

How to leave a bad impression

It seems lots of people and companies out there are trying hard to leave a bad impression. If you want to join their ranks, here are a few tips:

- Don't respond to inquiries. If someone calls or emails, free free to ignore.
- Don't say thank you. If someone buys a product from you or gives you a contact or anything, don't bother saying thank you. That would be nice.
- Keep pounding away with the same message. Send the same offer over and over, a couple of times of day if possible.
- Solicit free advice. Ask around for all the free advice you can. After all, it's just advice, right?
- After you get your free advice, feel free to ignore it. Someone's an expert but that doesn't mean he/she knows what she/he is saying.
- Cancel or change plans at the last minute. Your time is more valuable than anybody else's.
- Use foul language. If you are on Twitter, go ahead, drop an f-bomb or two.
- Be crass, self-involved, self-promoting. It's all about you.

My question is: how hard are you trying to leave a bad impression?



How Not to Write a Cover Letter

Being a small business, I don't often get cover letters and resumes, although once I got a perfume-scented resume on blue letterhead that went directly in the trash. Yesterday, I got a cover letter that was truly stunning, and not in a good way. It was stunning because it was such a good example of how NOT to write a letter. I am posting it here, with comments (and with identity removed, of course).

To Whom it May Concern:

No personalization...unforgivable since I am the only person listed on my website.

I would like to be considered for employment with your company, so here is a little background on my education and experiences.

Doesn't mention what type of employment is being sought.

I have a Bachelors of Science in Business Administration from [XXX]University, where I double majored in Marketing and Business Management. I also earned a minor in Professional Communications. I achieved a GPA of 3.49, while also being extremely involved in extra-curricular activities and community service opportunities on campus.

Would have put this down further...or talked about what subjects I learned about, more specifically.

I've gained experience relevant to the business industry through two internships, one with[xxx]- a marketing firm, and the other with[xxx]. These internships allowed me to utilize

the information I had been learning at[the University] and have allowed for me to gain experience in the marketing field.

No specificity: the writer could have given examples of specific tasks or information learned.

Before you ask, I'll go ahead and answer the big questions in your mind. Yes, I am currently in [other state] No, I do not plan to work from here; I'm ready and willing to relocate. And finally, No, I understand that I'm entry-level and do not expect to receive relocation funds.

Geez. Now you are a mind-reader. Don't assume anything.

I have enclosed my resume for your review. Also, my LinkedIn profile can be viewed at[LinkedIn], if that better fits your viewing preferences.

This is nit-picky but you have attached not enclosed your resume, since this is an email.

I would be happy to aid you and your company in future endeavors, if you will please contact me at [telephone and email] I would welcome the chance to discuss openings.

Notice that nearly every paragraph and sentence starts with I. It's all about the writer and nothing about my company.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

I wrote the author of this email back and told her there were no opportunities. I also gave her a couple of tips. She didn't reply. I am pretty positive this letter will get her nowhere.

Here are my top three tips on how to write an effective cover letter:

1. **Personalize:** Have a name (or at the very least a department or title). Mention the name of the company you are applying to, and why you are interested in working at that company.
2. **Summarize your background, but in relation to the potential job:** In college, you probably took arts classes and sociology, etc. but perhaps you took a really great writing class that would help you be a copywriter, right?
3. **Talk about what you can do for the company:** Can you bring in business, deal with clients, sweep the floor really well? What do you bring to the table?

What are your tips? What are the biggest mistakes you see when you get cover letters?



What makes stories work?

Last week, I attended a Washington Women In PR (WWPR) panel on “The Art of Storytelling.” WWPR’s Past President Debbie Friez has a great recap on the BurellesLuce blog.

While I agree with the concept that creating a story will help your organization to connect with its target audience, one thing was not answered. What makes the story work?

Danny Harris of People’s District said that stories help “show

the texture," which I take to mean give life and detail to otherwise dry and boring concepts. For instance, if I tell you I saw a homeless person on a street corner, that means nothing. But if I tell you that I stopped to talk to the homeless person, and he was able to tell me that because of a health issue he lost his job, and then his house, now you understand the situation. The story fills in the details.

