

Social media has changed PR

This is not or should not be a newsflash, but social media has changed public relations. Yet many people are resisting.

Yesterday, I was fortunate to have attended a presentation on social media strategy given by Sally Falkow, and hosted by the PRSA-NCC, here in Washington DC. Ms. Falkow presented a case for social media (newspapers in decline, people looking for new sources of information) and gave some advice on how to use social media to achieve public relations/marketing goals. You can access this valuable presentation here:

[slideshare id=2655269&doc=prsadcsocialmedia-091205063755-phpapp02]

Although her presentation gave me lots of new perspectives and ideas, what fascinated me the most was the audience reaction. Specifically three or four people, who are decidedly old school, immediately started questioning Ms. Falkow. One person in particular, who claimed she had been a White House reporter, was quite acid about new media, saying “no one has time to watch video news releases” and “blogs are not credible.” Obviously, this woman is not keen on social media, and thinks it just is not up to snuff, certainly not comparable to old media.

These questioners actually were quite disruptive, but mostly, they were a sad reminder that some people will fight change. This is why so many organizations are having a difficult time communicating these days. Sure, I know that getting a clip in a major newspaper or coverage from a major broadcaster felt good and was the result of good media relations. But that is not where the majority of the audience is these days. Newspapers are dying, major news broadcasts are losing ground, and more importantly, legions of people have embraced social media. Although you could ignore this situation, you would be

doing it at your own peril.

If you practice PR, or advertising, or marketing, you **MUST** consider social media. It is not optional any more. It is not just a way to get young people or techies. It is where a large majority of people are getting their news and information. Railing against it, questioning its legitimacy and refusing to change your ways will only result in your public relations efforts going to waste. You will be left out in the cold.

Why should I hire YOU?

What do I need to know in order to make a decision about hiring you? That is what your ABOUT section on your blog or website must answer. On the rare occasion that someone is going to make a decision about contracting services or buying products from you, that person will want to know your credentials.

Here are a few questions that you should answer:

- How long have you been in business?
- What is your experience?
- Do you have any special credentials?
- What makes you special?
- Who are you?
- Where or with whom have you worked?

Recently, I was “shopping” for a doctor. The insurance website listing is not helpful other than to give me the distance the doctor is located from my house and where he or she went to school. So I checked to see if some of the practices had websites. I found one that was very simple yet answered questions I had: does the practice do its own lab work? What

kind of healthcare do they practice? What are the doctors' backgrounds? It all sounded good to me and now I have an appointment. I will let you know.

On the other hand, I came across a new marketing company's website. Their "About us" says this:

We are uniquely qualified "marketing experts" as our seasoned management team has a combined 50 years of success in executing revenue generating strategies across numerous industries. We've been the leaders of Sales, Marketing, Business Development and Product Marketing teams. We have made cold calls, designed and launched products, catapulted public relation campaigns, pontificated press releases, and of course, successfully executed hundreds of marketing campaigns for small, medium, and large businesses.

Our team not only creates the programs, they are on the front lines executing and analyzing them. However, our success isn't measured in our experience and ROI alone. We are customers too and know the importance of rapport-building and customer service. We treat each customer as honor, and mind our customer's marketing campaigns as they were for our own company.

Why not tell me who you are, with whom you have worked, and where you are located, for starters? Hell, I am a "seasoned marketing expert" myself, right? (Not to mention the excessive capitalization.)

What other things do you look for when you are looking to hire/contract/buy services? Comments please!

We still need editors

Perhaps we have been lulled into thinking that our writing is OK because we have spell-check on our word-processing programs. Or perhaps we just think that we make no mistakes. But we do make mistakes, and some are just awful.

Here's a paragraph from a story posted on the WJLA website, today, about Virginia's smoking ban:

For the first time, patrons will walk through the doors without smelling smoke for the first time in 15 years at Ireland's Four Courts in Arlington. Friday morning, work started before dawn.

How many mistakes can one short paragraph have? Apparently, WJLA does not believe in copyediting or editing of any sort. I have seen more mistakes on this one website than on any other major news website I visit. You know what it does? It makes me think that they don't check ANY aspect of the stories they post. How can you trust what they say if they can't even say it right?

Advertising is not enough

Say you want to sell something. You think: I'll place an ad to get buyers. Buyers will come, see the item and pay for it. Deal done. For simple transactions, this simple paradigm works. Take note of all the individual ads for used furniture, bikes and other stuff on Craigslist.

However, there must be more thought put in when you are trying to market for a large store, retail operation or national distributor. First, you are selling more than one item. When you are advertising for a larger operation you are trying to accomplish at least two things. One is to move product and another is to get people in your store. The idea being that if someone is there to buy 2-for-1 widgets, he or she may also buy some gidgets.

