

Customer communications is part of marcom

Marketing communications is a large, unwieldy term. It covers a bunch of stuff, from public relations to advertising, to printed materials and trade show displays. Really, marketing communications is any communications that helps to market your product/service/organization. This why you should consider customer communications also part of your marcom effort.

Let me illustrate how a failure to communicate with customers can have a marketing impact:

I ordered a book from one of the Amazon sellers (the individuals or businesses that sell books for cheaper than Amazon does). I have done this many times before, in fact, just the week previous I had received both a book and a DVD I ordered this way. I received confirmation on July 6 that the order was received and on July 7 I got an email telling me that my order had shipped, and I could expect it any time between July 14 and 28.

My experience told me that usually it takes about a week to get your stuff, and I diligently checked with my front desk to see if my package had arrived. By July 21, two weeks after the seller said my stuff was shipped, there was no sign of the book. I started to suspect that a) they sent ground mail through China or b) that they had never sent it at all. On July 24 I contacted the seller through their website. By Tuesday I had received no answer, so I contacted them through Amazon. The response was this:

Thank you for your inquiry. We appreciate your patronage and interest in our merchandise. Our records indicate that this order was shipped via USPS Bound Printed Matter, which usually arrives within 4-14 business days. This method is

not traceable, and we cannot provide a definite date for delivery. We apologize that there was confusion regarding the delivery times you could expect. The listing for each item includes a statement "usually ships in 1-2 business days". Although it does state that the item will be shipped in two business days, delivery may take 4-14 business days. We have noticed that the expectation created by these messages can create confusion and we are working diligently to correct this situation. Please feel free to contact us if you have any additional questions.

Sincerely,
Customer Service
Superbookdeals
AB

Notice how they tell me that Amazon is creating false expectations, and that they don't offer to do ANYTHING for me.

By July 28, officially the last day I could receive the package before filing a claim, I still had not received anything and wrote them again. This is their response.

Thank you for your inquiry. We appreciate your patronage and interest in our merchandise. Our records indicate that this order was shipped via USPS Bound Printed Matter, which usually arrives within 4-14 business days. This method is not traceable, and we cannot provide a definite date for delivery. We apologize that there was confusion regarding the delivery times you could expect. The listing for each item includes a statement "usually ships in 1-2 business days". Although it does state that the item will be shipped in two business days, delivery may take 4-14 business days. We have noticed that the expectation created by these messages can create confusion and we are working diligently to correct this situation. Please feel free to contact us if you have any additional questions.

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Look familiar? Same response as before. No attempt to resolve the situation, and no information whatsoever.

I got the book on July 29. The order, according to the invoice inside the package, had been processed on July 19 and had not shipped until July 21. The seller sent the package two weeks later than they claimed to Amazon. Basically, they lied. How likely am I to shop with these people ever again? Not very. In fact, I gave them the lowest rating and complained to Amazon about it.

Better customer communications would have nipped this problem in the bud. Say the seller wrote me and said we're sorry, we made a mistake with your order, and we were unable to ship when we promised. Wouldn't I have been more understanding? Of course I would. Instead, they sent me a canned response, taking absolutely no responsibility for the situation and actually blaming Amazon instead. Additionally, there is no good way to reach the seller directly nor a name of a person.

Customer communications are your one-on-one way to promote your company/service/organization. If you can't market one-to-one you should not be marketing on a larger scale.

Sadly, this turns me off from the Amazon seller program. It tells me that Amazon is not vetting its sellers enough and that you don't know what you are going to get.

Bottom line is if you want to keep your customers happy, do a good job communicating with them.

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Giving a speech?

For some, giving a speech is just part of the job. These people are constantly doing sales pitches or addressing the board. For others, giving a speech is an opportunity to establish their credentials or gain more visibility. In any case, not everyone is a good speaker, and some people have really annoying habits when giving a speech.

I was at a two-day conference last week and I heard A LOT of speeches. Some were good, some were fine and some were just plain annoying. Here is a list of actual behaviors observed last week. If you are giving a speech, please keep your audience in mind and try to avoid any of these!

Talking too loudly: do not yell into a microphone please!

Talking too softly: yeah, the microphone amplifies your voice, but won't help if you are whispering. Besides, to me talking softly means that you are unsure of yourself.

Sounding unsure: mostly this happens when you end each and every sentence with a question mark, so your speech sound like this: Hi? Today I am going to be talking about widgets? Widgets are the fastest growing segment in the market?

