

# Culture in communications

I just finished reading Malcolm Gladwell's very insightful *Outliers*. I recommend it if you want to think about success as being a meeting of opportunity, chance and ability. And, my friend and colleague Daria Steigman just posted a question about culture in social media on her blog, *Independent Thinking*.

Daria wants to know if culture affects communication. *Outliers* can answer this question. Without a doubt, the answer is yes. In *Outliers*, Gladwell talks about the Avianca plane crash a few years ago on Long Island, NY. The plane crashed because it had run out of fuel after circling for hours due to bad weather in the area. Gladwell thinks that if the culture of the first officer flying the plane had allowed him to be less deferential toward the JFK control tower, he would have been able to make an emergency landing at Kennedy. Instead, he was not forceful in telling the tower that the plane was dangerously low on fuel. I highly recommend you read the book to fully understand this concept.

Suffice it to say that different cultures expect different communications from different people. Some cultures are more hierarchical and others less so. Some are more cooperative. Some are more focused on results. Whatever the differences are, any communications messages must reflect these nuances.

In Spanish, for instance, there is a difference between the more familiar "tu" and the more formal "usted." In certain Spanish-speaking countries, everyone uses tu and it is considered old-fashioned to use usted. In other countries, if you don't know someone, you automatically use usted. Clearly, an ad written in one of the pronouns that doesn't take into consideration the norm of the country may insult or offend or not reach its intended audience.

Culture matters in communications. A good communicator always knows his or her target audience, and one of the most important qualifiers to that target is culture.

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## Why we blog

Many of us have blogs to help our business, express our opinions or other reasons. I'd like to have a more scientific approach. If you have a blog, please complete the following survey (it will take about 1 minute):

[Click Here to take survey](#)

Thanks! I will post results here.

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## Proving once again Mother was right

Mom was right about minding your manners. Although behaving appropriately and properly seems to be lost these days, it is still the best way to behave, especially if you care about your personal brand and personal marketing.

This evening I was at an event about social media. Lots of people were tweeting and in this context that is acceptable behavior. However, lots of people, especially a very obnoxious man behind me, were chit-chatting during the panel presentation. This is not acceptable. It shows lack of respect for the speakers, the audience, and very poor manners. Of

course, this is no way compares to the congressman shouting “you lie” to the president or the obnoxious rants of a self-absorbed, self-important rap/pop star (I am omitting the names because you know who I am talking about and I am sick of giving them any more publicity).

Manners and considerate behavior are in free fall in our society and we should be concerned from a personal branding and marketing perspective, among others. Why? Because someone who has bad manners shows him/herself to be very self-absorbed, even narcissistic. And do you want to do business with someone like that? In the end, we always want to do business with people we like and maybe even respect. Let me tell you, if I ever see the man whom I mentioned was seated behind me, I will not want to meet him. And why should I? He has shown me through his behavior that he lacks common courtesy.

**The takeaway is this: mind your manners to show the world your best self, and in the process you will help improve your personal brand perception.**

On Monday, Kami Huyse discussed this very issue on her blog, Communication Overtones. She came to a different conclusion. She thinks the overemphasis on personal branding has allowed character to fall by the wayside. I think society and culture have more to do with that. I was thinking about it this evening and really, I don't think you can fault personal branding at all. In fact, as I said before, if you care about your personal brand, you should aim to be civil, be polite. It is better to be known for your ideas, your experiences than for your crassness and lack of manners. Right?

What are your thoughts on this subject?

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# USPS: Marketing Disconnect

Have you seen the latest USPS ad campaign? It says that you can send anything that fits in a box, anywhere in the country for a flat fee. Fabulous USP. Great deal. Easy.

But, and here is the rub, you have to deal with the post office unless your handy dandy mail carrier comes by to pick up your packages. Folks who don't work in offices or who work out of home actually have to make the trek down to the post office. And guess what, at the post office you are going to have to wait. And wait. And wait some more.

I was at the post office today. There were at least 10 people in line. And only two clerks were working. The supervisor was not working. And one of the clerks was trying to get people to use the automated machine, with her help, which sort of defeats the purpose of AUTOMATION. At one point, only one clerk was helping customers. All I needed was one international stamp, for which I wanted to pay cash. I was frustrated but realized this is the perfect example of marketing disconnect.

What is marketing disconnect? It is when the marketing does not match the product. Let's say you see a gorgeous ad for a luscious chocolate shake. You go buy it, and the product you get is far from luscious, in fact, it tastes more like talcum powder than chocolate. That is marketing disconnect. What happens is that you will never buy that product again. And heck, you may stop trusting advertising altogether.

