

Grammar rules again

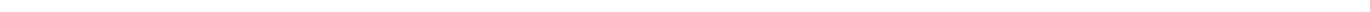
I think I hit a nerve yesterday with my post Grammar rules. I got the second highest number of visitors in one day to my blog in its two plus years of existence. And, several of you commented. First, let me say thanks for checking it out, and second, let me issue a plea to everyone who works with words, spoken or written, pay attention! Make grammar, spelling and proper usage a priority in your communications.

The response made it clear that many people are irritated by the lack of care we are seeing in English usage. Please take a look at the comments to the post to see what different people are experiencing.

What is not so clear is the reason behind the lapse in grammar. Is it laziness? Is it improper/insufficient instruction? Is it sheer ignorance? What do you think?

How do we change this? Mignon Fogarty, "Grammar Girl," gives seminars on grammar across the country. She has also written a couple of books on the subject. But how do we get people to a) realize they need to improve their grammar and b) learn what they are doing wrong?

Please let me know your ideas. I am so frustrated when I see my colleagues and otherwise educated folk use English so poorly.



Grammar rules

Yes, we all make mistakes. But the key is to realize our mistakes and correct them, right? And yet, I see the same grammar mistakes over and over again. And the people who are making said mistakes work in a language-based industry like PR, advertising, social media consulting and so forth.

I have seen the following grammar mistakes so many times I want to scream:

- Affect versus effect. No one seems to know or recognize the difference.
- Me versus I. So many people refer to themselves as I in the reflexive.
- Assure versus ensure. They mean different things, really.

I am currently reading Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing by Mignon Fogarty. I suggest reading it too. Or check out Mignon's tips online at Grammar Girl.

Like I said, we all make mistakes. But let's learn how to avoid them.

The bottom line is that bad grammar makes you sound ignorant.

What do you think? What grammar mistakes do you see repeated?



Consistency

Ralph Waldo Emerson is often quoted as saying that consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds. The quote actually says that it is a *foolish* consistency.

In communications, consistency is a necessity. Case in point, using your logo. If you use your logo only some times, you are not building your brand identity. On the other hand, if you use your logo all the time, then you are consistently working on reinforcing your brand.

If you blog, you should blog consistently. If you abandon your blog for months, your readers will abandon you. If you run a networking group, you should have meetings on a consistent basis. If not, then your group may think you are no longer in business.

I just read this blog post about obvious tips to save you time on Unclutterer.com. In communications there may be one obvious tip to communicate more effectively: be consistent!

Your thoughts?



Following up

We go to networking events. We chat. We shake hands. We exchange business cards. And then we follow up. Or at least that is what we are “supposed” to do.

Here’s my take: you follow up with whom you want to stay in touch with or want to do business with. Can you follow up just

to be polite? Yes, of course. Nothing wrong with it. But if your time is limited, then be selective.

Now, if you are following up, there is a wrong way, a better way and the best way.

The wrong way is like this follow up email I received:

Hi Deborah:

It was good to hear about what you do for companies. I hope to see you soon.

Sincerely,

(name of person)

The thing is, I never spoke to this guy directly. He got my card somehow. And it is vague. And impersonal. And gives me no reason to follow up with him.

Better is the following:

It was nice meeting you yesterday. Attached please find a brochure about our company. Please feel free to email this out to other business owners. We are happy to pay a 10% referral fee (minimum of \$1,000) when you refer a business owner to us.

Look forward to seeing you at the next event.

I did meet this person, who is giving me more information about her business. However, there is no personal note. She doesn't seem to say anything about me.

Best is something like this:

Hi Deborah,

You had great ideas and suggestions. Thanks for sharing the information.

I'll contact you in two weeks. As I mentioned, I am working on a XXX program for XXX. I'll share with you the structure that I am developing.

Best regards,

A little about me and a little about her. A firm follow up time frame, and something particular to discuss.

What do you look for in a follow up call/email? What are your

best practices?



Lessons from a networking session

Yesterday, I attended a networking event. It was your typical meet and greet with many real estate salespeople and financial advisors of all stripes. Many of these people believe in numbers, that is, the greater number of business cards they pass out, the better the outcome. I don't like this approach. Why? Because if I get a card with no context, why would I contact that person? Especially for a very personal service like financial planning?

