Trust is essential and must be earned

My last blog post detailed an ongoing attack on my inbox by a "lead generation company" called Bark. As of today, I've continued to receive dozens of emails from both the same sender ("Kate Potter") or with the same subject line ("new customers looking for your services"). In fact, I got at least six since last night.

But all I have to do is see who the sender is or read the same subject line to hit delete. Bark can continue to send emails until the end of days, and I will never open them. Why? Because I don't trust that Bark is legitimate. In fact, Bark has earned the opposite reputation, that of a spammer, an illegitimate business that seeks to worm its way into getting you to click or call by sending emails that may have the veneer of legitimacy but are a front for a scheme.

Too many bad actors

Cybersecurity and privacy threats are rampant, and we have to guard constantly against them. There are just too many bad actors seeking to damage businesses and people by installing malware or by phishing to get passwords in order to steal identities.

Clicking on links in emails always opens us up to problems. That is, unless we trust the sender and know they are not acting maliciously.

Reputation matters

In order to keep opening and reading email, we need to trust

the sender. Generally, we trust senders we have a relationship with. We know some senders personally or we've conducted some kind of transaction with them (donation, purchase, etc.) and thus we trust them.

However, if we don't trust the sender, we may not even open the email. And if we do open the email, we are certainly not downloading attachments or clicking on links.

Spammers don't understand trust

Trust is essential in the keeping yourself safe from cyber threats. And that is what Bark and many other spammers don't seem to get. They seems to think that as long as they are hiding behind a *veneer* of legitimacy (looking like legitimate business query or coming from the correct industry), then we will just trust that they are real. But trust is earned. And when you send the same email over and over and over again, you are not earning trust. You are causing suspicion. When you attempt to send the same email from a different sender's names, you are not engendering believabilty, nor are you increasing the chance that the recipient will open the email.

Endnote

I just checked Bark on WHOIS. All information has been "redacted for privacy." In other words, there is no contact information whatsoever. All I can find out from WHOIS is the name of the domain registrar for this "company." And I can use this information to register a complaint.

How not to do email marketing

My inbox is under attack. In just the last couple of days, I have received no less than 15 emails from either the same sender or with the same subject line.

A barrage of junk

The first one came in on Sunday at 3 a.m. from "Emma Thompson" with the subject line "New customers looking for your services." When I opened it, it said someone was seeking PR services. I deleted the email because I thought no serious agency would be sending out emails on Sunday at 3 a.m.

Later that morning, I got an email from "Kate Potter" with the subject line "Web designer quote."

And then an email from "Mia West" with the subject line "New customers looking for your services."

And then at least ten more emails throughout President's Day from "Kate Potter" with alternating subject lines:

"Mobile Software Developer Quote"

"Photographer Quote"

"Packaging Designer Quote"

"Web Designer Quote"

Interspersed were two more emails from "Mia West," subject: "New customer looking for your services."

Notice a pattern? Same sender and/or same subject line.

This is lead generation?

I opened some of these email and found they all came from a supposed lead generation outfit called Bark(dot)com. This "company" found my website and copied my contact information into their database, and then began "contacting" me.

Perhaps Bark(dot)com is a legitimate business, but it doesn't act like it. In fact, it is acting in a downright shady manner. Its marketing "method" is more like a spammer's than that of a legitimate business' email marketing technique.

If it acts like spam…

What makes these emails look and act like spam, and therefore be wholly ineffective:

- Sending during non-business hours and days
- Sending the same email time after time
- Sending way too many emails in too short a time span
- Sending emails that are not relevant and not personalized

Update

Since writing this post, I received six more emails, making it over 20 emails in a 48-hour time period.

3 ways to tighten up your writing

My job as a copy editor is to tighten up other people's writing so that it is more easily readable, clear, consistent and accurate. Often, I come across the same three issues that make writing harder to read and more unclear. These issues include having sentences that are too long and stuffed with extraneous words and phrases; writing in the passive voice; and using unnecessarily big words.

If you want to make your writing sharper, and your meaning clearer, here are three ways to achieve that goal:

1. Use active voice

By eliminating passive sentences, you are immediately tightening up your writing and getting rid of useless words.

Your sentences will be more direct and punchy.

Passive:

> The actress Jane Doe was awarded an Oscar by the Academy for her performance in *The Movie.*

Active:

> The Academy awarded an Oscar to actress Jane Doe for *The Movie*.

> Jane Doe won an Oscar for *The Movie*.

2. Get rid of the extras

Using extra words and phrases may have made your college essays reach the magic page number needed, but in marketing and business writing, these just make your work wordy and/or redundant.

