

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?



It's always on the record!

As anyone who has been through media training knows, what you say to a journalist is always on the record, even if you think it's not. When you talk to a journalist, he or she is gathering information, and whether you are quoted directly or

not, you have been used as a source.

Recently, there have been two widely publicized media gaffes. The most recent involves comments made by General Stanly McChrystal and his staff to Rolling Stone magazine. Those comments, widely seen as being proof of insubordination, led to McChrystal's resignation from his post as commanding officer of the war in Afghanistan.

It is hard to believe that McChrystal, a former head of Special Ops, would be so candid with a journalist not knowing his comments would make it to print. Anyone who has had as much exposure to the media would know that a journalist is always pursuing a story. In my opinion, McChrystal knew exactly what he was doing, and had his own motivations for getting on the record with his views of President Obama and the direction of the war in Afghanistan.

The other media gaffe also cost a job. I am talking of Helen Thomas and her anti-Semitic barrage, caught on video by a citizen journalist and blogger. Thomas, when asked on her views on Israel, did not hold back her contempt or her extremist views. Some have asked whether she understood the implications of talking to a non-journalist. In her fifty years plus of experience, Thomas must have come across a hand-held camera before. As a journalist herself, she knows that anything you say in front of other people can be quoted or at least, used as source material. Even if Thomas had not been captured on video, the Rabbi who interviewed her could have publicized her comments.

Because, as we said before, now more than ever, NOTHING is off the record. And all of us are going on the record all the time, on Twitter, Facebook, blogs and wherever else we are interacting. We need to be mindful that what we say can and will be used against (or for) us.

Your thoughts?

Advice you shouldn't ignore!

Last week was Digital Capital Week here in Washington, DC. The event consisted of workshops, meet-ups, parties and other events. It was well attended and well tweeted. As is now the custom, event attendees tweet out the little nuggets of shareable information followed by a hashtag, thus sharing with their following and publicizing the event.

Here are some that I saw:

“Be authentic.”

“Search your name on YouTube to see if there is any videos of you that you've forgotten.”

“Engage with your followers.”

“Blogging is hard work.”

My reaction to these on my Twitter stream: Really? Is that so? I have never heard that before.

On my Google Reader this morning, I came across this piece from HubSpot: “Responding to a Social Media Crisis: #Intuit Outage Takeaways.” Here are its four rules for dealing with such a crisis:

1. Practice what you preach. If you tout the importance of transparency, then make sure that you can be transparent during a crisis, too. For example, at HubSpot, we use trust.hubspot.com to show our portals and report on downtimes.

2. Respond fast, respond often. You're only hurting yourself if you wait too long before releasing information, and when you finally do speak up there isn't a lot of substance to what you're saying. Give frequent updates, even if the update is just "no new information".

3. Apologize for the right thing. Make sure you aren't alienating your customers further with your apology. They may be more upset if they feel like you are not addressing how the error impacted their livelihood.

4) Make amends. Try to find a way you can make it up to your customers. They are the backbone of your business, so it's in your best interest to keep them happy.

Read more:
<http://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/6101/Responding-to-a-Social-Media-Crisis-Intuit-Outage-Takeaways.aspx#ixzz0raltVJsj>

All these pieces of advice are fine. They aren't saying anything new, but we are supposed to think that social media somehow needs these rules. Being authentic and credible? Yes, you should be IN ALL ASPECTS of life. Engage with your audiences? Yes, of course you should. And the Hubspot advice to deal with a "social media" crisis? That is just plain crisis communication 101.

Social media may be new media, but the communications "rules" and advice that apply to older media apply here too. Perhaps because so many people are coming into media/communications because of social media, that so-called experts can recycle this advice and call it social media expertise.

My conclusion is that people are very eager to learn, but they are being snookered by the "social media experts" who seem to recycle advice and bring very little value to the conversation. So my advice, and this you should definitely not ignore, is to question any advice social media experts give.

P.S. If you need someone to tell you that being authentic and credible is important, then I really don't want to do business with you.

It's when you do it

Sometimes we are all about the how and why, and we forget about the when. When is just as important.

Timing can really make a difference in what you do. Yesterday, I watched a salesman be turned away by a restaurant manager because as she said "we are in the middle of lunch service." If your beat is restaurants, shouldn't you be aware of when is a good time to visit said restaurants? It seems logical that a restaurant will be busy during lunch and dinner. If you do nightclubs, you would not go after 9 p.m. Right?

The same idea applies to events. Plan your event for a time when people are able to attend. If you are trying to get busy professionals, perhaps daytime is not a good time. In busy places like Washington DC you can never really find a day that doesn't have an event already planned. You can't avoid all events, but you should avoid planning events too close to other similar events. For instance, a local medical organization may want to avoid planning an event on the same day as a local surgeon's meeting. There may be too much crossover.

Timing will affect how your message is received and whether its effective. If you invite people to an event with one day's notice, you are going to lose a lot of possible attendees. Similarly, publicizing an event too far in advance will guarantee people will forget about it.

