

Write well or fail

On Monday, I came across a letter to the editor in the Washington Post that made me nod my head vigorously. The author, David Klinger was writing about the Scripps Spelling Bee coverage, and I think you should read his letter:

I have written for a federal agency throughout a 34-year career. I had to pass a spelling test before graduating from the University of North Carolina's journalism school. Yet I turn to the dictionary half a dozen times a day to check a word or reconfirm a spelling. That's the nature of good, careful writing.

Memorization of words like "thanatophidia" (which isn't even in my Webster's) or "bondieuserie" for the Scripps spelling bee is about as relevant to me – or to today's generation of texters and youthful online denizens – as a buggy whip.

Scripps included, we desperately need to acquaint the next generation with a few, basic English grammar skills that seem to have disappeared amid society's collective cyber-mania: complete sentences, subject-verb agreement, correct punctuation and that all-important axiom that "an apostrophe does not a plural make."

David Klinger, Martinsburg, W.Va.

Basic grammar skills are disappearing left and right. I see the use of apostrophes to make plurals ALL the time. People just don't get it. However, to those in the know, using grammar poorly makes you look dumb. There is no other way to describe it. In marketing and PR, which are communications-based disciplines, writing well is key. It is key because if your grammar, spelling or sentence structure don't add up, you are probably not getting your thoughts through clearly.

Over on the Journalistics blog, Jessica Love writes "The Write Stuff: Still the #1 PR Skill." Yes, it should be, but no, many PR practitioners don't have it. We can blame many things from a failing school system to an overreliance on short form messaging, but the responsibility to straighten out your writing skills lies with you.

Write well, or fail to communicate.

Hello world!

Welcome to WordPress. This is your first post. Edit or delete it, then start blogging!

Thoughts on reaching out, stumbling blocks and helplessness

Perhaps in honor of the name of this blog (Caffeinated ideas and views on marketing), I have lots of things percolating in my head this morning.

Reaching out

With social media fast becoming a substitute for print and electronic media, and with the idea that “inbound” marketing is best, we are seeing a drop-off in reaching out. For instance, there is a conference today in Washington that I only just found out about because someone in my Twitter stream is attending. This conference is intended for nonprofits. I am not sure what type of marketing was done for the conference, but I can assure you it was not a traditional advertising in many channels approach. I will place bets that the nonprofit I work with never heard about it...

I feel that what is happening here is that circles are getting smaller and tighter. If you depend on social media for your

outreach, you will be reaching a self-reinforcing group of folks. More and more, if I attend an event promoted on social media, I see the same folks I saw at the last event.

I am not shunning social media, but I do think that if marketers want to spread the word, they have to use many different channels to do so.

Stumbling blocks

Last week, I attended a talk by Guy Kawasaki, author of Enchantment. He mentioned that when you put stumbling blocks between you and your customer or supporter, you are not being enchanting. And yet, I have visited dozens of blogs this week, with interesting posts that I would like to share on my social networks, and guess what, they make it hard to do. For instance "Sexy Sharing" (I think that is what is called) adds a second step when you click on one the sharing buttons (It asks whether you want to allow a third party to connect to your account...and I don't). That is not sexy, and it is a stumbling block. Similarly, some blogs do not have sharing or their sharing buttons don't work, making me do the work (use my own Hootsuite sharing button or use a URL shortener to cut and paste). Or how many times are you asked to give information, create passwords, etc. just to get costs/estimates/speak to someone. Stumbling blocks turn people away, and hurt you in the end.

Helplessness

I belong to a listserv, the name and purpose of which I won't share here. What irks me about this listserv is that many times people ask questions to the listserv that could be found out by doing some research (AKA typing a term into Google). To me, this is being helpless and dependent on others, and makes those people look bad (stupid). Perhaps these people are trying to reach out and start a conversation, but sometimes you just have to wonder if they understand the power

of the Internet.

I admit, the above are some random thoughts. Your take on them is appreciated...that is why we have comments!