Lesson #1: Do not do a mass pass of your business cards. That is not marketing, it is just a waste of cards.

The event was set up so a sponsor would deliver his talk and be able to provide more information (brochures, etc). The person who did this yesterday did a good job with his 10-minute speech. But his brochure and card were not so good. The brochure was printed on one side, leaving the other side blank. That other side is valuable real estate. There was no website listed on his business cards or his brochure.

Lesson #2 Use your marketing materials to their fullest potential. Be more creative and never leave blank space. Definitely include your website URL!!!!

Everyone in the room stood up and gave a 15-second introduction. Most did well.

Lesson #3 Have a concise 15-second elevator speech ready to go, and be certain to tell people why they should work with you. One reason is sufficient.

The organizer was diligent about reminding people about the low cost of joining this group, but he concentrated more on the numbers than the quality. He talked about all you could get for the price (lots of lunches and happy hours). He did not say that the group fomented meaningful connections or anything about the type of people who go to his events. And he kept offering add-ons—joining on the spot gave you a gift certificate, for instance. As one attendee said, it was like an infomercial: and if you buy right now, we will also give you...

Lesson #4 The value is not just about money. If there is no real value, people will not respond, no matter how good the money offer is.



Ads are powerful; differentiation is important

This morning's Washington Post is full of interesting media/marketing news. First is the announcement that the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) has enacted tough new rules on cigarette/tobacco advertising as part of the agency's new authority to regulate the industry.

According to the Post, tobacco companies will be banned from sponsoring sports and entertainment events and from offering free samples, among other restrictions. The FDA also tried to

limit advertising to text only (banning color and graphics) but a judge has ruled in favor of the tobacco companies, which the FDA is appealing.

Tobacco advertising and the federal response to it has always been fascinating. Tobacco is a legal product, sold and taxed in stores like any other product, but when used as directed, causes wide-ranging health problems (cancer, heart disease) not only to smokers but those exposed to smoke. The Feds have tried to curb the appeal of smoking by restricting advertising and putting warnings on cigarette packs. This has always raised the question of first amendment rights—after all, the companies that manufacture cigarettes are trying to sell a legal product. But the government is concerned that increased sales of tobacco mean increased health risks.

The point here is that advertising and marketing efforts, when done right, are powerful. They can steer consumer behavior. Personally, I abhor smoking and I applaud the FDA for stepping up regulation of tobacco marketing. To me, marketing tobacco is marketing death, yet the issue of free speech remains. The real issue may well be why we allow companies continue to produce and market a product that kills.

Another piece of news that is fascinating is that Christiane Amanpour, the famed CNN war reporter, will move over to ABC, to host This Week. If ever there was a least likely candidate for this position it was Amanpour, who is more comfortable confronting dictators and dodging bullets in war-torn areas. I think David Brinkley would turn over in his grave! Will the round table with George Will, Cokie Roberts and the rest continue? I doubt it. And I doubt that with Amanpour at the helm, This Week will be able to compete with Meet the Press on domestic political coverage. **But that seems to be the point—hiring Amanpour is meant to change This Week into a program with a more international focus. And differentiate it will, but will that also result in increased viewership? That is the question.**

Qualities of a PR Pro

PLEASE READ UPDATES AT THE END OF POST

In the last couple of weeks, I have come across a few blogs where the authors are complaining about inappropriate public relations overtures or of getting mass and untargeted pitches. I have come across a great deal of grammatically incorrect, spelling challenged and generally poorly written PR material.

I also have met several PR people who don't really follow the news or ever read a newspaper (including online). A few months ago I witnessed a gathering of PR professionals who expressed fear of social media, and resistance to change.

Today I came across this excellent and cautionary article, *Almost Everyone Gets PR Wrong* by Nick Morgan in Forbes, about public relations and public perception, and how PR folk just don't seem to know how to shape the narrative. Morgan writes the following:

Executives everywhere take note: Beware the power of the narrative. Stop keeping score, and instead look at your organization from the outside. What is your basic job, as far as the world is concerned? And what is the story that has developed over the years? That's where your PR efforts should be focused. That narrative has to be simple, consistent and all about your functional role in the world. You've only got one story. Make it a good one.