Instead of this	Use this
As well as	and
In the afternoon hours	In the afternoon
The reason why is	Because
Came at a time when	Came when

For more examples, check out this list of 50 redundant phrases.

3. Cut out the big words

Using big words when small ones would do makes you look like you are trying too hard, and does nothing to enhance the writing's readability. And p.s., using big words can sound pretentious.

Bigger word	*Smaller word*

Utilize	Use
Physician	Doctor
Reside	Live
Purchase	Buy

Have you come across these in your writing or in work you are editing? Which one is the most common?

Do you follow best practices?

What are best practices?

Best practices are the ones that are the most effective in providing results you want. And every industry has its own best practices. Additionally, your organization might have its own best practices, which include administrative and managerial tasks (e.g., how to invoice, how to handle hiring and firing, how to establish budget priorities, etc.). Best practices are guidelines. They serve as a map in getting things done the right way.

If you don't have best practices, you may not have best results

Take an administrative task like invoicing, for example. Do you follow a rule about invoicing? Perhaps you invoice every time a project is completed, or you invoice every two weeks, or once a month. You probably understand that unless you invoice regularly, you may not get paid regularly. I once worked at a communications agency where the invoicing was handled by the very disorganized president (who was a horrible micro-manager and could/would not delegate these types of tasks). She invoiced clients whenever she got around to it. And guess what? That affected cash flow for the agency, and even angered clients who were getting billed for work done months earlier. This agency president was not following invoicing best practices, and it was making her agency suffer financially.

An effective communications strategy incorporates your industry/organizational best practices.

Say you are building a brand new website. You will need to consult with or engage a website developer. That will ensure you are following best practices for user experience (UX), design, the admin of the website and other website issues. But you will also need to know what should be included from a communications perspective, and may need to consult with someone for that (some website developers have this capacity). And lastly, but certainly not least, you have to understand and incorporate your industry and organizational best practices. Perhaps in your industry it is a best practice to quote firm pricing upfront. Then, you would show prices on your website.

What happens when you don't follow best practices in communications?

There are examples galore of organizations that don't follow communications best practices. There are plenty of restaurants whose websites don't include menus or have menus that need to be downloaded as PDFs (which is a real pain on your smartphone, where most people are looking this stuff up). The best practice is to include menus that are easily accessible and readable on mobile. Another best practice is to make sure to include important information such as hours and location (and yet, many restaurant websites don't). What happens here is that potential diners may not choose to check out your restaurant.

There are many organizations that send email marketing pieces that are made up of all images and not text (I've written about this before). The industry best practice is to include the important information in a text format. The result of not following the practice is that recipients will not be able to see the information, and your email is a waste.

Experts know and use best practices

Here's the thing: You are an expert at your organization's priorities and inner workings. You know your best practices. You may also know your industry's best practices. But chances are, you are not an expert at writing, design, website development, crisis communication , SEO, public relations or any specialized communications field. That is why hiring and working with experts in those fields makes for a better result.

The bottom line here is that if you want to achieve the best results from your communications efforts you have to follow communications best practices. Experts will know those best practices. Winging it or worse, thinking you know the best way when you don't, will result in poor performance from your communications.

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4 key steps to get your blog back on track for 2019

If you, like me, have been neglecting your blog, you've probably got a few good reasons (or excuses). Maybe you took time off during the holidays. Maybe preparing for the holidays

and the new year took over your life. Maybe you just haven't been inspired to write. Whatever the case may be, your blog is calling out for attention and now, at the beginning of 2019, is the perfect time to get it back on track.

Here are four key steps you can take to get your blog back on track:

1. **Clarify your objective**. Blogs flounder when you don't know why you are writing them. Ask yourself what your blog is meant to do. Is it supposed to establish your expertise? Is it part of your content marketing strategy? Perhaps it's meant to help in lead generation, email sign-ups or to encourage ebook downloads. Whatever you are trying to accomplish, that is your objective. Writing it down, and being clear about it will help motivate you going forward.

2. **Define your topic area (s).** What are you writing about? What topics does your blog deal with? Do these reflect your expertise, interests and specializations? Making a list of topics you may write about helps give you inspiration. Also, those could be the basis for

research.

3. **Scope out the competition.** Are there a lot of other blogs or websites that offer information on your topic areas? If so, are you offering any unique or different take on the topic? What would be a reason for someone to read something on the topic on your blog rather than going elsewhere? You want to stand out from your competition by providing specialized insights or unique takes that can't be found elsewhere.