Using capitalized words the right way

In English, we use capitals in the following situations:

- At the beginning of a sentence.
- For proper names (Deborah Brody lives in Maryland)
- For titles (President Barack Obama)

We do not use capitals as a way to emphasize words, or make them prominent. For that purpose, we might underline, italicize or bold the word in question.

All caps as in NO WAY AM I GOING OUTSIDE TODAY is generally used to denote excitement, anger or “shouting.”

However, I see words being capitalized that don't need to be, all the time.

Notice this help wanted ad from Craigslist (words underlined for emphasis by me):

*Our Firm has an immediate open for two Writers/Proofreaders
We are very flexible:
You can work as contractors, Part Timers or Freelancers
You can work from your house/office or/and our office
You must have experience writing for Finance, Tax,
Accounting, and Insurance businesses
You must have experience in Marketing, Advertising and Sale*

You must be available to start next week

You must include your desired pay (per page and/or per hour) in your email or cover letter

This is a help-wanted ad for a proofreader! I am not sure the ad is intended to be a test or if it is showing (unwittingly) a desperate need for a proofreader.

Engagement is just the beginning

Johna Burke, of BurellesLuce addressed WWPR last week (recap by Joan Coyle here). She talked about social media measurement and provided lots of useful information about web tools and marketing strategies.

One thing, more than anything else Johna said, struck me as crucial: she talked about engagement and marriage. Engagement, Johna said, is just the beginning. It's when everything is all promise and excitement (isn't that ring all shiny?) Marriage (which most times follows the engagement) takes a lot of hard work and commitment.

In social media, people talk about engagement all the time. You have to "engage" with your followers. What does this really mean? Why are you engaging? The answer is simple—to build a lasting relationship (the "marriage"). If you are engaging just to engage and not to follow through, then you are just breaking promises. If you get caught up in getting Twitter followers but don't provide any substance or reason to "stay together" then you are looking at social media (and any marketing) as being all about the excitement of it rather than

the substance (which should be your marketing goals and strategy).

Engagement is just the beginning. It is your starting point to a marketing/communications strategy that seeks to accomplish a goal (e.g. establish thought leadership, increase sales, etc.).

Are you getting engaged all the time or are you working on your marriage?



Repetition and frequency

In advertising, most media buyers are trying to find the holy grail of how much repetition/frequency you need to get your target audience to hear/understand and act on your message. The other aspect is reach. Are you reaching the target audience through the channels you have chosen?

It occurs to me that some companies, namely the ones that have the MOST customer service issues (telecom companies, power companies and airlines) and some degree of monopoly, are the same ones that advertise the most aggressively. In any given hour, you will see many spots for Comcast/Xfinity or for Verizon FIOS. I wrote here last year about the intense amount of direct mail FIOS sent me. These companies are hammering away repeating their message with a scary frequency.

Why? Because they have to. Nothing else is going to speak as loudly as lots of loud advertisements. Certainly not the customer experience or their “stellar” customer service.

A few months ago I had a appliance repair person come to the house. He was great: fixed what needed to be fixed, and charged a fair price. He does NO advertising. His business, which is doing well, is strictly word of mouth.

Can you imagine Comcast or Verizon having no advertising? On the other hand, you have few options when it comes to Internet, cable and phone providers. You will have to persuaded over and over and over.

I am suspicious about any company that feels the need to advertise ALL the time. It seems to me that high repetition and frequency, which are expensive to maintain, are the only way they will retain any top-of-mind share.

What do you think?



Brilliant and not so brilliant

Free tacos, just for me!

This is brilliant, and it is part of California Tortilla's clever (and as they would say, spunky) online direct marketing campaign. Let me explain: CalTort has a loyalty card (the "Burrito Elito" card), which allows you to accumulate points toward free food. To use it, you have to register it online. Every week, CalTort sends out a special of the week or some such to its database (which I am sure is sizeable). And every once in a while they send out a private note to card holders, such as the one I got today, which says, under the subject

line “We Miss You. And We Can Prove It”:

*Where the heck have you been? To show you how much we miss you, we got you a little something—but we can't give it to you unless you come in. So here's the scoop: we've just put a **FREE TACO** on your Burrito Elito card. All you have to do is visit any Cal Tort, with your card, within 2 weeks of this email to get it. After 2 weeks it goes away—so hurry!*

We're holding our breath until you get here. 1, 2, 3...

