

Personality and style communicate

All the advertising in the world is not going to make a frog into a prince. People respond to things personally—especially to things (like politics) that affect them directly.

In Washington DC, incumbent mayor Adrian Fenty lost the democratic primary to his opponent council member Vince Grey. Why? Partially because people preferred Grey, but in larger part, because people did not like Fenty's arrogance and leadership style. You can read an article in the Washington Post that further delves into this here.

Would you vote for someone you don't like? Probably not, even if he or she had the nicer ads, the flashier website. My advice to political strategists is people respond to people they like more than to ads they like.

Is customer service your best marcom strategy?

Perhaps no other sales strategy is better than good customer service. Think about it, when you get good service, you develop a good impression, right?

I just had the pleasure of flying on Taca Airlines, a Central American airline. It was great. The flight crew were pleasant, helpful. They served a snack, free of charge. I got to my destination on time, on a clean, comfortable, new airplane. I made my reservations with an agent who was patient and who did

not charge me for ticketing. Given my druthers, I would fly Taca again in a heartbeat.

I have never seen an ad for Taca, but had heard word-of-mouth how good their service is. It's true. I am sold and all because of great customer service.

Your thoughts?

Labor Day thoughts

Here we go into the last “official” summer weekend of the year. It is September and soon enough, the bustle of Fall, back-to-school, holidays will be upon us.

On a long weekend, the best thing you can do is chill out, relax, take it easy. Too many people today are busy working all the time, or at least being connected all the time. Believe me, as of next week, everything will accelerate and you will wish for some breathing room.

We celebrate Labor Day by taking the day off—seems ironic. And we celebrate Labor Day by having sales. Shopping is how we celebrate in the United States.

As you think about the back to work and busy season that is Fall and the end of the year, how will you make the most of the remaining third of 2010? What steps will you take to get more business? Will you revamp your marketing strategy? Redesign your website? Blog more? Get on social media? Learn something new? Attend more networking events? I will be doing all of the above!

With that said, I wish you a great, relaxing and re-charging Labor Day Weekend. When we meet here again next, we can get

back to the business of marketing!



Social cues

Although I think many people who march to the beat of their own drummer are interesting, some folks are just plain clueless. This past weekend I went on an organized hike. Most hikers were dressed in hiking clothes of one stripe or another, except for someone my friend dubbed "Disco Dan." "Disco Dan" was attired in short shorts made of corduroy and of a peach hue, to match his multicolored button down shirt. Furthermore, "Disco Dan" was wearing non-hiking shoes. To say the least, "Disco Dan" stood out, and not in a good way.

Although "Disco Dan" was harmless and mildly amusing, it made me think about how people act in a societal context. Most people are adept enough to fit in. Some people, like Dan, either don't get it or don't care to get it, and still others are avant-garde, doing today what most of us won't do for months or years.

How is this a marketing issue? First, responding to social cues is important in personal marketing. If you are trying to get people to buy you, the product, you can't be out of touch with what is socially acceptable. For instance, if you are interviewing at a law firm and you show up in jeans and a t-shirt, you are saying with your clothing choice that you don't understand the law firm ethos, or that you are going to do what you are going to do, no matter what.

Secondly, observing and listening to understand what is socially acceptable and what is not, is essential when

marketing. I would say that if you have trouble with social cues you are not going to be able to create great ad copy or be in public relations or in event planning. Say you are tasked with writing copy directed at senior citizens. You use the terms that GenY appreciates but that seniors don't understand. You are being tone-deaf to the needs of your audience. Or a more common occurrence, you go for the intentionally hip or what you think is really funny, but that your audience just doesn't get.

Unfortunately, as more people lose the ability to interact directly with other people due to the over reliance on electronic gadgets like smart phones and gps, the less they are able to pick up on social cues. It is common to see people with headphones on walking around in their own personal bubble, and when they are looking for something, instead of asking a live person nearby they go to Twitter or Facebook and ask there.

The bottom line is that we live together in a society, where some things are more acceptable than others. When you want to be like Disco Dan and wear what you want because you want to, you are only communicating to the world that you don't care or that you don't get it. Either way, it creates a degree of alienation.

What are your thoughts? Have you noticed an increase in people who don't react to social cues?



Even good communications don't fix bad products

Sometimes a perfectly good product is ruined because of bad communications. But good communications will not fix a bad product. Eventually, people won't buy it, no matter how good your public relations or advertising or marketing is.