So your ad agency created a great ad, the pricing is great both for the customer and for your bottom line, and you've done a comprehensive media buy. All you have to do now is sit back and wait. Right? Wrong!

Retailers, from the smallest to the largest, have to be a bit more proactive. First, they have to make sure they have enough stock of what they are attempting to sell. Second, they have to have contingency plans if the demand is too large. Are you going to honor the same price when a new shipment arrives? Are you going to give rainchecks?

In short, advertising must be connected to your operations and customer service policies.

Let me share a misadventure I had at a well known office supply store (email me if you want the name). They had advertised a certain desk chair on sale. On the second day of the sale, I showed up at a store and wanted to buy said desk chair . The store was "out of stock." In fact, most every store in the area was out of stock. I had to ask the manager to locate stores with the chair in stock and both had only one chair. At no point did he offer to call and have the other store hold the chair for me. The manager also did not offer to give me a coupon or the same price on a similar chair. In fact, the whole experience was illustrative of terrible customer service, but also of the disconnect between advertising and operations.

The store had advertised a sale for an item that it did not have in stock. Perhaps it was bait and switch and perhaps it was the fault of the advertising manager. Whatever the reason, it did not result in a sale, quite the opposite, it resulted in an irritated potential customer who will think twice before going to this store for anything, much less anything advertised in the weekly circular.

Advertising gets people to the door but it does not make the sale. Customer service and sales staff make the sale.

The truth is advertising alone is rarely enough.

It's not you, it's me

Have you ever wondered why some ads work and some don't? Some ads don't work because they are missing crucial information or they are too convoluted or weird. Some ads just don't stimulate interest or excitement. And some ads miss their target completely by being placed in the wrong medium.

Yes, sometimes, it is the marketing effort that is to blame. Sometimes the creativity wasn't there or the strategy was not the best.

But (of course there is a but), sometimes it is what you are selling, your offer, that is to blame. In other words, your marketing is fine but your offer is not.

Many times I get dozens of emails advertising an event. The event is posted everywhere. All the correct information is there. Perhaps there is a great headline. But the date conflicts with something else. But the price is too high. But you just bought something similar. **The offer is off.**

Sometimes, what you are offering is not what the customer wants.

For instance, a local marketing association is having an event about LinkedIn. Another organization in town had a similar event just a few weeks ago. Furthermore, the event costs \$60. It is too much for me. There was nothing wrong with the marketing for the event except the offer didn't entice me (in this case it was the cost).

If you are failing to bring in people to your event or buyers to your store, examine your offer. Is the offer fair? Is the offer special? Do people like the offer? Don't blame your marketing until you make sure you have a good offer.

Sometimes you have to think, it's not you, it's me.

Do you have examples of an ad with a bad offer? Please share!!!

Your minimum social media presence

If you are in marketing communications – advertising, public relations, direct marketing, design or anything else involving promotion, you should be conversant in social media. You should know what it is and you should be using some social media tools yourself. How will you be able to recommend “new media” to clients if you are not on any social networks yourself?

I am not covering any new ground here, I know. However, I am

continually shocked when I meet people who are in the marketing biz and who are completely out of the loop in terms of social media. Or, what I think is worse, is people in marketing who have dipped their tippy toes into social media only to have Twitter accounts they never use, or incomplete LinkedIn profiles with 10 connections or a blog that was last updated in 2007. Do you know these people? Are you one of these people? Don't be!

OK. If you buy in to the paragraphs above let's proceed.

LinkedIn—your professional social networking site

- Set up your profile, and include a photograph of yourself. You can most likely use the same photograph on other networks as well. Make sure you have a robust description of what you do now, and an informative headline. If you have older profiles, get rid of them. Make it easy for people who know you to find you.
- If you own your company, set up a profile for your company. Include your company logo and website.
- Link your blog to your profile.
- Grow your network! When you meet people you'd like to do business with, see if you can add them to your network.
- Answer questions. LinkedIn has an "answers" section...see if you can contribute to it.

Blog already!

- If you have a website, that is fine. But keep in mind that websites are static and don't invite interaction. If you can add a blog to your website you will keep it fresher.

Twitter

- Set up a twitter account. If it is personal, use your name. If it is business, use your business name. Getting long and complex doesn't pay off. Remember, your name is

part of any re-tweeting, so don't take away precious characters from the 140 you are given.

- Your Twitter profile should have either a photograph of you or your company logo. Do not use the Twitter bird. Be sure to write up a bio and include your website or blog URL.
- Follow people. Make lists (the newest Twitter feature)
- Tweet! Have something to say.

Facebook

- In my book, Facebook is personal. However, you can and should set up a fan page for your business. It is a no-cost way of promoting your business.

To succeed in social media, you must invest some time, be consistent and be persistent.

To recap, get on one or more social networks already!!!!

