

WaPo: Carney hopes and Pepco failures

Two items from today's Washington Post caught my eye. One was about Jay Carney, the new White House press secretary and the other was a letter to the editor regarding Pepco.

Speaking for the White House

Jay Carney is taking over from Robert Gibbs as White House press secretary. Carney was a journalist, and many people think he will bring a journalist's viewpoint to the White House briefing room. Dana Milbank wonders "Can Jay Carney Hack it as a Flack" in an op-ed in today's Washington Post. Few people will miss Gibbs, so maybe by comparison, Carney will already do better. I wrote about Gibbs snark here. If one thing Carney can learn from Gibbs is how not to act. I think the press corps are looking for information without sarcasm.

Proving advertising doesn't turn the lights back on

Another hot topic this week (other than the ongoing protests in Egypt) is Pepco. If you live in the DC area you know that Pepco failed, once again, to restore power in a timely fashion following a weird snow storm last week. At one point, they had 300,000 customers without power and in many cases, it took them three or four days to restore power to all of them. Witness how people felt about it, and more importantly, about how Pepco mishandled communications by reading letters to the editor in today's Post. Notice the title of the piece includes the word "outrage."

This latest episode in Pepco's ongoing reliability struggle proves my point that no matter how many nice ads and promising assertions you make, you have to back them up with real action. As you recall, Pepco started running an ad campaign talking about all the stuff they are doing to make themselves

more reliable and responsive. Well, sadly, it was just words. No one believed it then, and certainly, no one believes it now. Instead of spending lots of ad dollars on an image campaign, Pepco should spend some money figuring out how to increase its reliability, responsiveness and communications with customers.

The bottom line for both these stories is that communications matter a whole lot. How you handle communications, what you say, when you say it, can truly impact public opinion and your image.

Positive Power!

No, this is not a post about the power of positive thinking. It's about the power of positive reviews.

How many times have you bought a book, gone to a movie, hired a contractor, eaten at a restaurant because you read/heard a positive review? I would bet that the answer is many times.

Case in point. The Washington Post raved about Helen Simonson's book, Major Pettigrew's Last Stand. In fact, many other reviewers also raved. So I went out to buy it. And guess what, I am not liking it quite that much. But the sale has been made.

Getting a third-party positive review is definitely worth its weight in gold. This is why public relations is so valuable, even in the age of social media. You get one great review, and you will get lots of interest (and possibly lots of sales). The sticking point lies in whether the product/service/movie/restaurant delivers the goods. You may get an initial sale but no follow up sales if the product does

not live up to its review.

As companies look to save money, many are doing away with PR help. This is not good business. Good PR can lead to good reviews, which in turn, may lead to increased sales.

When has a review turned your opinion? Please share any stories.

One thing that will make you stand out

Being personal. That's the one thing that will make you stand out.

We are living, increasingly, in an electronic world. People send email and texts instead of picking up the phone. People tweet out questions to strangers in the hopes of getting the wisdom of the crowd. But, as we talked about here, people want to connect personally, one to one. Although we *feel* more connected, we are more isolated from other people. It is now possible for you to know what your friend from elementary school had for breakfast (on Facebook) while not knowing who your neighbor is.

This morning, on CBS Sunday Morning, Steve Hartman investigated the handwritten thank you note. He has never been a fan, but his colleague Byron Pitts is. Pitts sends out thank you notes to the people he interviews, to others who have helped him. This makes Pitts stand out. Those people will remember the gesture.

I am not sure if it is generational, cultural or personality-

driven, but some people just don't seem to get that people want to be treated like people. If someone is sick or has been sick, you ask about their health. If someone is facing a problem, you offer support. Yet many people don't do this even though it takes very little effort for a big reward. Some politicians have gotten far because they treat people like people. George Bush gained popularity in part because he was personal—asking people about their families, following up, sending thank you notes.

Don't underestimate the power of reaching out, of being personal. It could be a handwritten note, or it could be a telephone call. Reach out to people, and you will stand out to them.

Marketing old school

This past Monday, I attended the What's Next DC marketing communications conference put on by Green Buzz Agency. For a nice recap, please read Daria Steigman's post on the Independent Thinking blog and also check out slides from the conference.

Most speakers at the conference talked about social media, and how traditional marketing is dead (the press release is dead, social media shouldn't even be called that, etc.). And although I agree that social media has transformed the marketing landscape, making everyone "networked" as one speaker put it, it has not changed the fundamentals of marketing nor the viability of old school marketing channels. One speaker said marketers need to be "remarkable." To put it in old school terms, what is it to be remarkable if not to find your USP (unique selling proposition)?

In my opinion, marketing is still marketing regardless of whether the tools have changed. If you don't know what you are selling, or what sets you apart, you will not succeed, no matter how many Twitter followers you have or how much of a "digital native" you are.