4. **Create an editorial guide and/or calendar for 2019.** Create a framework for your blogging this year. Start with the calendar and write down any special dates or events you will be participating in. Those may be the basis for blog posts. If you are looking for something more formal, or if you collaborate with others, there are many free and paid resources on the web for creating a content calendar.

Bonus step: Now that you've been giving some serious thought to what you want your blog to do this year, brainstorm at least 10 blog post ideas.

Clarifying what you want to achieve, and defining your topic areas will help provide direction for your blog, and get you back on track.

Please let me know in the comments if there are other methods you've used to revive a blog.

Do you appreciate your

customers?

I am sure you appreciate your customers (or supporters), especially when they pay you (or donate) for the goods/services you offer. But do your customers know you appreciate them? How are you communicating appreciation?

If you are trying to establish or maintain a long term relationship with your customers or supporters, you must demonstrate AND COMMUNICATE that you appreciate their business/donations, and that you are not taking the relationship for granted.

How can you do this? There are several ways.

Reward their loyalty

Big box stores, airlines, credit cards and any number of other service/good purveyors provide discounts/points/bonuses for

frequent customers. Giving customers a discount or something else of value gives them a reason to continue to work with you, and lets you reward their support.

Thank them

It depends on the size of your business, but thanking customers can be done with a simple hand written card, an email, a pre-printed postcard, or even through a personalized email marketing campaign.

Accommodate them

My kitchen sink was leaking, so I contacted my go-to plumber. I sent him an email explaining the situation and asking when he could come to deal with it. He could only fit me in the following week. I wrote him back and said that I would be looking for someone who could come sooner. His response was this:

> *Wow, that sucks but ok*

Really? It sucks that I have to look for someone else? You know what sucks? Having your kitchen sink leak. Imagine if instead he wrote this:

"Totally understand. You need to get the sink fixed ASAP. If you can't find anyone, let me know."

As it turns out, I found someone to come that day! And fix the leak for a lot less than my soon to be ex plumber, who clearly is taking my business for granted.

Notice them

I've been going to a yoga studio for the better part of the last year but around Thanksgiving, I went out of town and had a couple other obligations. Since I had not been in the studio for several weeks, the studio manager sent me an email with

the subject line "Just checking in." It said this:

Has it been a few weeks since you've been to yoga? Just remember you carry your yoga practice with you wherever you go. In the meantime, here is a 7 minute practice you can do right now in your chair. Don't stay away too long. ▢

This included the instructions for the seven minute practice referenced.

It all requires keeping track

All these require you tracking your customers/donors. For the yoga studio, this is probably part of the Mindbody software they use. For smaller organizations it may be as simple as a Excel spreadsheet. For bigger businesses, there are many types of customer management (CRM) software available. For nonprofits, their are specific donor databases.

Make them feel that you appreciate them

We all like to feel appreciated. And organizations of all types need to be sure to communicate their appreciation.

Write fewer press releases and more pitches

For the past several years, there's been a debate raging in the world of public relations: is the press release dead or not? Some unequivocally state that it is (or should be), and some still use it and see a value in it.

Press releases may not be dead, but they are not as effective

I think that the press release is not dead, but it is not living like it used to. Press releases no longer generate stories. Instead, press releases have become a way for organizations to write a story and distribute it to an audience, generally via their website. And, press releases put on "wire" services may help with SEO.

Move beyond press releases

If, however, you intend to generate publicity and coverage for an organization, you have to move beyond the press release. In fact, you need to work on your pitching skills, and on your data gathering and analysis. Why? Because the world of journalism and PR has changed dramatically in the past decade. News organizations have consolidated. Small/community/local newspapers are struggling, or are gone altogether. Most news is national news, and most national news is political news around very few issues that generate a high degree of controversy. And then social media has disrupted how people get news, and how they interact with news organizations.

Newspapers are still delivered?

(Aside: The community where I live was going to be repairing our street, and closing it to traffic for 48 hours. I expressed concern to the community manager that our newspapers would not be able to be delivered. She asked if these items were delivered every day, and whether I paid for this delivery. In short, she did not have *any* concept or understanding of what it means to have a daily, print newspaper delivered to your door.)

There are new issues for communicators to deal with

A couple of weeks ago, I attended the National Press Club's Communicator's Summit, where the following four issues were addressed:

1) **Artificial intelligence in news production/news gathering**. The main take-away for PR from this presentation is that for news that is data-based (quarterly earnings reports, for example), newsrooms are creating templates and then using AI to fill out the data.