This past weekend I traveled to Charleston, South Carolina (which, by the way, is a great place for a vacation: lots to do, lots to see, good shopping and fantastic food). I stayed in a small hotel, which had a great location, close to many restaurants, the waterfront and sightseeing. I received an email from the hotel before my trip telling me they looked forward to my visit, and how to find the place. Nice gesture. After my trip, I received another email from the hotel thanking me for my visit and encouraging me to submit comments and suggestions. Again, nice example of customer communications.

On the communications front, the hotel is doing well. However, on the actual product the hotel offers, there was a lot lacking. The rooms were very small, with no outside windows. You could hear the phone ringing in the reception area. The included breakfast was on par with the Holiday Inn's (that is, nothing special). The place was musty. Some of the front desk attendants had a slight attitude problem and a lack of professionalism. Overall, not my favorite hotel by a long shot.

Bottom line is that if your product has flaws, no amount of communications will fix those flaws. You can have a snazzy website, great PR and excellent customer service, but if your product doesn't work, it won't sell.

When I go back to Charleston, I will look for another hotel.

Not because the hotel I stayed at did a poor job communicating with me but because I need a hotel where the rooms have windows to the outside and offers some privacy.



What are you all about?

When you visit a website, particularly for a company you may want to do business with, do you check out the "about" page? I always do. I want to know who I am dealing with.

When I write an "about" page for a client, I always concentrate on facts. In a sense, I am doing the journalism 101 treatment: who, what, where, when, why and how. In my book, that is what an "about" page should answer for website visitors. If you go to my website, my about page has my bio (the who, why, when, where) and my business philosophy (the how).

Another thing to remember when you are writing an about page: people do business with people. People don't do business with concepts or grand ideas. People choose you based on your qualifications (and maybe your likability, who you know, what you know).

Recently, I came across a business and checked out their about page. I wanted to know who was behind this company. And this is part of what I found:

XXX provides business integration solutions, our focus is on helping organizations capitalize on information management by designing programs that sustain business goals and objectives. With expertise in Business Process Management,

Enterprise Architecture and Knowledge Management; XXX are passionate about helping organizations increase customer satisfaction, providing solid frameworks for continuous improvement and aligning technology catalog with core business objectives. XXX merges the right technology solutions with sound information management practices to provide customers with smart customized, future-forward, business integration solutions.

I blocked out the company name of course, but does this description tell you anything? I have no idea what these people do or who they are, but I do know they love jargon. What the heck is a “smart customized, future-forward, business integration solution?”

As they say on Twitter, this is a FAIL!

The Caffeinated take-away:

To have a truly useful “about” page, go back to basics. Who are you? What do you do? Where are you located? When did you start doing what you are doing? How do you do what you do? Why do you do it? Answer those questions and get yourself a good description. It may actually help your business.



What does your Twitter stream

communicate

Lots of communications people –journalists, PR folks, ad people–are on Twitter. I am too, and I follow many communications types. You can get a lot of good information, and interesting facts from your Twitter stream. But you can also learn a lot about the people you follow.

What you tweet about: Obviously, what you tweet about shows what you are interested in, and what you are more knowledgeable about. If you are in health care, you may tweet about the latest health research. If you are constantly tweeting about personal stuff, you are communicating that your business is not as important to you as your personal life. If you never tweet about personal stuff, you are saying that you view Twitter as only business.

When you tweet: Do you tweet during the day? Chances are that you incorporate Twitter into your work life. Do you only tweet on the weekend? Timing shows how much you understand how Twitter works. Although we have the ability to look at a people's stream history, Twitter tends to be about immediacy. If you are tweeting in the middle of the night, you are saying you don't care whether people see your tweets, you just want to share.

How much you re-tweet: If you re-tweet stuff, it shows you are really reading what the people you follow share, and also, that you find it useful. You also are saying you are willing to share credit. If you never re-tweet, well, maybe you haven't found anything worth sharing.

Your Twitter stream really communicates a lot to those who follow you. Twitter is about building your network, and it is about sharing. I would argue that Twitter is also about branding. If you haven't locked your tweets, anyone can see what you are putting out there, and can form an opinion about

who you are and what you do.

What does your Twitter stream say about you?



Editorial: The Obamas need better communications advice

Editorial

From the start of the Obama presidency, I have been surprised at the lack of good communications advice given (or maybe it is received) by the president. Last year, the president irritated DC residents by saying they weren't tough enough about winter. Robert Gibbs, the current press secretary, has gotten himself in many a bad situation, most recently calling left wing critics of the president "crazy."

