re-tweets. Watch your swearing in a public space (yes, social media is a public space).

Think about your audience: If you think about who your audience is, and what information they need, you will be a huge step ahead. Considering your audience will help determine your language, your timing, etc.

Learn how to network effectively: Perhaps we are spending too much time with our gadgets, but it seems more people are less able to interact personally with others. If you go to a networking event, try speaking to other people. It is as easy as introducing yourself, and asking a simple question (how did you hear about the event, have you been here before, etc.) You may also want to follow up with the people you meet.

Be a LinkedIn rock star: Not a week goes by that I don't get a LinkedIn invitation that is a) not personalized and b) from someone I don't know. Sometimes, I go to somebody's profile, and it is missing information, does not have photograph, and lists an old position where the person is no longer working. So, you have the opportunity to shine on LinkedIn by:

- Completing your profile (include your photo)
- ALWAYS personalizing invitations
- Not connecting with every Tom, Dick and Jane out there.
- Having an updated job description
- Joining (and participating) in groups

How do you shine? Please share what you do to stand out from the crowd.

Grover: You don't know marketing

Last night, I watched Steve Kroft on 60 Minutes attempt to get Grover Norquist to be thoughtful about his no taxes pledge. In case you don't know, Norquist, the founder of the misleadingly named "Americans for Tax Reform" is the reason the GOP will not vote for any tax increase regardless of anything.

I could say a lot about Norquist's smarmy demeanor, lack of ethics and sad attempts at humor, but I want to concentrate on one particular aspect of the interview. Norquist said that what American for Tax Reform is trying to accomplish is **to brand the Republican Party as the party of no taxes**. Here is the exchange, taken from CBS News/60 Minutes website:

Norquist claims he got the idea to brand the Republican Party as the party that would never raise your taxes, when he was just 12 years old and volunteering for the Nixon campaign. He says it came to him one day while he was riding home on the school bus.

Norquist: If the parties would brand themselves the way Coke and Pepsi and other products do so that you knew what you were buying, it had quality control. I vote for the Republican. He or she will not raise my taxes. I'll buy one. I'll take that one home.

Kroft: So this is about marketing?

Norquist: Yes. It's a part of that. Yeah, very much so.

But Norquist says the success of any product requires relentless monitoring and diligent quality control to protect the brand, whether it's Coca Cola or the Republican Party.

The problem with this scenario is that Norquist seems to think

that branding is achieved by threat. Basically, if a GOP candidate does not sign the no-taxes pledge, Norquist will fund his demise. The deal is that pols will sign the pledge and then get money for their campaigns. If they refuse to sign the pledge, American for Tax Reform will do everything it can to discredit them and will fund any opposing pol who does sign the pledge. Furthermore, if the pol votes for a tax increase after having signed the pledge (no matter how long ago), Norquist will work to make sure the pol loses his/her seat.

Norquist is *not* a marketer—he is a politician who is using power and money to influence (and some would say corrupt) the political process. To really “market” the GOP, Norquist would have to do some research. He would have to listen to the average citizen/consumer. He would have to explore what the GOP brand means to people inside and outside the GOP.

Finally, Norquist is not really trying to REFORM taxes or make them more equitable or fair. He is working to reduce the size of government, as this article in Politico points out.

Why not make the GOP the party of “we don’t want to be a part of government.” Many of us could support that.

Your thoughts?

4 tips to make e-invitations

successful

Everybody's inbox is full of holiday and event invitations during this time of the year. Between fundraisers and holiday parties, you have enough email to last you until January. If you are the person sending those invitations out, are you having success?

Success starts with having the person open your email, but is sealed when the person makes a decision to attend.

Sometimes, there is too much volume and you could have the perfect invitation and few people will see it. That's something to consider during the November-December holiday season. However, you can't avoid it if you are keen to have a holiday party or a year-end fundraiser.

Based on the invites I have been getting, here are my four top tips for making them successful:

1. Have an informative subject line (Join Joe's Christmas Party on December 22)
2. Provide the **all the requisite information**: date, time, location/directions, cost, attire, and any other relevant information. Do not put any of this stuff elsewhere.
3. Double (and triple) check the dates, spelling, and the accuracy of the information.
4. Include at least one reason as to why this event is a must-attend (biggest fundraiser of the year, more than 200 potential clients, the best food and drink, etc.)

These may seem like good common sense, but I can't tell you how many emails I get that:

- Have the right day, but the wrong date
- Don't include location
- Don't include cost (and make you click through to

registration to find out)

- Give no reason why would want to attend

Yes, this is basic, but minding the basics is the first thing you should do. Once you have covered the basic, the extra credit to make invitations successful is good design. An attractively designed invitation will welcome people, and make them want to be a part of the event.

What do you do to make your invitations stand out from the crowd?

Why The Outlet Shoppes at Gettysburg needs help

A few days ago I received a four-fold brochure in the mail that had this tease on the address panel:

*Governor O'Malley doesn't want you to know about this....SHOP
TAX FREE*

My first impression was this was a political mailing. It wasn't, because on the back panel it says:

Shop Tax Free Every Day

The Outlet Shoppes at Gettysburg (website, address, phone)

Midnight Madness – Thanksgiving Night! Save All Night

On the inside panels was a listing of participating stores with their different special offers.

Do you notice any missing information? How about driving

directions, or even an indication how far it is from main roads/cities in Maryland? How about hours?

