

Beware the social media echo chamber

Sarah Palin may be forgiven for thinking that many people in the U.S. agree with her viewpoints—after all, she gets confirmation all the time from her Facebook fans. Last week, Politico reported that Palin posted a criticism of President Obama on her Facebook page. If you check out the entry, you will note that there are dozens of supporting comments and more than 19,000 people liked her words.

You could also be excused for thinking that Sarah Palin has lots of support. But you would be wrong. What she has is support among her supporters—that is, she is preaching to the choir. She is not going to get push back from people on Facebook, because after all, they (presumably) have indicated that they “like” her. Sure, there are probably several people in there who “liked” her to follow her moves, but overall, these are her fans, her base, her **echo chamber**.

Politicians—and marketers—need to be careful that they aren’t getting to overenthusiastic about the echoes they are hearing. **Your supporters will mostly always like you and agree with you. But if you are always listening to those who like you, you will be unaware of why those other people out there don’t.**

Social media, especially the concept of Facebook pages, is the very definition of an echo chamber. You are sharing content with those who are already predisposed to liking what you say and do. Same thing happens with your Twitter stream—you have chosen to follow and be followed by certain people. If someone in your Twitter stream annoys you or doesn’t agree with you, you can block him/her.

I am not saying that brands should not have Facebook pages, or that you should not select your Twitter stream. What I am

saying is that you have to be aware that you may be speaking in an echo chamber—hearing back what you want to hear.

What do you think? Do you find yourself in an echo chamber?

Questions?

Do you have specific questions about a marketing issue? Just post here and I will attempt an answer.

Doesn't everybody?

Some people think that books, magazines and newspapers are dead. Borders, the bookstore chain recently in bankruptcy, is closing down all its stores. If you walk into a Barnes and Noble, the display for the Nook (their e-reader), has taken over the entrance. All around it *seems* that *everybody* is using tablets and e-readers to read books and magazine and that *nobody* is reading the printed on paper stuff anymore. But, that would be wrong.

Did you know that only 12% of U.S. adults own an e-reader (like a Kindle, Nook, etc.)? Or that 35% of U.S. adults own a smart phone (Iphone, Blackberry, etc.)? Given how the media reports things, and if you are surrounded by folks who are early adopters, then you could be excused for thinking the

number was much much higher—like 99%.

The truth is that not everybody is on the smart phone/e-reader/all-computer-all-the-time bandwagon. The numbers above mean that nearly two thirds of adults in the US do NOT use a smart phone, and nearly 90% do not have an e-reader. This indicates to me that many many people out there are still consuming media in more “traditional” ways—like in a printed format. Or perhaps are relying on television and radio.

It is a wrong (and dangerous) assumption to think that “everybody is doing it.” They are not. Unless it is breathing, not ever human being out there is doing (or thinking) the same thing as you are.

Last week, I attended a presentation purportedly about YouTube. In effect, it was about stuff you could do if you wanted to get together a video to promote your company (it was not a very in-depth or insightful presentation). One thing that the presenter asked was whether people in the room knew what QR codes are. I turned to a colleague sitting beside me and asked “who doesn’t?” It turns out that most in the room (all communicators I may add) had no idea. Because I know what a QR code is (a quick response code that has become ubiquitous on print ads everywhere, and which when scanned takes you to a website), and I see them everywhere, I assumed everyone else did too. Clearly, I was wrong.

You can't assume that everybody knows something. In communications, making assumptions can be detrimental to making your message clear.

And yet, people using the above-mentioned QR codes in their ads are assuming that people know what they are! And also, they are assuming that people have a smart phone that they will use to scan the QR code. But if we go with the fact that 35% of people have a smart phone, and from my unscientific survey, even fewer know what a QR code is, then you are

probably reaching somewhere south of 30% of people by using those codes. Think about that.

Getting more readers and getting unfollowed

Check out my guest blog post at the Downtown Women's Club blog: 5 ways to get more readers to your blog. Hint: it has to do with being consistent and getting the word out. Special thanks to Diane Danielson for giving me the opportunity!