Same here. Why would you want to continue dealing with the post office if you don't have to? Which, is probably why more and more people are paying bills on line. The USPS is hurting. In fact, they are thinking of closing branches (which of course means that you will have longer waits because more people have fewer places to go). I felt bad for them until

today. The USPS is often a model of inefficiency, when it comes to customer service. I think the back end people and the letter carriers do a tremendous job.

For marketing to continue working, operations and products need to be in line with the offering. In this case, if the post office wants to boost the sales of the flat fee packages it must also do something about the customer service experience in its offices.

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# Business cards

## Dos and Don'ts

**Do have a business card,** even if you don't yet have a business off the ground. There is nothing worse than people who go to networking events and don't have business cards. Go get plain cards with your name, phone and email at the very least. When you are more set up then spend more money.

**Do use both sides of the card.** The other side can hold more information about your services. It is extra real estate space, use it.

**Don't make your cards super unusual.** Cards that are odd sizes, vertical instead of horizontal or folded are hard to put away easily. Most people either put them in a Rolldex of some sort or scan them. If your card is too small or too big for these applications it will get lost. I particularly hate vertical cards and folded cards.

**Do use a professional design.** When possible, hire a graphic designer to do your entire letterhead package. It looks nicer.

**Don't go too cheap.** Unless you are brand spanking new, don't

go for the cheapest black ink on white crappy paper cards from your inkjet if you can all avoid it. It looks, well, cheap.

**Don't use other people's cards.** If you work for yourself do not under any circumstances just fill out your name on someone else's card. Looks bad.

**Do make sure you have the correct information.** By this I mean, your card should have your name, company name, phone number, email address, at a minimum. You can add street address, fax, cell phone number, Twitter handle, and other info.

**Don't sacrifice legibility for information.** If you have to use a ridiculously small point size to fit in too much information on the card, forget about it. The point of the card is to let people find you EASILY, without the help of a magnifying glass.

I have said it before and I will say it again, if you are in business of any kind, you need a business card. It is an easy way to provide other people your information. Before you go to your next networking event, take a look at what you are giving out. Does it help or hinder you?

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## **You only have one chance to make a first impression**

Yesterday, I attended a networking/information lunch put on by a group to which I had never been before. The topic was business strategies. This was the fall kick-off event and I thought it was a good time to think about strategy as I move forward with my business and so forth. Well, the speaker was more interested in telling us about how he doesn't take

clients under \$20,000. He made the point that we should think about doing strategy and not tactics. No word about how to develop strategies for your business. He also took a bunch of self-centered questions from the audience. In a word, the event was disappointing. Not to mention expensive and not very satisfying.

The group put out a survey and I gladly responded that the event did not meet my expectations and why. The organizer wrote me and said that "he had no control over the speaker" even though he agreed with me about content. He asked me to give the group another chance.

Here are my thoughts.

1) Organizers do have some control over the speaker. It is not total of course, but the organizer could have reminded the speaker of the topic, and OUTLINED EXPECTATIONS FROM THE SPEECH, QUESTIONS AND TOPIC TO BE COVERED.

2) It is not enough to ask me to try again. It was money out of my pocket, and perhaps he could have offered a discount for next time or something such.

3) The organizer needs to be aware that you only get one chance to make a first impression. If you don't make a good first impression, YOU MUST make a better second impression or else all is lost. My second impression is that the organizer doesn't get it. He did not take full responsibility. Etc.

Oh, and when I arrived at the event, there was no name tag for me, even though I pre-registered. Nothing irritates me more at these types of events than having a handwritten Hello, I am... tag. Awful. My handwriting is not that clear and I think it looks unprofessional.

Ironically, this group is a public relations related group. What is the saying about doctors healing themselves?

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# Profanities

Now, I am not claiming that I don't use profanities. I do, probably too much, in private conversations or when I am in the car behind some incompetent driver. However, I never use profanity in a public forum such as Twitter or Facebook.

Profanities can get you in trouble. People have varying degrees of comfort toward the use of profanities. The point is you have to watch out for what you put out there. People will judge you. And some people get in trouble. A state senator in California was forced to resign because of some salacious comments he made, which were recorded and replayed. A few weeks ago, a local religious-sponsored organization here in DC used unnecessary expletives in its Twitter stream. I cringed when I read that. It is public, and it's on the record.

There is a self-important blog expert here in DC who has an Internet radio show. I tuned in only to hear him use an expletive every other word, apparently because he could. It made him sound dumb, and my respect for him is now non-existent.

In general, marketing communications should never contain profanities. Unless you are communicating with a target audience that enjoys using expletives every other word, you will offend someone, somewhere. Not to mention that using expletives can make you seem rude and coarse. In an age where manners are dwindling, it is important to be mindful of our PUBLIC language, especially language that may be etched in cyberspace, just waiting for someone to find it.