This brochure assumes that saving on taxes would be enough incentive for me to go the website or call to get the information that is missing. That is expecting too much. I did go to the website just to see how this mall does with this piece of marketing communication. The website does list hours and has a rather unhelpful map under the directions. And also a Facebook link (which is not listed in the brochure).

I think that if you are going to spend money on printing, it better be worth the money. In this case, the Outlet Shoppes at Gettysburg got carried away with an idea—lets tell people in Maryland that we don't charge taxes—and went from there. The company neglected to include BASIC information that anybody choosing to shop out of state would need: how do I get there, how long is it going to take and when are you open?

I would bet anything that this brochure was done in house. If it wasn't done in house, it was done by a local agency that knows exactly how to get to the Outlet Shoppes at Gettysburg, because there is no other mall like it nearby. In Maryland, there are several outlet shopping malls in state, and others in Northern Virginia.

To me, this is a clear example of why you need to get an independent or outside opinion on your marketing materials. You will overlook something and a third party may be able to point it out to you, like I am doing here.

Thoughts?

The source matters

Unless you are very young, inexperienced or just plain naive, you probably have a healthy degree of skepticism about whatever a politician says, or for that matter, what is reported in the news. You have to—there are too many instances of misrepresentation, faulty reporting or just plain lies. Of course, this is why the source matters. If it is a source that has proven trustworthy, you accept what it says. If the source is unreliable, then you do have to question it more.

This leads me to the latest in the Herman Cain sexual harassment scandal. Now, Cain is parading his up-to-now reticent wife Gloria in an effort to shore up his female trustworthiness bona-fides. Gloria says that Herman “totally respects women.” It is reported via the AP on WJLA.com and on Politico.com . Gloria gives an interview to Fox News’ On The Record with Greta Van Susteren (already, you start to see that source matters), which is set to air tonight. Gloria says among other things “I’m thinking he would have to have a split personality to do the things that were said.”

The source matters. Anyone will question Gloria Cain’s agenda—and recognize that she is trying to protect her husband. Why else would she suddenly be dragged out of her family home, where she has been hiding out these last few months of the campaign? Is she suddenly relishing the spotlight?

Always question the source, and act accordingly.

Is it a communications or a leadership problem?

No doubt you have heard about Rick Perry's "oops" moment during the GOP debate on Wednesday night. The 53 second piece, where Perry forgets the third federal agency he would cut if elected president, has been replayed to death. Now, Perry is in full salvaging-his-election-chances mode, as Politico reports in "GOP debate gaffe rocks Rick Perry rescue mission."

In my opinion, this is not a communications problem. It is a leadership problem. Any human being can be forgiven for blanking out or misspeaking. We make mistakes and we correct them. But Rick Perry is not trying to fix one communications misstep. He is trying to resuscitate his campaign. I think most people would be willing to overlook Perry's brain freeze moment (although the media certainly wasn't going to let go of a golden opportunity to make fun of him). However, most people see through Perry's swagger and sense that there is not much substance there. It was not that he forgot that he wanted to cut the Department of Energy, but that he thinks that cutting cabinet positions is the way to fix this country. If we focus on what he did say—that he wants to cut the Department of Education—we can see that he doesn't have a communications problem. His message is that getting rid of government will solve the USA's problems.

Perry, like Joe Paterno of Penn State, is someone dealing with a leadership problem. If both these men were true leaders, they would take responsibility for their mistakes and then make a hard decision to exit the national stage. In Perry's case, he should realize that he is not yet cut out for

national office, and that his lack of debating ability speaks volumes about his preparedness to deal with off-the-cuff moments that will inevitably crop up in a US president's daily life.

In Paterno's case, the fact that Paterno KNEW about Sandusky being involved in child molestation and still did not report it, speaks to a failure of leadership. When Sandusky was indicted, and it became apparent that Paterno was aware of what had happened, Paterno should have offered to step down immediately (take responsibility). Instead, he offered to resign at the END of football season. Penn State's trustees fired him instead. Then Penn State burst into chaos, and Paterno said nothing. He could have been a true leader and coach and told the students that what the trustees did was the right thing, and that rioting was not what they should be doing.

Both men may have made communications mistakes, but that was not the problem. In fact, good communications would have only come after they both exercised LEADERSHIP. **Great communicators don't always make great leaders, but certainly, great leaders must be great communicators.**

Remember the after

Often, we focus on the here and now. There's nothing wrong with that. However, you shouldn't forget about the after.

Yesterday was Greater Washington Give to the Max day. Various DC-area nonprofits were beneficiaries of a massive, day-long donation drive. Nonprofits who got the most donors got

bonuses. There was an urgency to get donors to give during the day. This resulted in many social media and email messages being sent out by the nonprofits. I receive communication from several nonprofits and all of them sent at least one email during the day if not several. But, only very few sent emails today. **Today is the after, and it is a great opportunity to reaffirm a message.**

One nonprofit said thanks on an email. Another posted on Facebook detailing how much money had been raised, and reminding us that we can give ANY day. This is smart. By forgetting the after, the other nonprofits are losing opportunities and they are seeming to only communicate when they perceive it is necessary (there is a deadline for example).

Nonprofits who use email and social media to ask for support and businesses who sell products and services would do well to think about the after. **What is your message to your target audience AFTER you've told them what you wanted to tell them in the first place?**