Stories should be memorable, ideally. But then again, not every story, and certainly not corporate stories, is memorable. Stories should aim to create recognition and let you find commonality with them through the details they impart. Yet what details will resonate with your audience?

One thing not one person on the panel said and which I think is absolutely critical for storytelling is this: authenticity.

Although it is a much-vaunted word (especially on social media), authenticity is a concept that is often lacking in marketing communications. When something doesn't ring true it is because it is not authentic. Case in point: my criticism of Pepco's ads about customers being first. Those ads were simply not authentic. Why? Because anyone who has had to deal with Pepco knows that customers are NOT first. Same goes for Comcast (Here is a total aside, I went to Comcast to return equipment and saw a sign that said "Customers are our first priority." Of course, the customer service office was a small cramped affair where a dozen people were waiting in line for one or two surly customer service reps. Yes, I am sure Comcast puts customers first.)

If you are going to use stories to relay your marketing message you have to be sure they are authentic. People see through the BS. And people who see through it will now have a really bad impression about your organization.

What do you think makes stories work?

The New York Times' Pay Wall

Yesterday, the New York Times announced its new subscription plan. Basically, you can read 20 articles on their site per month for free, and if you want continued access you will need to pay \$15 a month. This applies to your iPad subscription too. If you are a print subscriber, your digital access is included.

It is very telling that this announcement generated more than 2,000 comments on the New York Times site (more would have come in but the NYT shut down comments). I started reading through them, and the majority of what I read seemed to indicate that readers will not pay for access. The biggest argument: it is too expensive. The second biggest argument: NYTimes.com already carries lots of advertising.

Will the pay wall work? In my opinion, it will backfire for various reasons:

- **Human nature:** People do not like to pay for what they used to get for free. And, there are plenty of other news sites on the Web that are still free.
- **Work arounds:** If you click through on a Facebook or Twitter link to a New York Times article, you get around the paywall.
- **Too much money:** People are looking for ways to save money and paying for a digital subscription is probably an easy budget cut.
- **Fewer readers=lost revenue:** So say some people continue to pay for the content on the New York Times site. It

will never be the same amount as the people accessing it for free. With fewer numbers, they will either have to charge less for their online ads (and lose revenue) or lose advertisers unwilling to pay for fewer impressions.

For many years, I was a subscriber to the New York Times print edition. I was a huge fan of their crossword puzzle and I loved the Sunday Times. But, the price was exorbitant. I had to stop my subscription. I missed the crossword puzzle, yes, but not the huge bill. People will do the same with the NYTimes.com site. They will miss it at first, but they won't pay for it because of budgetary constraints.

UPDATE: Just came across this article from emedia vitals, which says that some sites using the "metered model" have actually gained visitors. Is it that you think you get what you pay for?

Your thoughts? Take my poll.

[polldaddy poll=4741554]



Web and social media irritants

There are things that I see happening on social media and on the web that are irritating. They happen way too often. Here are my top peeves (and least of this week).

One of my top ten peeves of all time, and which I have discussed before, is the **impersonal invitation to connect on LinkedIn**. In the past few weeks, I have received at least four

or five invitations from people I don't know and who haven't made the slightest attempt to personalize the LinkedIn generated note "I'd like to add you to my professional network." I got one this morning, and I fired back a note telling the person in question that we hadn't ever met, and that a tip for her would be to personalize the note. She wrote back this really clueless note:

Please accept my sincere apologies. I must have mistaken you for someone else. I thought I had met you at a XXXX function. I never send blind invitations.

I am currently writing for a couple of online magazines and am building local pr connections.

So sorry to be an annoyance.

Why is this clueless? Because, a) she did send a blind invitation. She could have written something like, "We met at a XXX event last week, and I would like to connect with you here." And b) she is telling me she is using LinkedIn to build connections, which I interpret as using this forum to send out countless queries and newsletters , etc. So, she is not seeking to build a connection with ME, she is seeking to build her network to profit her work.

Other irritants are:

Blog posts that are not shareable on social media. And ironically, this post, from the All things WOM, from the Word of Mouth Association, IS NOT SHAREABLE. Has no share buttons. Really. How stupid is this.