2) **Generational differences and how they affect communication.** There are big differences in how Gen X, Gen Y and Baby Boomers deal with hierarchy and how they prefer to communicate. Millennials do not see hierarchy they same way as older generations, and will communicate directly with superiors. They also want to be kept more updated and want feedback. There's also a marked shift from voice communications to text-based communications.

3) **How media organizations are distributing conten**t. Media organizations are using more content platforms (social media, etc) and formats (video, etc.) to distribute content.

4) **Today's challenges and opportunities in getting news out**. Frank Sesno gave the luncheon talk, and he discussed many issues ranging from journalists who have forgotten how to provide objectivity, to the constant connection and "breaking news," which make it harder for communicators to get their message through.

All of the above led me to conclude that we are indeed wasting our time writing press releases in order to generate publicity (earned media). In fact, a couple of the panelists (both were journalists and/or news editors) said we should be providing thoughtful, short pitches and raw data. They said they do not read press releases, and often delete those emails.

We are overwhelmed with email and news

We've heard it before, but in our accelerated world, people have even less time to slog through countless emails (and definitely not attachments). Few people listen to voice mail. Communicators may have to find a way to communicate with

journalists that does not involve email or phone calls. Some people have had success communicating on social media.

In conclusion

A thoughtful, well-written press release can still play a role in a communicator's toolkit. But if communicators are seeking publicity, the best bet is to create solid, short, informative pitches backed up with data (when warranted).

Your thoughts are appreciated. Tell me what you think in the comments.

The biggest email marketing mistake

I've lost count of the times I've gotten an email that looks like this:
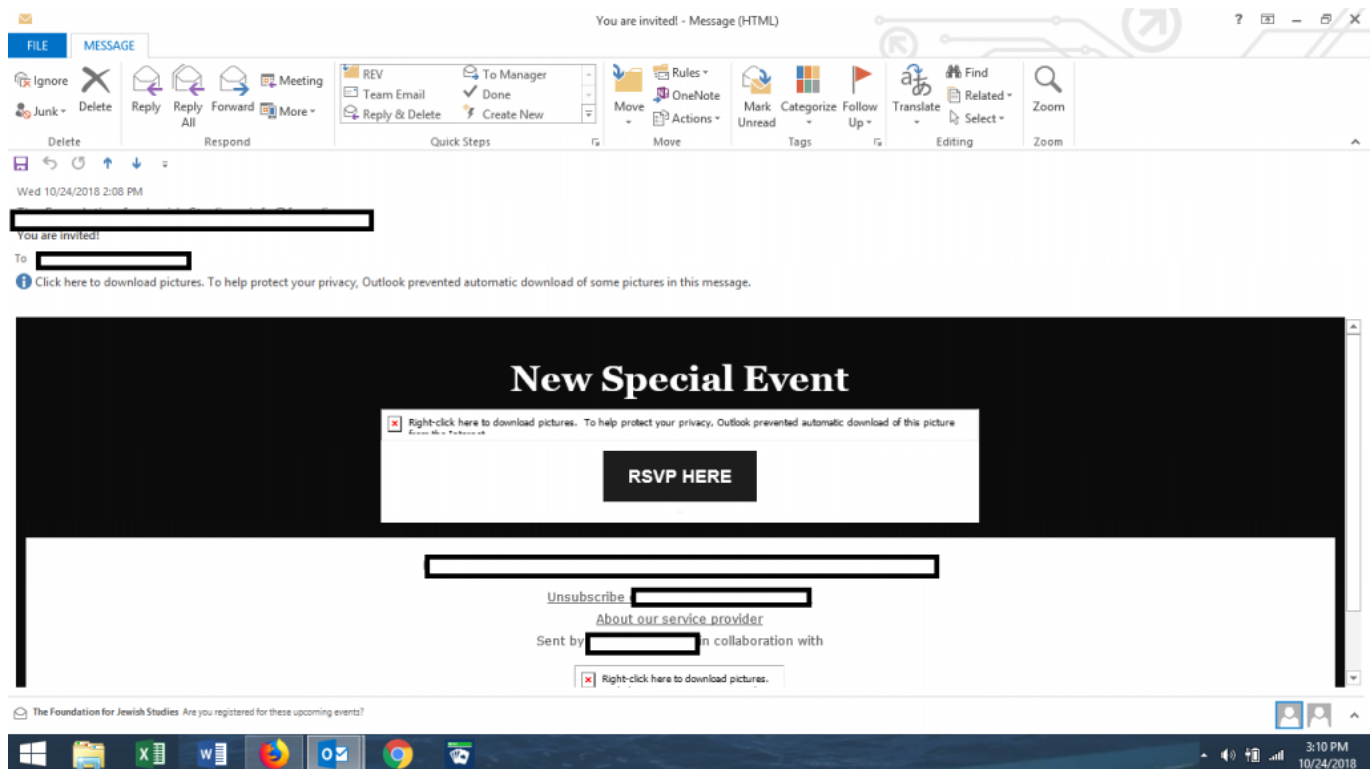
If you are getting poor response to your email marketing, emails that look like the above could be the reason.