Sounding too sure: also known as sounding arrogant or dismissive.

Self promoting: say you are asked to talk about literature in the eighteenth century, but all you talk about is the book you just wrote, inspired by the 18th century.

Being off-topic: you were given a topic, try to address it. No one came to hear your views on extra-terrestrials if the topic

was the planetary system.

Hogging the spotlight: if you are speaking on a panel, that means the other people get to speak to. If you are told you have five minutes, we should not still be hearing from you fifteen minutes later.

Not answering questions: this applies to speeches that have an audience Q&A component. If you don't know the answer to a question, it is OK to say that you don't know. It is not OK to go off on a tangent or ignore the content of the question and add more time to your speech.

Do you have any pet peeves about speeches? Any advice? Please share in the comments.



Is the lack of crisis PR to blame for brand failure?

Yesterday, I talked about nightmare CEOs. And today, I came across two very good business articles, one about the biggest brand disasters of the year, and the other about the decline in crisis PR. It seems to me that perhaps the lack of good crisis communications strategy is directly to blame for these brand failures.

Daily Finance lists a top ten list of brand disasters, which include:

- BP
- Goldman Sachs

- Toyota
- Google

Each of these companies had plenty of headlines this year, most of them negative. But what made each of their particular situations worse was the inappropriate reactions from their CEOs, and their response to the situation.

It seems fairly clear to me that although the situations that each company faced were bad, the public response to the situations made the situations even worse. In Toyota's case, the first response to reports of accidents tied to flaws in their vehicles was DENIAL. Toyota insisted for some time that there was nothing wrong with their vehicles, that the people were somehow to blame. Then, they insisted that small fixes were needed—like with the floor rugs (come on, the floor rugs cause sudden acceleration?). Finally, they had to face the music as the government stepped in with all sorts of evidence, but the damage was already done.

According to Matthew DeBord, writing in Big Money, the problem may lie in the 24-7 Internet news cycle, and the inability of PR firms to adapt to the new realities. He writes:

But now, the new crisis paradigm is spinning hopelessly in the dark. By mid-2010, the stories were changing too rapidly to control, much less revise. Like a violent postmodern vortex, the bad news sucked down all who struggled to escape it. Unsurprisingly, the Internet is to blame. But it goes beyond the 24/7 news-and-comment cycle, and forces the PR world to confront something far more disruptive—and something that will undercut its \$700-per-hour fees.

The lesson now for companies that screw up is that you really have no chance: The currents are against you from the get-go. The courts of Twitter and online video sharing and the forming of Facebook groups to deplore the transgressions of an enterprise will overwhelm even the most crafted crisis

battle plan. The profession, quite simply, is at a crossroads. And it isn't in a position to ride out the bumps, because it's up against the kind of high-altitude turbulence that can shred the airframe.

There is no doubt that with Twitter, YouTube, blogs and the rest, bad news travels fast, faster than good news for sure! No news is not good news—it is an opportunity for bad news to stay at the top of people's minds.

Companies and organizations who want to avoid first-class meltdowns must invest in crisis planning and strategizing. If the big names like Toyota and BP can suffer the erosion from bad news, what makes smaller companies think they will survive a crisis?



When your CEO is giving you PR nightmares

What do you do when your CEO is giving you lots of PR problems? We've been seeing a slew of PR missteps by CEOs, from Tony Hayward of BP to Ben Baldanza of Spirit Airlines.

Ben Baldanza seems to be quite the character. He recently said that luggage is not essential when traveling, and this is why Spirit is now charging for bringing carry-ons on board. BudgetTravel just wrote a post about it here (and please read the comments, which is where we can start to see the PR dimensions).

When the charge was announced earlier this year (it will start being implemented in August), Baldanza set out an letter to his email subscribers describing how carry-on fees actually make flying cheaper. Anybody who has a half-brain and has flown anywhere before knows that this is simply spin. When you have to pay to check baggage and you have to pay to check carry-ons, it doesn't matter how cheap airline tickets seem because you will end up paying more.

Steve Jobs recently showed a considerable degree of hubris when telling journalists that the way people were holding the iPhone 4 was responsible for the loss of signal. Huh? Inc. Magazine has a great article about this misstep here.

I am not even going to discuss Tony Hayward.

Unfortunately, many people in leadership positions do not have leadership qualities. These folks tend to be arrogant, often believe that they know best and that underlings should remain quiet. It is not easy to deal with this situation professionally, but it is nearly impossible to rectify from a public relations perspective.