Web redesigns that are not useful to the reader. The Washington Post redesigned their website and recently re-launched it. As far as I can tell, readers were not consulted. In a note to readers, sent THREE days after the re-launch the Post says:

The Washington Post is now even more essential and more in

tune with the way you interact with news.

- *Follow stories as they develop and share your ideas as they evolve*
- *Watch events unfold with new video programs*
- *Know what's getting the most buzz and what's really happening in D.C.*
- *Get straight to your favorite coverage with destination hubs for Politics, Local, Sports and Opinions*

I guess what they mean by “more essential” is less stuff to read. Now I have to dig through the site to get to local news. And where are the blogs? Oh, and by screwing around with the site, lots of the Post’s blog RSS feeds were messed up. Nice going.

Using swear words on Twitter. I have written about this before, and I will again in light of this article in the New York Times. I swear all the time, just not on Twitter. Because Twitter is a broadcast medium that is also archived. What you say here is on the record for ALL to see. It shows a lack of thought to use your words carelessly.

Promoting yourself endlessly or worse, showing off on Twitter. There is one particular person, whom I just unfollowed today, who felt it necessary to be a braggart at every turn. It was things like this: “aren’t you jealous of my fabulous view?” with an attached picture. Why do I want to read this? Why do I care? Again, Twitter is a broadcast medium. What you say can be seen by 1000s of people.

Sending too many (or useless) email marketing messages. The AMA-DC was sending me four emails A WEEK. I told them it was too much. They unsubscribed me for criticizing them. And here is Entrepreneur’s take on why people stop following you. Read it and see that too many emails or too many posts irritate people. (And get this, I keep getting Comcast’s marketing missives, even though they CANCELLED my account.)

Any of these get your goat too?

Are you trying to bully your customers?

Today, I got this precious direct marketing letter:

Dear Deborah:

Again congratulations on the purchase of your home [address omitted]. We hope that it has been a pleasant experience for you.

We have been trying to contact you regarding our termite warranty but have been unable to do so. We also did not receive a response to our previous letter. Please call [name and contacted omitted] at your earliest convenience so that we may discuss this important matter with you. Also, be sure to ask about our PEST CONTROL SERVICE PLAN for as low as \$376 per year. This will be our final effort to contact you by mail. This will be our final effort to contact you by mail.

(Yes, in the letter the last sentence is repeated and it is underlined.)

Let's break this down. This company is trying to get me to buy

a service plan at \$376 per year. They are direct mailing me off a list of recent home buyers. Apparently, I should contact them immediately and if not, they will do what? Apparently, they will start contacting me by other means other than mail. Will they be sending out their bully squad to my door to get me to purchase their plan?

Also, they claim they have been trying to reach me. What they have been doing is sending this same letter at least three times.

What this letter is doing, plain and simple, is bullying me. This company thinks that sending a letter like this will get me to call them, when all it does is make me think that they just don't get it.

What do people do when they are being bullied? Do they turn around and do business with you or do they run the other way?

Plan B...do you have one?

Last week, I found out my accountant is in the hospital. His partner cannot take on new work and the only remedy I was offered was to file an extension. When I asked for a referral to another accountant, the partner was not able (or willing) to give me a name. In short, my accountant apparently had no plan B, no contingency plan in case of emergency.

Most of us do not plan for contingencies. We have our plan A, and we rarely think about what could happen if things do not go as expected. In cases of emergency, in communications having a plan B is also known as crisis communication planning or management. Well-managed organizations will have some sort of crisis plan.

Many people do not like to think about the what if. It makes them nervous. When consulting with a nonprofit recently, it turned out that the organization had absolutely no crisis plan. And, by the way, a crisis does not necessarily have to be your fault or an emergency, or something horrible.

Contingency planning in general has to do with having alternative plans. Say that the Internet goes out, are there other ways people can find information about you? If so, where? You cannot plan for every situation but you can have a general sense of what scenarios are most likely to happen, and what the procedures and communications are for each of those top situations. For instance, if you have a spokesperson, you may want to plan for the day the spokesperson is out with the flu (as I mentioned before, it doesn't have to be a dire situation). Who is the alternate spokesperson?

In short, because life will not go as planned, you should always plan for that fact.

(Note to the accountants: you could set up a list of trusted accountants you refer to or you could hire temporary help for tax season.)