Yesterday, I experienced true old school marketing. I had a leak in my refrigerator and needed to find someone to fix it ASAP (before the snow that hit us yesterday), but had no Internet access or Smart Phone. I couldn't tweet out my concern or go to Angie's List (my go-to spot for all matters home related). What did I do? First, I remembered a electrical/plumbing place I have seen advertised in the paper and online. I called 411, got the number and called them. They don't do appliances. Back to square one. Then, it dawned on me that I have PHONE BOOKS/Yellow Pages. I looked up appliance repair, called a place that said they do emergencies, and about two hours later, a technician was at my house fixing the fridge.

The moral of this story is don't give up on old school marketing just yet. Not everything is solved by the Internet or Twitter. In fact, today, many people in Maryland are sitting without power or Internet access due to the snow. Many don't have Smart Phones. Some may not have Internet access, or only have it at work. This is why ads still work. The Yellow Pages still work. And yes, well written press releases still work too.

Are you still marketing old school?

Nonprofit communications: how not to do it

Several years ago, I was asked to join the board of a local education nonprofit. This particular organization was tiny, and operating in the red. The executive director was a very young and inexperienced person, who was getting paid a salary and benefits that the organization just could not afford. Clearly, funds were the issue, as they are in most nonprofit organizations.

There is a tension between marketing communications and nonprofit organizations. As a marketer, you want your communications to look professional and put-together. I have always advocated for professional design. However, professional design does not come cheap, and it certainly is not free. But good design pulls in eyeballs and may actually help drive traffic to your website/brochure/etc. So what is a nonprofit to do? In my opinion, a nonprofit needs to commit resources to its communications needs—carefully. For instance, a cheap website will not attract donors. An overly glitzy website could potentially turn off donors. Somewhere in between—a website that has the necessary elements, looks clean and modern, has the ability to receive donations—is probably where nonprofits need to go.

Back to the nonprofit organization I was involved with. The board was committed to having a printed brochure, which was mailed to the mailing list of members and former students. Because the executive director was lazy (there is no other word), she paid first-class postage instead of the more labor-intensive bulk nonprofit mailing rate. The brochure was printed in two-colors on heavy bond paper, adding both mailing costs and printing costs. The executive director laid out the newsletter in Publisher, and it was very difficult to edit and to update. Additionally, the organization had very little idea

of who attended the classes offered or where they came from. In other words, they had no demographic information.

I recommended moving the brochure to an electronic format and mailing out only to those who requested printed copies. I recommended using the nonprofit rate. I recommended getting a logo designed by graphic designer. I recommended getting all content in Word, edit and correct it, and then lay it out. I recommended conducting a survey to get a sense of who is taking the classes. Guess what? They did not show any interest in any of these recommendations. It was so frustrating that I quit the board. A few months later the executive director left, and they hired someone more mature part-time. Last I know, they don't have any executive director.

This organization is now sending out an even less graphically appealing printed brochure (I just got one the other day and it ended up in the trash). It is still being printed on heavy bond paper, without color though. And they are using their nonprofit bulk rate instead of first-class stamps. I wonder if this is working for them.

First of all, who are they trying to attract? An older, less sophisticated audience might not mind a brochure that looks like a secretary in the 1990s put it together. Why am I still getting their mailing? I haven't attended a class there for years, which indicates to me they haven't cleaned up their database.

When you have limited funds, you should use them wisely. In this case, the organization is spending too much money on printed materials that are not visually appealing. I would bet that they are not achieving good return on investment.

Do you have examples of other nonprofits that are not doing things "right?" Please share stories and examples.

Connecting in person

Shashi Bellamkonda from Network Solutions gave the keynote yesterday at Washington Women in PR's annual luncheon. Here is a link to his presentation, which is well worth a read if you work in PR and/or social media. He spoke about the importance of establishing connections, in person when possible. He's absolutely right. Too many people substitute an email or my least favorite, a text, for a phone conversation or an in-person meeting. I have said it before on this blog but it bears repeating: people do business with people.

Recently, I met David Heyman in person. Up to that time, I knew him on Twitter only as @dcborn61. We have had breakfast together and chatted. We've also done business. That is the power of connection.

I first met Shashi as @shashib on Twitter too. I met him in person at a casual Tweet up and have had the fortune of seeing him at many other events since.

Get to know someone better. Go for coffee or a beer. Try to connect in person—you will get to know each other better.

How do you connect?

Tips to improve your customer

communication

How do you communicate with your present or potential customers or clients? Whether you do it successfully can mean a difference to your bottom line.

Provide the information requested. Yes it sounds self evident, but so many times businesses dance around a question without an answer. For instance, I recently requested costs to create a pdf form from a virtual assistant. There was a whole lot of emails back and forth: just what type of form, how long, with logo or without, etc. And never a quote. I can't do business with someone who can't provide an estimate for me.

Be realistic. Often, people think that if they say something is going to take a couple of days when it really takes a week the customer will sign up. But if the job actually takes longer you will risk angering your customer. For instance, if you are a service provider and you can't fit someone for two weeks, say so. Don't say that you can possibly squeeze a customer in just because that is his/her timetable. If you can't accommodate something, you will end up with an unhappy customer

Don't sugarcoat bad news. If you need to cancel or the price has gone up, say it quickly and directly.