These cases illustrate a real conundrum for marketers. The CEO is the public face of any company, and if he or she is saying things that hurt the company, what do you do? Chances are the CEO is the one with the ultimate power to hire or fire PR counsel. Or the person who refuses to listen to counsel.

As PR counsel in this type of case, you are in a delicate position. The best thing to do is to point out how the CEO may be affecting the bottom line. You may need statistics, like sales or stock prices. Make a case as to what should be done, and why it will be better. If your CEO refuses to listen to you, he/she may listen to outside counsel.

There is a chance your CEO will not listen to anyone and he/she may bring the ship down. Is there a recourse? Probably stockholders or your board of directors are interested in

remaining profitable and keeping the public happy. If no one seems to think bad PR is a problem, well then you really have a problem!

What do you think?

How what you don't say or do can hurt you

Sometimes it's what you don't do or say that hurts you.

This is what I am talking about:

- When you don't say thank you
- When you don't acknowledge a phone call or an email
- When you don't respond
- When you don't say "I'm sorry" when you are in the wrong
- When you don't do what you say you are going to do

These omissions hurt you both personally and professionally. On a personal level, we know these types of non-actions lead to misunderstandings and hurts. They often ruin relationships. On a professional level, they are just as damaging, if not more, since there is a monetary aspect involved.

Let's take a few professional examples. Say you are a charity, and you received a donation (the amount really doesn't matter). You don't acknowledge or thank the donor. What are the chances the donor will **want** to give to you again?

Say you are a consultant, and you promised your client you would have the report by end of the week. The client is waiting on this report to make a big decision. You don't deliver. What happens? You've let down the client, and you

have seriously undermined your credibility.

You you get an inquiry about your product or service. You don't respond (excuses don't matter!). You have just lost potential business.

Perhaps you are overworked and overwhelmed. Perhaps the message got lost. Perhaps you just didn't think about it. In the end, no matter what the reason or excuse is, the result is the same. Not saying or doing or not being civil and polite creates a perception about you, about what you value, about how you interact with others.

Perhaps you just don't care how you are perceived. However, if you don't care about perceptions, then you shouldn't be in marketing communications.

MarCom is about creating positive perceptions for the product/service/organization/cause we are promoting. Being civil, being responsive, showing you care are part and parcel of creating positive perceptions.

What do you think? Have you lost business because you didn't say or do what you should have said or done?



Some non-connected thoughts

This is not a post about marketing communications per se, but it does have to do with communications. This is also not in any particular order.

Heads in the sand

I wrote a few days ago about my stay in a Rochester hotel that did not live up to its advertising. Like I said then, there was nothing WRONG with the hotel, but it wasn't particularly right. Since I made my reservation online, I got the following email from the hotel:

Thank you for staying with us at the XXX. We sincerely hope you enjoyed your visit with us and that we were able to exceed your expectations. We look forward to serving you again when your travel plans bring you back to the XXX area.

They "hope" they exceeded my expectations. Well, they barely met my expectations but are they interested in knowing what my expectations and experiences were? No. I responded to them that if they cared about my expectations they would ask for feedback, and guess what, I have gotten no reply to that.

If you want to stick your head in the sand about your product or service, you are doing so at your own peril. If you are wondering why sales are down or employee morale is low, perhaps you need to FIND OUT instead.

How you present yourself (or, there are other people in the room)

I was at a couple professional development events yesterday. In both cases, there was at least one audience member who, during the Q&A, seemed to forget that there were other people in the audience. In the first case, the questioner went on and on about her business and finally got in a question (if asking a question that applies only to you is asking a question). In the second case, the questioner shared a very personal, and in my opinion, inappropriate, story as a set up to her comment (no real question). Both these people clearly see the world as subordinate to their own personal needs and desires.

This last thought leads me to:

Self promotion, arrogance and the cult of celebrity

Although the rise of social media and citizen journalism is, in general, a good thing, there has also been a rise in the amount of people who think they are superior to all the rest of us, and now, because they can harness great followings and share their every thought with the masses, have become ubiquitous and often, quite obnoxious. I wrote recently about people who actually create Wikipedia entries for themselves (talk about arrogant), and yesterday, my friend and colleague, Daria Steigman told me about the hoopla surrounding a “famous” PR person and a comment on a blog. Read the whole thing here and draw your own conclusions.