On social media and blogs, we are all trying to get more readers and more followers. If we are in business or marketing, we are also trying to convert some followers/readers/likers into customers. Right?

Lately, I have been cleaning up Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook. Basically, I have been reducing the numbers of people that I follow or am connected to. Let me tell you why.

It's personal

On Facebook, which I consider a personal network, I have been “unfriending” anyone that I don’t know very well, or only know through business encounters. I tend to share my personal views and activities and really, would rather have fewer “friends” on Facebook than thousands of people with insight into my personal life.

It's business

On LinkedIn, I have removed a few connections because I just don't know enough about them. LinkedIn is a business network, and when you connect with someone, you have access to his/her connections. I want to be more careful with this network and not give away my hard-earned connections to people who are just trying to expand their own networks with little regard for what I do.

It's common sense

I have been unfollowing lots of people on Twitter lately. Why? Because there is only so much time in the day, and there are so many tweets that I want to make sure to follow folks who are offering stuff that is relevant and/or interesting. I am on Twitter to share and to learn, but I don't need to learn about what you did at the gym or whether your cat is at the vet. On Twitter, I definitely stopped following anybody who:

- Self promotes endlessly
- Uses crass expressions/language ALWAYS
- Doesn't ever share anything valuable (as defined by me)
- Seems to be in a quest to get the most tweets per day ever
- Who never ever interacts with me or re-tweets or even acknowledges my re-tweets (unless the person in question is a journalist/politician/world leader)

So yes, we are all trying to get more followers and to do that, you need to be aware of what gets you unfollowed.

Your thoughts?

More ways to make people dislike your company

It is the marketing kiss of death when people actively start disliking your company. People like to do business with people (and companies) they like. Except where there is monopoly-like with the power company or the phone or cable company–then people are forced to do business with companies they do not like very much.

Yesterday, Netflix became a very disliked company. In an email to subscribers (which again hit AFTER the press release hit the blogosphere), Netflix raised its prices for the second time in less than one year. The company, which was offering people a plan that allowed one DVD at a time (unlimited in a month) and unlimited streaming for \$9.99 (raised from \$8.99 last December), is now offering this combination for \$15.99 OR you can get the DVD option only for \$7.99 or the streaming option only for \$7.99. You can read it Netflix own words here:

<http://blog.netflix.com/2011/07/netflix-introduces-new-plans-and.html>

Needless to say, a price hike of this magnitude was not greeted with open arms by Netflix subscribers. Just check out the more than 6,000 comments on the blog (link above), or these stories from USA Today and the New York Post.

On Twitter, many people are expressing their dislike for this price hike and threatening to cancel their subscription altogether.

Netflix is pretty disliked right now. But what really is driving the discontent?

1. **Raising rates without offering more.** In effect, most people are complaining because Netflix' streaming option does

not offer the equivalent value of the DVD option (i.e. you can't get everything on streaming that you can get on DVD).

2. **Thinking your customers will grin and bear it.** Yes, it probably will help to raise revenue....if you keep your current base! The result here is that customers will find other options better suited to the value they perceive the service should be worth.

3. **Underestimating the power of social media.** With Twitter and Facebook one person's discontent spreads like wildfire.

4. **Underestimating your customer's intelligence.** The email from Netflix about the price hike says this:

We are separating unlimited DVDs by mail and unlimited streaming into two separate plans to better reflect the costs of each. Now our members have a choice: a streaming only plan, a DVD only plan, or both.

This presumes customers want a choice or that they don't like the choice they have or that if you put it as a choice then people will accept it.

Companies that treat their customers like revenue sources and not like people who actually do have a choice in which companies they do business with, risk losing business. Netflix will probably survive this episode, but not without a lot of bad blood and bad publicity.

How to become the most hated company

Yesterday, I talked about how you can make sure people dislike you. It's not hard—all you have to do is be self-centered and creepy. Well, how about making your company one of the most hated companies in America? That is a new level of dislike, and Pepco has reached it.