Putting out a press release on a Friday is a good way to bury it, and in my opinion, doing it on Monday achieves the same

result.

So next time you are busy planning a communication strategy or an event, go beyond the what, where, how and why and think about the when.



What to do when there's too much competition

Unless you are in a highly specialized field, you are facing increased competition. Bricks-and-mortar stores are facing competition from Internet retailers. And goodness, if you have an Internet-only storefront, you are facing more competition than ever.

There are two big reasons for the increase in competition:

1. The economy. Because many people have been laid off/lost their jobs, many are becoming entrepreneurs.
2. The Internet. It is easy and relatively inexpensive to set yourself up with a website/blog and to promote said website/blog.

What do you do?

First let me tell you what NOT to do: nothing. Doing nothing ensures that you will remain less visible. Nothing also refers to not pursuing opportunities or answering inquiries. There is more competition out there, and if prospects don't sign up with you, it is easy for them to find someone else.

Here are a few things to do:

1. **Research your competition.** What are they doing that you are not doing? What are you doing that they are not?
2. Based on your research, **figure out what you offer that is different than your competition:** do you have better turn-around times, better prices, more experience?
3. **Figure out who your real target audience** is. Are you wasting time and energy by targeting the wrong people?
4. **Assess your materials:** website, brochure, business cards, blog, Twitter stream. Does anything need tweaking? Are you really transmitting your message?
5. **Network.** I know this is not new advice, but people you know are more likely to give you work/buy your product or refer you.

I'd like to thank Michele Lerner for the idea for this post—we were discussing the freelance writing market this morning. And if you are looking to buy a home, check out Michele's book: Homebuying: Tough Times, First Time, Anytime.

What are you doing to deal with competition?



Communicating better by design

Have you heard of Milton Glaser? Perhaps you haven't heard of him by name, but you certainly have seen his work. Glaser was the originator of the I (heart) NY concept, the co-founder of New York Magazine, and designer behind Ms. Magazine and countless other publications.

Last night I watched MILTON GLASER: TO INFORM AND DELIGHT.

What a revelation. Every communicator should watch this documentary to learn both how good design can transform, and the importance of communicating simply and directly.

Glaser rightly believes that design can transform the world, that better design leads to better communication. One campaign that gave him great pleasure was working on supermarket design—from the layout to the signage and the logo. He made it easy for people to find what they were looking for. We take things like this for granted, and we really shouldn't. How many times do we have trouble finding something because signage is lacking?

Glaser attended New York City's famed (and in fact on which the movie Fame! was based) La Guardia High School of Art&Music and Performing Arts. The high school approached him about redesigning its logo, and first he suggested changing the high school's name to LaGuardia Arts, as being simpler. And then he did a fabulous logo that he says can be sung. See it here.

I have seen people take short cuts with design—trying to save a few bucks or thinking it is no big deal. But design is a big deal. Good design will make communication easier. For those of you who have clients who think this way, show them MILTON GLASER: TO INFORM AND DELIGHT.

Things that make me crazy

We all have pet peeves and things that make us go bonkers. Right? Unfortunately, we can't always tell what will make other people feel like they are listening to nails scratching a blackboard, and sometimes our communications misfire because of it.

I wish I could say these are universal peeves and that you should avoid them at all costs (you *should* avoid them with me), instead I am asking you to think of what makes you crazy and what you would like to see avoided. Please be sure to share in the comments.

- Using words that you don't understand or saying something complicated when simple would do (like *utile*—why can't you say *useful*?)
- Having really obvious grammatical mistakes (example: using I instead of me or having problems with subject-verb agreement)

(Please read this entry over at [OpenForum: 5 Common Word Usage Mistakes that Make You Sound Stupid](#))

- **Capitalizing Everything Instead of Bolding:** more and more people are doing this in white papers and other texts. **Capitals are for proper names and the beginning of sentences only.**
- **Threatening:** If you don't do it this now... For instance, I got an email from the IPRA (a division of the PRSA-NCC) about an event, and then I got another email, and another. Then, I got one that said "final notice." Like if it was an overdue bill and I hadn't paid it. And then I get an email telling me it's my "last chance." Here's a newsflash IPRA: threatening me is not going to make me more interested in seeing Mike McCurry, who sold out his boss for the chance to sell his book. Nope.
- **Saying or claiming things that are obviously not true:** I am planning to write a post about this specifically, but what I am referring to are ads or brochures that seem to ignore reality. Like those Cox Communications commercials that claim the company has great customer service, when plenty of people can attest to the opposite. Or American Airlines claiming to be

empathetic, telling me they know why I fly.

- Insulting my intelligence: enough said.
- Excessive self-promotion: I see this a lot on Twitter and Facebook. When you feel the need to tell me how great you are all the time, I immediately think you are insecure. I used to follow someone who was very proud of her WeightWatchers progress. And that is fine, but she needed all her followers to pat her on the back too. There is a moving line somewhere between excessive self-promotion (and neediness) and genuine pride and promotion of accomplishments. Figure out where it lies.