However, let me add my conclusion, I think Kami Huyse is generally right that people have become arrogant, but what she doesn't realize is that she herself is being arrogant by claiming “I don't have time to Google you.” Why is her time more important? Now let me be clear—people who think that “Google me” is a response to other people who ask how to contact you or more about you are clearly arrogant. BUT, if I truly want to know more, chances are I WILL Google you.

In the end, it is up to each of us to give attention to the people we respect. If we don't respect someone or we think they are arrogant, then let's NOT follow them or read their blogs or buy their books or attend their parties or whatever. Self-promoting and arrogant people will eventually lose their followings IF enough people realize that just because other people think someone is great does not mean that he or she really is great (after all, lots of people liked Stalin ...).

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Are you keeping your promises?

This past weekend I stayed in a hotel in Rochester, NY. The hotel's website is nice, modern (although it has music) and tells me they have refurbished their rooms. In a tourist magazine that I picked up at the airport, the hotel has an ad that tells me that hot breakfast is included in the price. The website says only they offer "complimentary breakfast."

The hotel does not offer a hot breakfast. It offers what is better known as a "continental breakfast." That is, a selection of muffins and breakfast pastries, cold cereals, fruit and yogurt. They also provide a microwave where you can reheat a Jimmy Dean breakfast muffin or heat up your instant oatmeal. Nothing wrong with the complimentary breakfast but it is not a hot breakfast. Hot breakfast means eggs, waffles, pancakes and other cooked items. None of those were offered.

As for refurbishing—I think this means the hotel added new linens and flat screen tvs. The bathrooms seemed dated and nothing seemed particularly modern (certainly not the alarm clocks or the phones). The room had a safe (not something you see very often in a hotel). In fact, the hotel highlights the safe as a room feature, not mentioning anywhere that they charge guests \$1 per day just to have the safe, regardless of whether it is used or not.

In short, this hotel, while not bad, did not live up to its promises made on its website or in its advertising. It also failed to mention that something that they include in your hotel room is actually fee-based.

In this case, these lapses are not disastrous for the hotel. However, generally, saying something in your marketing that is simply not true in "real life," will result in broken trust

and lost customers. And yet, how many times have you seen ads that are inaccurate? Promises that start with free or assurance of 100s of satisfied customers. Marketers sometimes play hard and fast with these formulas, but if your product or service is not able to back it up, you are going to turn off your potential customers. It is that simple.

Live up to your marketing promises, and be transparent. Don't hit up customers with fees for services you seem to imply are included. Don't promise things you can't or won't deliver. Customers will resent these things and will be cautious in choosing to do business with you again.



Do you value your website?

Any business that does not have a website in 2010 is probably at a huge disadvantage. Back in the day, people used phone books to look things up. Not anymore. Google is the phone book of the 21st Century, and woe to those who are not being found by the search engine.

But you have a website, right? And not only do you have a website, you value your website too. You know it's as good as gold in getting business (or for nonprofits, supporters/volunteers/donors) for your product/service? But, too many organizations take their website for granted. They either don't touch it once it is up or they are always changing it up.

Take CNN.com for instance. The web site was redesigned a few months ago, and in my opinion, made it completely difficult to find the news, which, presumably, is what CNN offers. I used

to visit CNN all the time. Now, I don't. This is not to say that you should never redesign your website. You should. Your website should be as updated as possible. Say I go to a restaurant's website, and the only menu posted is the winter menu. But it is summer. You get my drift.

Valuing your website means providing your visitors with what they need and expect.

Do you value your website? How many of the following do you agree with?

- I had my website professionally designed
- I have had a third-party evaluation of my website to check content, ease of navigation and usability.
- My website is fully up to date
- I have made sure to make my website search engine friendly
- I have a list of keywords and I have used them on my website
- I have a blog
- I have a newsroom or similar in which I post my organization's latest news
- My latest news is dated no earlier than 2010
- My web host is reliable and I have very little if any downtime
- I have made my website social media friendly (share buttons, Twitter/Facebook links, etc.)

How did you fare? To really value your website, you should have agreed with most, if not all, of these statements.

Lisa Barone has written an excellent blog post: [11 Reasons Customers Don't Trust Your Website](#), which points out 11 things to watch out for. And according to Daniel Kehrter at Small Business CEO, one of the 13 Mistakes that Can Jinx your Business, is to let your website go dormant.

Value your website. It is a primary source of business.

Is the Washington Post trying to alienate subscribers?