The article about this “honor” in WTOP (Berzerk customers make Pepco ‘most hated’ in U.S.) tells us that the power company has had a drop in customer satisfaction since last year, due in part to:

frequent and wide-ranging outages made worse by belated customer service response... Pepco has had reliability problems in the past, but not as serious as the last year when its customers faced 70% more power outages than households in other metropolitan areas, along with outages lasting twice as long on average.

What is most interesting to me is how Pepco responded to this “accolade” reported in the website Business Insider. Here is what the article said

Pepco initially issued a statement questioning the validity of the Business Insider rankings, which it said could have been to drive up their readership.

It later retracted this statement, released another written statement in response to the survey. Pepco spokespeople declined to answer specific questions.

“While we certainly believe that this label is over the top, we have heard our customers loud and clear and are working hard to upgrade our system,” the second statement said.

Pepco's communication department certainly does not get it. You don't get rid of something by attacking the source (unless it was some muck-raking tabloid). The lesson here is that Pepco is in denial about how it is perceived by its customers. As a company, it believes that if it says that it is fixing things, people should just accept it.

To become the most hated company you have to provide bad service, first and foremost. But you compound this by:

- Thinking your customers are stupid or ignorant (read about Pepco's misguided ad campaign for instance)
- Denying that serious problems exist
- Not doing enough to address those problems, or just giving lip-service to fixing said issues.
- If criticized, pointing fingers at the source of criticism rather than dealing with the substance.

I tweeted out the WTOP article yesterday, and @pepcoconnect tweeted back: Working to get it right (with a link to this: <http://pepcoconnect.wordpress.com/2011/07/11/working-to-get-it-right/>) And if that is true, why on Friday night, did I lose power for one and half hours, for no apparent reason?

How to make sure nobody likes you

If you have been to any networking or social event, you have met this person: the person nobody likes. Chances are good that this person has not one single solitary clue why nobody seems to be wanting to interact, exchange business cards, or just chat.

Here's what to do if you want to be just like that person:

- Talk endlessly about yourself (and never ever ask the other person anything).
- Use big words or obscure references, forcing whoever you are interacting to ask you what you mean.
- Brag (I don't mean talk about your accomplishment, but actually brag, like this: Well, when I was on safari last year with Robert Redford, we ran into a pack of rare pink Rhinoceros...).
- Don't maintain eye contact. People just love shifty-eyed people—gives them a vote of confidence.
- Have a clammy or limp handshake (or worse, a clammy AND limp handshake).
- Shift the burden of conversation to the other person.
- Denigrate whatever the other person is saying ("Oh, you think that is a big deal? I got a bigger deal!)
- Live in the past or in another place: you know, things were much better then and there.
- Speak ill of the host, venue, group, etc. I don't mean constructive criticism like "I thought the parking was a bit difficult here," but something like "Jane Doe and her group just don't have a clue! "
- Have poor hygiene or grooming.

Unfortunately, the first impression you make is usually a lasting one. However, you can also not try to be likeable, people see through that too. You have to be who you are, but be aware that what you say and do do affect how other people perceive you.

Next, we'll talk about how this personal behavior is often seen in marketing communications (and especially in social media).

What you can learn about marketing from food trucks

You've heard of (or perhaps eaten from) the food trucks? While it may be a fad, it is a huge trend right now, spawning its very own Cooking Channel show: Eat Street. I admit, watching this show is a guilty pleasure for me. And, it seems, most of the really cool trucks are in places no where near me like Vancouver, Portland or San Francisco, making me really really want to visit!

Food trucks are popular because of three main reasons:

1. Mobility—bringing the food to you;
2. Accessibility: making cutting edge food cheaper/more accessible
3. Specialization: they concentrate on one thing such as fried food, cheese, lobster, sauce, ethnic, etc.

That last one is key—food trucks are specialists. You know what they offer right off the bat. Perhaps you love Philipino food? There is a truck for that in San Francisco! Grilled cheese your thing? Then head over to the grilled cheese truck in Los Angeles.