And then there are two more troubling, recent missteps. First, Michelle Obama chose to take a mother-daughter trip to Spain, and did so at considerable expense. The trip was roundly criticized as being in poor taste as many Americans are in dire financial straits. Kathleen Parker in today's Washington Post calls the trip "tone deaf." It's like Michelle Obama had no reality check, no perception check before embarking on her trip. I am sure that she could have found a great place to vacation, with her entourage in tow, in the United States. In my opinion, Obama's Spain trip is the result of a lack of communications counseling. Someone at the White House is not thinking in terms of public perceptions.

The other recurring and ongoing communications issue is

President Obama's apparent obsession with blaming George Bush. Instead of referring to the current GOP power base, Obama keeps blaming Bush's policies for the economic slump. After nearly two years in office, this economic mess is Obama's, not Bush's. Also, as Frank Rich pointed out in the excellent New York Times opinion piece, "How to Lose an Election Without Really Trying," many ideas that Obama is saying are Bush's are not. Again, this is a lack of communications advice. People are looking for reasons to vote for the Democrats, not reasons to vote against the Republicans. Most people have lost track of George Bush and are more interested in knowing what OBAMA is going to do.

What the White House needs is better communications advice. And stat. As midterm elections approach, people are going to be deciding to vote for Republicans or Democrats, and if the Republicans gain momentum, they may kick out Obama out of office in 2012.



Communications is part of leadership

Let me make a blanket statement: if you can't communicate, you can't lead. Leaders need, above all, to be able to communicate, because without communication, they will have no followers and no impact. This is why we prefer loquacious, friendly people as leaders. They want to communicate and they do it well. Tight-lipped, terse people do not inspire following. In fact, people shy away from this type of person.

Recently, a volunteer-run, non-membership based group here in DC had a crisis in leadership. The president gave birth and is on maternity leave, and her second-in-command is on paternity leave at the same time. There is a vacuum at the top. But what is most disturbing about this is that there has been no communication about this vacuum from this communications group!!! They have a blog, and it has not been updated since June. Impending motherhood is fairly predictable in that you know you will have a baby, and even near which date. If you are a leader of a group, perhaps you can make some plans for your absence and COMMUNICATE them? BTW, to my knowledge, this group does not have a Twitter feed or a Facebook page. They do have a group on LinkedIn.

If you don't communicate with your followers, your followers have no way of knowing what is going on. If they think you are no longer there, they will no longer follow you. It is that simple.

Leadership means being able to communicate, and means being able to plan for the instance when you can't communicate (this may be called crisis communication planning). If an organization's leader (CEO, president, manager, whatever) is no longer able to communicate, the organization must have a plan in place to deal with this. A true leader will have the foresight to make planning a part of his/her leadership strategy.

Thoughts?



A big, fat problem

This past weekend I took a little trip out to the beach in Rehoboth, Delaware. The weather was great and hanging out near the ocean is always relaxing. You see all types out on the beach but what struck me as I looked around was how many obese people were there. In fact, I am seeing more and more obese people everywhere. The New York Times reports that obesity rates are rising, so it really is no surprise. Pretty close to one out of three Americans is obese.

As the New York Times article points out, obesity is a national health epidemic. Obesity can be tied to many deadly diseases, including heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure.

Is marketing to blame for obesity? On the boardwalk in Rehoboth it is hard to avoid the aroma of french fries and candied popcorn. Candy stores are everywhere, and healthy food is hard to find. There were a lot of people jogging on the boardwalk, but there were many more people just sitting on the beach. Fast food and junk food don't really have to market too much—they just have to be available. Which begs the question, if healthy options were available (and made to look as tantalizing), would people choose to buy those instead?

Is there an effort being made by public health authorities to market a healthier lifestyle? I don't see any evidence of it. Obviously, it is hard to change people's habits. And when on vacation, people tend to want to reward themselves with treats like fried dough and salt water taffy. How many people want to use vacation to start a healthy eating plan? Not many—because it is not appealing.

If marketing has a fault in the obesity epidemic, is that not enough is being done to market healthy choices, or the benefits of NOT being obese. Or perhaps, more should be done

to show people the MORTAL DANGERS of obesity. It is not just about looks—our society certainly markets thinness as an equivalent to beauty—but about health. Fat people are at risk, and the sad thing is they can do something about it: eat less, exercise more.

What are your thoughts? How can society convince people to stop piling on the pounds?