Over the past five years, since I moved to Washington, I have seen the Washington Post decline as its price continues to climb. When I got here, you could get the paper for 50 cents. Now, it is 75 cents. Subscription costs also continue to rise. And yet, the paper gets smaller and more irrelevant. It's almost like the Post wants to get rid of its subscribers and print edition readers.

Here are several questionable moves the Post has engaged in over the past couple of years:

- Increased subscription rates and got rid of the ability to pay for more than 8 weeks at a time (there used to be an option to pay for 12 weeks, etc., thus locking in a price)
- Made TV Week opt-in and then charged 15 cents for each copy
- Got rid of separate business section and folded it into front section
- Created Capital Business "for subscribers only" and is charging \$50 per year for it
- Posts print content online a day or two before it is published, effectively making newspaper content available sooner to the entire world for FREE.
- Cut back substantially on copy editors and other newsroom personnel, making the newspaper rife with errors (grammatical, spelling and factual)

- Publishes the Express, a smaller version of the Post, for FREE

All these moves seem (with the exception of publishing all content online for free) seemed to be designed to increase the Post bottom line AT THE EXPENSE OF ITS BASE. The most loyal readers are those that pay to get the newspaper, and yet, the Post is basically screwing those readers by charging them MORE to get what others get for free.

Clearly, it is not a financially wise move to subscribe to the Post, so why do we continue to subscribe? Often, it is because of habit. Many of us still like reading a paper newspaper with our morning coffee. And some of us love the puzzles. Otherwise, the printed Washington Post has NO value. Everything in the printed edition is available online, for free. If I want to take it with me, I can pick up an Express. There is absolutely no financial incentive to subscribe. And the Post seems to be doing everything in its power to get me to stop subscribing.

If the Post continues down this path, it will reduce its circulation numbers substantially, which in turn will affect the amount of money they can charge advertisers. As ad revenue goes down, along with subscriber revenue, the newspapers bottom line will suffer. And then they will want to charge for online content. Online readers will probably not pay since plenty of other quality content is available elsewhere for free.

Can the Post reverse course? Probably not thus leaving us with a crappy newspaper we are paying more for...good thing some of us have birdcages to line.



Wiki promotion and self-promotion

Promotion is one of the four “Ps” of marketing (the others being price, product, place). You can’t market effectively without promotion, and in fact, marketing communications is all about promotion. MarComm people don’t deal with price, product or place, other than to give input.

So, to sell a product, a service or an idea, you will promote. Promotion could go many ways, from traditional advertising, to blogging, to a public relations campaign. That’s all fine and good. However, with the rise of social media as a prime promotion vehicle, we run into some problems. In social media, we rely on user-generated content, whether through blog entries or sharing thoughts and ideas via social networks. We now have the term “citizen journalist.”

Enter Wikipedia. Wikipedia is an online, USER-GENERATED encyclopedia. Anyone can contribute to Wikipedia. There is very little if any editorial control over content. Products, people, historical events, music and any number of other topics are covered over at Wikipedia. Wikipedia entries tend to come up pretty high in Google searches too. It seems obvious that someone looking to promote something or someone would add a Wikipedia entry. Right?

From a marketing perspective alone, of course you would add Wikipedia as a target for your social media/SEO/SEM efforts. It makes complete sense. However, as a consumer you have to be wary. If anyone can post anything on Wikipedia, then how accurate is that information? Can you rely on it? Should you rely on it? Are people questioning what they find on Wikipedia

and if so, how is that affecting Wikipedia entries?

I don't have the answers to this.

You have all heard of personal branding right? And personal branding has everything to do with promotion, and more specifically, self-promotion. You see people on Twitter promoting links to their blogs, to their parties, to their businesses. This is OK (although I have a problem with people who endlessly self-promote but that is another blog post). And to link it back to Wikipedia, individuals are now creating Wikipedia entries about themselves. Again, it makes sense on a macro-scale.

Still, perhaps I am being "old school" but a self-provided entry on Wikipedia is meaningless. A third party endorsement, like an article in a newspaper, has much more weight. Presumably, the third party (perhaps a journalist) did some fact-checking. If I can put down whatever I want in Wikipedia, what is stopping me from inflating reality or straight-out making stuff up? And worse, people think of Wikipedia as a real source for information, not unlike an Encyclopedia Britannica.

The bottom line is this: maybe using Wikipedia to promote yourself or your product is a good strategic, social-media-savvy move, but is it ethical?

What do you think?