Apologize if warranted, but say what you will do to fix it. Apologies are all fine and good, but not sufficient. Most people don't care if you are sorry that you screwed up, they want to know how you are going to make it better.

Don't make excuses. The dog ate my homework didn't fly in grade school and will certainly not fly in the face of a customer relationship and yet how many times do you hear excuses from service providers? I am having my floors done and the service provider underestimated the time it would take his crew, but he keeps telling me it is because they weren't able

to work on the weekend. That is an excuse and it doesn't fly.

Be timely. If you say you are going to call a customer, call! If there is going to be a problem, call your customer sooner rather than later. Don't let your customer call you with something you said you would get.

Be pleasant. Again, it seems self-evident. Just today I called my auto insurance company. I had a change to make, and the woman who helped me was really pleasant. It made the transaction easy. It left a good impression.

Anything you would add? What works best for you?

One move to guarantee social media success

If you do just one thing, I can almost guarantee you will improve your social media success:

Post a good (perhaps even professional) picture of yourself on your social media profiles.

First a caveat: I said a GOOD picture of yourself. Not some quirky, smirky mugshot a la Jared Lee Loughner (that is guaranteed to drive people away). I know that good is subjective, but aim for some of these adjectives: professional, pleasant, smiling, poised, polished, approachable.

The reason is simple: people do business (and connect) with people.

A few days ago, an acquaintance of mine who is notoriously shy and quiet, posted her company logo as her LinkedIn profile picture. What a bad move (and I told her so). After all, are people seeking to connect with her company (where she is an employee and not an owner) or with her?

For some people, putting up a picture seems like an invasion of privacy. For some, there is fear of being judged by looks or the worry that they don't look good enough. I have heard of women who want to lose weight before posting a picture. Unfortunately, these excuses don't fly. Social media is social, and social means people. People are not icons or images or logos. They are themselves, and generally a photo captures this.

According to this blog post by Todd Taskey on Small Business Trends, a PROFESSIONAL photo will increase your chances of having business opportunities find you on LinkedIn. More reason to go out and get a professional portrait done. It truly is a worthwhile investment.

It's never "just words"

Those of us who work in communications appreciate the power of choosing words well. We sweat it out over how to phrase a headline or a tagline because we know words matter. Different words carry different meanings, connotations, appeal and can sway your audience one way or another.

In the aftermath of the Arizona shooting of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords and the murder of six people by a deranged Jared Lee Loughner there has been A LOT of discussion over whether

political discourse contributed to this heinous act. In truth, the only person who can answer if there is a direct correlation is Loughner, but I doubt we will be getting a sane answer from him. And many people on both sides of the political spectrum are pointing fingers at each other, at the heated rhetoric, etc. In my opinion, words do matter. They may not have been the cause in this particular instance, but when you are continually demonizing the other by labeling (job-killing, un-American, etc.) you create chasm and you create distrust. You create or stoke hatred. You reinforce the idea that those you attack are different than you, that they cannot be trusted, that they are out to get you.

So, although Sarah Palin's rhetoric and demagoguery are not what made Loughner go into a store to buy a gun and then shoot innocent people, and she is right to claim she is being wrong accused, that does not make it right for her to accuse the media of a "blood libel." First, because Palin (and her communications crew) clearly do not understand the meaning of phrase and second, as my friend Daria Steigman pointed out, using the word "blood" in the aftermath of a bloody tragedy is just plain poor choice of words.

Here are a few articles to read about Palin's word choice:

David Frum on what she should have said.

New York Times' The Caucus

Palin seems to be a master manipulator of words, and making herself the victim of a conspiracy against her (which is what I believe she meant to say with blood libel) is no error. She should be taken to task. I will be waiting to see what she says next now that the criticism is mounting.

The bottom line is that what we say and how we say it does matter and it does influence perception. Advertising and public relations people know this better than most.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

To quote Aretha Franklin: “R-E-S-P-E-C-T, find out what it means to me.” (I do wish I could sing this to you but...)

We do business with people and brands we respect. This is why we see the rise in rating websites like Yelp and Angie’s List. We are looking not only for value and good quality, but to respect who we are doing business with. On Angie’s List, one of the parameters used to rate service providers is professionalism. Professionalism is about whether a person exhibits good judgment, whether he or she treats his or her customers with respect.

It is said that respect is earned. That is true. To earn respect, you have to act in ways that garner trust. For instance, if you read a newspaper and find interesting and informative articles there, you continue reading it. You respect and trust the information it provides. But once you start seeing factual mistakes, typos and lapses in editorial judgment, you start losing respect and trust for the publication (or its editors). Same goes for blogs, company newsletters, anything.

As a marketer, one of your tasks should be to earn your customers’ respect and make sure they trust your product or service. You do that by providing honest information. If you are marketing an office supply store and you say in your advertising that you carry everything for the office, but when a customer is looking for a desk or a file cabinet, and can’t find that at your store, you are not being honest with your customers. Your customers will lose respect for you. If you say you match pricing from any other store (and you make that really large print) and then list exceptions (in very small

print), you are not being honest with your customers. And yes, that will cost you respect.

It does come down to R-E-S-P-E-C-T.