I was watching Eat Street the other day and daydreaming about a visit to the Pacific Northwest to have fish and chips or great soup or something, when the show focused on a truck that made pockets (some people would call them empanadas). They make savory and sweet pockets. Great. And then, the truck owner says he also makes burgers. What??? Why? What do burgers have to do with pockets?

Pockets and burgers are not related. One does not add anything to the other. In the competitive food truck business, you stand out by doing one thing really well. People will go to your truck because you have great lobster or mac and cheese or

tacos. Or because you have great Indian or Korean or Mexican.

Pick a specialty, get really good at it and don't dilute it. Don't be the pocket-burger truck.

The problem with leaf blowers

Have you ever been jarred awake by the sound of a leaf blower? Not too pleasant is it? Leaf blowers are definitely high on the noise index, but low on the productivity scale. After all, what does a leaf blower do? It blows leaves around—it doesn't gather them, or suck them up, it just moves them from place to place.

As I was watching a gardener use his leaf-blower several times over a four-hour span, making noise and not accomplishing ANYTHING, it occurred to me that the people paying for his services were really wasting their money. First, he kept doing the same thing, over and over, without actually creating any change. Second, he *seemed* to be busy and not to be accomplishing much. Third, he was taking the easy way out, yet at more expense. The harder and cheaper way would be to use a rake and gather the leaves to then dispose of. He was wasting resources (time, gas) and accomplishing little or nothing.

Since this is not a gardening blog, you know where I am headed with this. Are you using a leaf-blower for your marketing efforts? Are you making lots of noise but not actually getting things done? Are you moving paper around but not actually getting to closing? Are you doing the same thing over and over with minimal or no results?

Just like leaf blowers are annoying and pretty useless in gardens throughout the country, loud and untargeted marketing

efforts are pointless exercises that create noise and don't communicate. Next time you launch a marketing campaign or create a marketing piece, ask yourself, is this at all like a leaf-blower or is it a rake? After all, rakes are useful, cheap and get the job done with minimal noise.

Putting back the social in social media

It's been discussed to pieces but social media is just a channel for communicating with other people. It is not the be-all-end-all. Yes, it can be used for marketing (just like that ad you just saw on your way to work this morning) or to incite political action (as in Egypt) or to let people know when the next event is.

Recently, I was at a women's business networking event and we were told to discuss resources we recommend for new businesses, and our own goals and achievements. When I talked about blogs (I write blog content for clients, among other things), many of the women started saying things like "I am not on Twitter/Facebook, and I just don't get it." My response was this: well, you better learn because people are using these channels to communicate much the way you use the telephone or we used to use the fax or the telex even longer ago.

Social media has become the communication channel of choice for many people. Will people still use the phone? Yes. Will some use the fax? Maybe. Telex, no. In a few years, we will be communicating some other way (not on Twitter or Facebook). We

will use what other people are using.

Communicating on social media is just a phone conversation on steroids.

It is about people speaking to other people. Yet, there are many people out there scheduling their tweets, and broadcasting irrelevant news and/or sales pitches. There are people who never attempt to learn anything about the PERSON at the other end of the avatar. People who are too busy looking at their screens to interact with other people at an event. (As an aside, a few weeks ago I was at an event regarding social media, and one of the organizers never introduced herself to anyone and barely looked up from her laptop. And she is supposed to be a social media whiz. Apparently, she knows how to use the tools of social media but not how to be social in real life with actual people.)

Last week, I made a point of having coffee with someone I regularly chat with on Twitter: Diane Danielson (founder of the Downtown Women's Club). I had traveled up to Boston for my college reunion, and asked Diane if she would like to meet up. It was nice to be able to talk face-to-face, and make a more tangible connection.

In my opinion, the real goal of social media or any other communication channel is to connect, whether it be to converse or to exchange information or to perhaps to sell (products, ideas, services).

So, try to put the social back into social media by realizing you are using it as a way to communicate with other people.