Why is this brilliant? Because it has a personality (slightly irreverent), it is personalized and gives me a REASON to go to CalTort. It also shows that a bit of creativity and some work can earn you customers and loyalty. Kudos to CalTort for knowing how to use direct email effectively.

This is boring. Gen Y thinks this way.

On blog posts, in newspaper articles, on TV and in ads everywhere there are sweeping generalizations and assumptions that undermine your message. You (the blogger or copywriter) assume that if you find something boring, that everyone else finds it boring. You are a member of a generation, therefore you can speak for the entire cohort. No and no.

It is not very brilliant to assume that the world sees things EXACTLY like you do, like there is a universal key and you hold it. For instance, not everyone found the humor in Pineapple Express funny (I didn't), so if you start a movie ad with the line “As funny as Pineapple Express,” you will automatically lose people.

Be mindful of what you are assuming and saying. Generalizations and stereotypes that are cast too wide will turn away more people than will be brought in.

You must be able to answer this question

In my new favorite movie, **POM Wonderful Presents: The Greatest Movie Ever Sold**, filmmaker Morgan Spurlock goes into a meeting to pitch his movie to Ban Deodorant. Apparently, Ban is not a top-tier deodorant, and the company is pretty interested in alternative ways of expanding their presence, thus the meeting with Spurlock.

During the pitch, Morgan Spurlock asks the Ban people to describe their product. There is a long moment of silence that follows, and then the marketing people put their thinking caps on. The audience laughed at this interval because of how ridiculous the scene was—and yet, I bet it plays out every day with businesses of every size, everywhere.

You must be able to answer this question: **what is your product/service and what makes it different from any other product/service in the category.**

If you can't describe your product/service and its attributes, you are in deep trouble. If you don't do any other marketing, you must work on that description and pound it in to your marketing and salespeople's heads. Can you imagine a Coca Cola salesperson being asked to describe his/her product and not being able to do so? All he/she has to say is "Coke is it! " (Just kidding, but they would probably say something to the effect that Coke is one of the world's top selling soft drinks, and it is a carbonated, sugar loaded "delight.")



“Faction:” learn what this is

Perhaps if you studied politics, like I did, you think faction is a party or group that is usually causing some trouble. However, if you watch Morgan Spurlock’s *The Greatest Movie Ever Sold*, you will learn that a “faction” is a combination of the words fact and fiction. Meaning that it is neither fact nor fiction. Perhaps it is a fictionalized fact, or fact-based fiction. Sounds like many of the memoirs that are making the rounds these days.

The Greatest Movie Ever Sold is a faction, and it is a must-watch movie if you are even remotely interested in marketing. Spurlock, who is previously known for his documentary *Super Size Me*, has blown open the world of product placement and movie funding.

This movie is funny and it is pure genius. To see Spurlock go pitch this movie, about product placement and movie funding, to people in marketing is just about as humorous as any parody can be. But what is truly genius, is that it is real. This is how things get done in the world of marketing. Celebrity endorsements are real. Advertisers are looking for new ways to reach more audiences. And everything is for sale.

I can’t do this movie justice here. There was too much stuff that struck a chord, from creating a pitch, to finding the brand personality, to how to market a movie.

Here’s a the official trailer:

[youtube id=T4Ng2P3zxFM&w=560&h=349]



Do you speak Jargonese?

Chances are you do...especially if you are in marketing, or the government.

I just came across the article “How to ‘unsuck’ you jargon” on Ragan’s PR Daily. The key seems to go to Unsuck-It.com and type in the offending phrase or word, such as “above the fold” or “leading edge.”

The issue is that most people who are fluent in Jargonese don’t really realize they are speaking in Jargonese. It seems perfectly natural to say things like: “We are currently working on aligning our values with our mission, while creating storytelling capacity in case there is a barrier to entry and we need to create synergies to boost the bottom line.”

But hey, Unsuck-It.com may only be a stop-gap measure. You may need to restructure your language skills.