Plainly speaking, it is better

What is better is to speak and write plainly, a lesson that is being forced on the U.S. Government according to the Federal Diary column by Joe Davidson in the Washington Post. To make that happen (I could have written: In order to facilitate the transition), there will be a symposium on plain language this afternoon at the National Press Club, held by the Center for Plain Language.

There is no doubt that the government (and many in the legal

community) loves to make things complicated. The more obtuse, the better. The more wordy the better. Passive voice? They love it. Big words when smaller words would do, check.

But, more disturbing in my opinion (since I already expect government/legal communications to be convoluted), is that marketing folk are jumping on the complicated bandwagon. This blog post, from the Branding Strategy Insider, claims that "Complex Language Weakens Brands." As the post says:

A serious impediment to communications is this constant upgrading of the language. No aspect of life is left untouched by the upgrade police. Not only does a term have to be politically correct, it has to be as long and as complicated as possible.

A great example from the post is that UPS went from being in the parcel delivery business to being a logistics company. How many people on the street instinctively understand what logistics is???? Not many, my friends. The only people who understand logistics are in logistics.

In any case, if you want to be clear, speak and write plainly. Using big words when small ones would do does NOT make you look more intelligent (if anything, it makes you look less so). From the Center for Plain Language website:

A communication is in plain language if the people who are the audience for that communication can quickly and easily

- *find what they need*
- *understand what they find*
- *act appropriately on that understanding*

I think the bullet points above are the point of ANY communications.

And you thought plain vanilla was the boring choice.

Propaganda

Last night, I was fortunate to visit a magnificent exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, entitled State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda.

As the curator explained, propaganda is inherently linked with advertising and public relations. In the beginning of modern advertising and PR, propaganda people were running the show. Edward Bernays, the “father of modern PR” was a propagandist. But propaganda is not inherently negative. Propaganda is simply the propagation of an idea, using various means.

Unfortunately, as with Hitler and the Nazis, propaganda has been used to propagate evil and incite violence and murder. It is a testament to the power of propaganda that the Holocaust was as widespread and supported as it was.

The Nazis understood the power of mass media, and they understood the power of symbolism and word choice. They understood that you had to dehumanize your enemy. They used words that had emotional appeal to the Germans of the day, like “freedom.”

The Nazis made radios cheaper and widely available, and then proceeded to use radio as a way to send out their propaganda within music shows. It became illegal in Nazi Germany to listen to foreign radio broadcasts, punishable by long imprisonment. So the way propaganda worked within Nazi Germany was to use all media possible and by the suppression of all opposing viewpoints.

In any case, the lesson to learn is that words are powerful. We that work in the promotion business, be it advertising, PR or marketing have the power to persuade and that is not

something to be taken lightly.

Numbers don't lie

Newspapers are in decline. It's a fact.

This is the first paragraph from a Washington Post article entitled "The accelerating decline of newspapers by Frank Ahrens:

"U.S. newspaper circulation has hit its lowest level in seven decades, as papers across the country lost 10.6 percent of their paying readers from April through September, compared with a year earlier."

The numbers were released by the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC), which measures circulation for print media across the United States. Some interesting (and sad) facts from the study:

- 30.4 million Americans buy daily newspapers, 40 million on Sundays
- Daily circulation has been declining since 1987
- In 1940, 31 percent of Americans bought a newspaper. Today, it is 13%.
- The top five newspapers are: Wall Street Journal, USA Today, New York Times, Los Angeles Times and The Washington Post (all except the Journal have lost readers)
- USA Today suffered the highest reader loss, declining by 17.2%, due in part to a decline in the travel industry

As fewer people buy print newspapers, fewer advertisers will pay fewer dollars for the chance to display their ads therein.

What will happen to the industry? More cuts and less paper, that is for sure. The New York Times recently announced another round of layoffs from its newsroom. The Washington Post is desperate to reinvent itself and recently went through a complete redesign.

Is there a solution? Your thoughts?

Revenue is good, but not at the expense of profit

I came across an item in Reuters today that says that Verizon Communications had an increase in revenue (i.e. more subscribers) but a decrease in profit in the third quarter of 2009. What this means is that the company's expenses are rising. Expenses could be anything from salaries to office supplies to marketing. One area where I believe Verizon is probably bleeding expenses is in marketing. I wrote before that I have received nearly five pounds of direct mail from the company during the past year. Multiply five pounds by millions and you will get a sense of the amount of paper Verizon has generated just to market one product: FIOS. In my opinion, this is wasteful and useless.

If Verizon spent as much on customer service as on their repetitious direct mail campaign, they might have a more satisfied customer base. That would strengthen their revenue and profit streams.

This is just my opinion. I do not work for Verizon or any Verizon affiliated business or with any of Verizon's competitors. My only affiliation with Verizon is as a customer.