What's on your list?



How to alienate people and lose customers

Some companies just don't get it. They actually seem to want to lose customers. Here are two examples.

Citibank

Just one day after I wrote my last post on alienating customers, I got a letter from Citibank informing that my credit card account is changing. But not to fear, these changes include several "enhancements." But the changes are not enhancements. They are making the card even more useless—no more picture ID, no more 2% cash back for supermarket and drugstore purchases, AND, they are changing the name of the card and issuing a new number. The thing

about the account number was in the last paragraph.

You know what this is: it is a way of further alienating me as a customer. Why? Because first, it insults my intelligence. I know an enhancement when I see one—it usually involves something positive for me as a customer. Second, it forces me to do some work. Now, I have to call places where I have recurring charges to change my card number. And third, it is giving me something I didn't ask for nor did I want AGAINST MY WILL, WITH NO OPT-OUT.

Verizon

Although I have few service issues with Verizon, when I do, it is a nightmare to deal with this company. Its customer service truly is atrocious. I dread having to call them for anything. I usually get a phone tree, followed by an inept customer service rep who then drops the call when transferring me to the correct department. Just ugh. So, the idea of adding any services with this company is unthinkable.

Verizon seems to think that if they send me enough direct mail, I will buckle in and get FIOS. So, every single week, I get a minimum of one piece of direct mail with an offer to install FIOS. This week, I got three pieces. This has been going on for two years. Every time I see a letter from Verizon it goes in the trash and I think what a stupid company this is. Spending millions of dollars on direct mail, killing trees and for what? If they had an inkling on how to get customers they would figure out what customers want, and work on serving those needs first (better customer service comes to mind). Instead of doing real work, Verizon keeps sending useless direct mail. How many people are signing up? I bet not many.

How to alienate people and lose customers? Keep hitting them over the head with offers they don't want, insult their intelligence and make them do all the work. On that end,

Citibank and Verizon, you are doing a great job.



Avoid Alienating (nearly) Anybody

Marketing communications is about persuading people that your product, service or organization offers something that is of value to them. It's really that simple. *How* you do it may not be so simple as there are many different strategies and tactics that you can use. Perhaps you will show the benefits of the product, perhaps you will make people feel good about choosing your service. But, whatever you do, you should not alienate your audience.

Businesses and organizations can alienate their customers and supporters by taking certain negative actions. Perhaps it is raising prices or cutting back services. Sometimes unpopular actions are necessary, which is why how you communicate those actions becomes even more important. In fact, taking a negative action does not have to translate into alienation if it is handled correctly. Perhaps, you work on making the case more forcefully.

Yet, how often do we see companies doing things that alienate their audiences? We see it often. Two recent examples stand out for me: Facebook with its privacy problems and Spirit Airlines with its decision to charge for carry-on bags. Both situations have been widely reported in the media, and both companies have done a mediocre job of explaining why they have taken those decisions. Facebook seems to think that what

benefits it as a company should benefit you as customer. And Spirit actually claims that by charging for carry on baggage you benefit from lower fares. Both companies insult their customers' intelligence, thus, alienate them.

Here are a few tips to avoid alienating your customers

- If you must take a negative action, explain it from your own perspective before the media/others do it for you.
- Don't underestimate your audience's intelligence: they can usually see right through a bad explanation.
- When you communicate, avoid being too self-promoting or too self-serving. Your customers and supporters are more interested in what you can do for them than in what you did for yourself.
- Be forthright and say what you mean.
- Research! It is amazing how many organizations and companies don't understand who their audiences are and what they want.
- Offer good-will gestures. If you've done something that is bad (cancelled a concert for instance), give your customers a carrot (make it easy to get money back, give an additional discount, etc.).

How do you think companies can avoid alienating customers?



What the Facebook fracas can teach us about marketing

As you have no doubt read elsewhere, Facebook keeps changing privacy settings. It has created marketing partnerships with

other sites, that now have access to your preferences and can customize their offerings to you. And just yesterday Facebook unilaterally decided that only Facebook Fan Pages with more than 10,000 fans can have customized landing pages, only to apparently back down today.

All these changes have a few things in common:

- They are surreptitious, behind-the-scenes changes that are not well communicated
- They assume what the consumer wants.
- They are difficult to understand and have no clear rationale
- The advantage may be wholly for Facebook with little if no benefit to consumers.

There has been a growing backlash against Facebook, although the site is in no danger of going under.

There are some marketing take-aways:

- Customers want upfront communications.
- Customers do not want to be taken for granted.
- Customers want to feel as if they have some level of control, especially over their personal information.
- Customers do not want to feel excessively marketed to.

Facebook is one of the few companies that could actually survive this type of backlash. Why? Because people like what it offers, and it is free. If people paid for services, then this would definitely not fly.

Next time you are planning a big marketing change or push, think of Facebook. Are you going to raise concerns? Will you have to backtrack and explain yourself?