As you can see, this email is mostly images. There's very little text, and the text doesn't give me any relevant information. The important information about the event I am being asked to RSVP to is embedded in an image. If I wanted to know more (date, venue, type of event, all the *relevan*t information) so that I know whether I want to click on the RSVP button, I'd have to download the images. This is an extra, and unnecessary, step that places the burden on me.

Don't send all image texts. Ever. That is the biggest email marketing mistake I see done time and again.

What writers, journalists, and PR/Comms people need to watch

Over the weekend, I finally got to see *Obit*. This documentary should be required viewing for anybody who writes for a living, and for anybody who work with or within the news media. It's also for anybody who is thinking about what makes a life matter.

With print newspapers on the decline, it's likely many people don't even read the obituary section. I don't have access to the statistics, but I'd bet there's huge spike in readership of *online* versions of celebrity obituaries. Just in the few weeks, we've seen tremendous interest in the deaths of Senator John McCain and Aretha Franklin, and a likely increase in online reading of their obituaries.

Perhaps most people don't think a lot about what goes into writing an obituary, but it takes a special skill. Writing about someone who has died takes sensitivity and a sense for what is newsworthy. A good obituary is informative and interesting, while giving you an overview of the person's life and achievements. Generally, long-form obituaries are only written for politicians, artists, inventors, celebrities and other notable people. Just yesterday, I read an obituary in the *Washington Post* for Mel Elfin, who was the long time Washington editor for Newsweek Magazine. Elfin was not a celebrity *per se,* but his decades of in Washington political and news circles probably touched lots of DC insiders (which is why this obituary appeared in the *Washington Post* and not the *New York Times*).

Among the many questions and issues that the featured obituary writers in *Obit* deal with are these

- What and how much detail to include
- What the lede (first paragraph of the article that includes the most important facts) should be
- What questions to ask to the relatives, and how much to fact-check what they say
- Importance of verifying facts
- How to follow the arc of a life that has fits and starts
- Importance of graphics, and of finding the best image to illustrate a life

There's a lot in the documentary about the news process: editorial meetings, pitching, finding images, fact-checking, and working on deadline. This is why this should be required viewing for public relations practitioners, who need to understand news judgement, and how things make it into the news cycle.

Finally, what writing (and reading) obituaries does is make people think about mortality and how they want to live their lives. You think about what you will be remembered for, what you've done here that is "newsworthy." So do yourself a favor—watch *Obit.* It's available streaming on demand, and on Kanopy.

Simple reminders help market doctor's offices

Doctors don't seem to do much marketing. Most doctors' offices have websites, but besides that, they don't actively engage in

marketing. The communications they have is generally one on one, although the more savvy medical offices send out health alerts (e.g., it's flu season and you should get a flu shot) and maybe even health newsletters.

Since most people go to a doctor only when they are sick, it would be better for public and individual health for medical professionals to encourage annual visits. Annual visits would catch potential issues before they become critical. And of course, having a relationship with a doctor makes emergency situations easier to deal with.

Some doctor's offices do encourage annual visits, and they do it by sending reminders. Some reminders are phone calls, some are emails, and I have even seen printed and mailed letters.

Bad (no contact at all, ever)

One doctor's office I used to go to never sent any reminders at all. Even though they had my email address, I never once

got an email from them regarding anything. No calls about annual appointments. No reminder to get an annual flu vaccine. Nothing. Ever. I no longer go to that doctor.

Better (well after the year passed)

An eye doctor I went to for several years called to remind me that I had not had my annual eye exam since November of 2016. It took them more than eight months to realize that I had not been there for more than a year. Of course they had no idea that I had changed eye doctors because of staffing issues.

Best (before the year is up)

The new eye doctor I went to called me in early September to remind that in October it would be a year since my last appointment, and did I want to schedule one now.

Reminders are an opportunity to touch base with patients. They can be a way to schedule an appointment right there and then. There is no down side to medical reminders. They also serve to show patients that doctors want to see them, and that they are not just one more person in a database.

If doctors are not going to do any other marketing, they should at the very least, have a process to remind patients about annual visits.