How do you create contingency plans?

Is social media the right venue for you?

Sometimes it seems like everywhere you turn someone is telling you to be on Twitter, Facebook and so forth. Lots of companies are now advertising that you should follow them.

Let me say there is a huge benefit to being on social media. Some companies will find most if not all of their target audience on social networks. But, and there always is that but, if you are not prepared to be on social media, don't be on it. It can hurt more than help.

Let me give you an example of how being on social media when you are not ready can actually cause more damage than any benefit. Last week, I bought a mattress from Sleepy's, "the mattress professionals." The mattress was supposed to be delivered on Tuesday, between 3 pm and 7 pm (and, no, this is not the cable company although Sleepy's gives them a run for their money). By 6 pm, it was obvious the delivery was going to be delayed. I tweeted to @sleepys several times. No answer. Mattress finally got delivered at nearly 9 pm. I did not receive a tweet back from Sleepy's until nearly 5 pm the next day, asking me to email my concern. The next day, they tweeted to email my concern (which I already had done.). By Friday, I had an email from them asking me to test the email address!!!! And, someone from customer service finally called me Friday afternoon.

Although there are many things wrong with Sleepy's (and if you are interested in my opinion of this company just drop me a line), **it adds insult to injury for them to be on social media and not to respond to social media.**

Social media for companies, whether it be for customer service or for image, requires a sizeable time investment. It requires monitoring for mentions. It requires responsiveness.

Is social media the right venue for you? Here's a checklist to determine the answer:

- I have the time and/or the staff to manage social media.
- I have the understanding of how social media works.
- I will respond to customer complaints on social media

like I do on traditional outlets.

- **I will monitor for mentions consistently/constantly.**

If you can't commit to this checklist, social media may not be the right venue for you.

If your company does not have the staff/time to deal with social media, do yourself a favor, and do not get it to the game. You will make matters worse. By saying you have social media outlets, you are encouraging your customers to contact you there. If you are not there, then your customers will become even more frustrated. Frustration can lead to anger and upset. And because of the power of amplification, the problem will get transmitted to more and more people.

Your thoughts?

How to become irrelevant

How many blogs have you stopped reading? How many products have you stopped buying? How many ads do you ignore?

If you answered just one to any of these questions, the reason is because whatever the blog/ad/product/service has become irrelevant.

Some irrelevancy is by attrition—meaning that you will stop buying a product because you no longer need it (like baby diapers when your child is potty trained). Other irrelevancy is because you just don't care anymore or the information does not ring true.

How do you become irrelevant?

If you are a blogger:

- You write about things that people don't care about or are not interested in.
- You write about the same things over and over.
- You write about you, you and more about you.
- You never update your blog.

If you are an advertisement:

- You advertise the same offer, over and over
- You advertise an offer with tons of small print
- You advertise things that are just not true (we beat any price, for instance).
- What you advertise does not match reality.

If you are a product:

- You don't work as promised.
- You don't fill a need.
- You are not well priced.

If you are a website:

- You have outdated information.
- You look like you were designed in 1999.
- Your visitors can't find the information they need to make a purchase/visit your location/etc.

Basically, you become irrelevant when you forget what your audience needs or wants.

What makes you tune out marketing? Let me know what makes blogs/ads/websites/brochures irrelevant.

4 items to check on your website

Have you checked your website lately? Chances are good that you haven't, especially if it is built on a non-blogging platform. But go ahead, check it for these four items today.

1. **Does it load quickly?** How long does it take for the average person to open your website? If it takes too long, you may lose that person.
2. **Does it load correctly?** Are all the pages formatted correctly, and is the format readable? I have opened pages only to find HTML gobbledygook.
3. **Is the contact information current and accurate?** The basics—address, phone, email—should all be up to date and you should make sure they are correct.
4. **Do you provide the information your prospective customers or clients need?** If you are a retail location, do you have your hours posted? If you are a restaurant, do you have your menu posted? If you are a salon, do you have a listing (including pricing) of your services?

It is worth remembering that people go to websites to find useful information. If they can't access your website or find the information they need, THEY WILL GO ELSEWHERE.

What types of things do you look for in a website? What turns you away?