All this made me think about what makes a good public relations person (no matter if he/she specializes in media relations, crisis communications or strategic communication). Following a list of qualities a PR pro should have, in my opinion:

- Ability to use the language correctly (grammar, spelling, word usage), both written and spoken
- Common sense: being able to see what is important and what won't make a difference
- Interest in the news and the news business
- People skills and emotional intelligence (e.g. being able to pick up cues)
- Understanding what public relations attempts to accomplish (getting the big picture)
- Ability to network (meeting people and being able to connect with them is a learned and important skill)
- Eager to learn new skills and communication trends
- Seeing the possibilities and being creative ("thinking outside the box")

UPDATE: As per the two comments below:

- **Listening skills (not as easy as it sounds!)**

In short, a PR pro should be a great communicator and should be able to understand how communications works to shape perception.

UPDATE: Just read this great post about the 14 attributes for new PR practitioners. Matches up quite nicely.

What makes a PR pro in your opinion?



Where marketing ends

Obviously, as a marketing communications person, I believe that marketing is helpful and mostly necessary if you want to promote an event, sell a product or service or obtain support. If people don't know you are there, they can't buy from you or support your cause. However, at some point marketing ends and customer service starts.

Let me share a story with you. I have been going to a hair salon in DC for a bit over a year. It doesn't advertise much and really depends on word of mouth. They have my business solely based on my experience. My last visit was last week. I had to wait and then the hairdresser, who has been cutting my hair for a year, did not remember me. It was as if I had never been there. She was unfriendly and she made me late for my next appointment. My hair did not look good. I felt upset and in general, the experience was bad. Would I go back? Absolutely not. Would I recommend the place to anyone? Not a chance. So Fiddleheads on 17th Street, NW in Washington, DC, not only have you lost a customer but you have lost my word-of-mouth marketing on your behalf.

Could this situation be averted? Yes. Communication would have helped, as would a system where the salon keeps track of its customers, their preferences, when they've visited, etc. Can it be fixed retroactively? No. There is nothing that can fix a bad experience once it has happened. I would never trust my hair to this nasty woman who clearly does not care who she is working with.

My point is that marketing, including word-of-mouth marketing can only go so far. **The service/product/cause has to live up to the expectation or else you won't buy it or use it or support it.** I want to point you also to this article on Adweek, by Joseph Jaffe, "Customer Service is Key Strategy." Give it a read. Jaffe's point is that customers are lifeblood

to a business and serving them should be one of your marketing strategies (interestingly, the article changed names from when I read it earlier today, when it said Customer Service is a Key Differentiator).

What are your experiences? Have you ever been turned off by a service experience to such an extent that you never bought from the vendor? Heck, let me do a poll:

[polldaddy poll=2827189]



Timing is everything

Timing is everything. You've heard it when you walk up to a fast food counter, and breakfast is no longer being served. So perhaps it's more accurate to say good timing is everything. So many times it seems that had you shown up five minutes earlier, called two days later, or whenever was the "right" time, your outcome may have been different.

Of course, the right timing is also key in communications. For instance, if you are promoting an event, you want to send out calendar listings and email blasts with plenty of lead time, but not too much lead time so that the event gets buried. If you have an newsletter or a printed newsletter, you also want to make sure that any highlighted events don't happen before the newsletter gets to its audience. I know this seems like plain common sense, and yet how many times have you gotten an invitation that is not timed right?

Another aspect is when to send things out. In media relations, if you want to bury some news, you release the news on Friday.

Same goes for a press conference. Often, you don't reach out to broadcast venues during busy times in the broadcast day cycle (right before the evening news for example).

Good timing is about finding the right time to reach your audience, or when your audience will be most receptive. I would never send out an newsletter on Monday. Why? Because Mondays are catch up days, and people are busy getting back into the groove of the work week.

Consider your audience and what works best in order to figure out the right time to communicate.



It's National Grammar Day!

Today, March 4th, is officially designated here in the United States as National Grammar Day. How will you celebrate?

If I may offer some suggestions:

- Read a grammar book or my favorite book about punctuation: *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* by Lynne Truss
- Mind your apostrophes (here's a hint: apostrophes do not make a word plural)
- Practice gender neutrality, but don't use "they" to signify ONE person.
- Read a well written book, any book.
- Try to effect change by not using big words you don't understand (it affects how people perceive your writing and speaking)

What would you like to see on National Grammar Day?

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