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# The value of a title

We've all heard of MDs, MBAs, and PhDs. We usually deal with a CPA once a year. I don't have to tell you what these stand for. You know. You are familiar with them, and therefore you understand their value. What about MPS? Do you know what that is? I don't. The point is that titles are important, but only if you know what they mean.

Would you go to a doctor that didn't have a MD after his or her name? Probably not. MD stands for medical doctor. You may need to go to a PsyD, which is a doctor of psychology. You may want your lawyer to be a JD and he or she probably uses the abbreviation to Esquire in his/her cards.

There are some titles that are obscure, like the MPS. Does it mean anything at first glance? Probably only to those who have it. MP, on the other hand, stands for Member of Parliament in the United Kingdom, which may be a pretty important title. Some organizations, such as the IABC (International Association of Business Communicators) and the PRSA (Public Relations Society of America) issue certificates like the ABC and APR respectively. The problem is that no one outside of a small circle knows what it means. In fact, you can be a business communicator or a public relations practitioner WITHOUT being accredited. On the other hand, you cannot practice medicine legally without your proper degree.

My point is that we all like titles. In fact, some cultures love titles. However, if you are going to use them as a marketing point, you better be sure that people know what the title is and what it stands for. I got an invitation to an event where the speaker is the aforementioned "MPS." Am I supposed to be impressed? I don't even know what it stands

for!

Anybody have a title they have seen and don't know what it is?

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## Gender and Message

I am sure you have heard by now that Charlie Gibson is stepping down from the anchor position at ABC World News and that Diane Sawyer will be taking his place come January. It was probably Charlie's time to go, he looked tired and somewhat out of touch. I am not a huge Diane Sawyer fan, although I think she will do well in the slot. However, is Diane going to be judged solely by her accomplishments? No. Absolutely not. She will be judged by her gender. It has already started. All the talk about how "historic" it is that now there will be two female evening news anchors, blah blah blah. I have news for all (mostly male) pundits and TV critics out there: It is 2009. There are women everywhere. This is not news. Katie Couric is in third place not because she is a woman, but because she has a bad delivery for news, in my opinion. Diane has much more gravitas. But it will be inevitable that they will be compared on things like appearance and clothing.

UPDATE: Carole Simpson opines that Diane Sawyer being promoted to network news is too little, too late. Simpson thinks that network news is in tremendous decline, and that with women at the helm, they may end up being blamed. Interesting take. Here's the link to her piece on CNN.

Gender is old news. For Generation Y especially (not that they watch the evening news) the idea of judging someone based on something innate like gender, race or sexual orientation is anathema. So here's a plea to all the old fogies that are

stirring up flames about how amazing it is that there will two female anchors—drop it! Concentrate on real news. Judge all anchors on their ability to deliver the news, on their editorial choices and not on the shape of their genitals.

It was Marshall McLuhan who said the medium is the message. Well, the message is the message. Here's a piece from CNN on how Obama is losing the health care fight because of social media. No, Obama is losing the health care fight because his MESSAGE is not resonating. It is not the medium, it is the message.

Thoughts?

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## **A reason to buy (plus photographs)**

Perhaps I should have titled this blog post "Back to Basics," because it is all about hitting the essential notes. When marketing anything, you need to show the potential buyer why he or she would want to buy something. Seems fairly obvious. And yet, how many times have you seen products advertised for which there is no clear reason given that would cause buyers to buy?

I got the following anecdote from Sara Cormeny (who is a web developer at [www.paperlantern.com](http://www.paperlantern.com). )Please note I edited slightly:

I just recently purchased a product on Amazon called the Standers Bed Cane, for my dad. It's a handle that you attach to the side of your bed, in order to have something secure and sturdy to hold onto as you get in and out of bed.

For people who are still having a hard time convincing a parent to get one, I noticed that they have cleverly added an organizer pouch, useful for holding glasses, the remote control, a pen, etc. More than one of the Amazon user reviews mentioned that her mom was willing to consider the Bed Cane because she actually thought the organizer was worth it, even if she insisted that she didn't need one of those cane-assists.

I thought it was really clever that the makers added this to the product – now it appeals to both parties who are likely to be involved in the buying process, and lets the user save face with a product that screams “old lady who can't get in and out of bed on her own.”

I was also impressed that the seller included five photos of the product, which were clearly taken and showed it in use with a person in the bed, in a close-up attached to the bed without a person, and two photos of it removed from the bed so you could see all the parts and see it folded up for storage. For me, all the photos made it so much easier to understand how it would work and how it would fit with my parents' bed, and that was really what sold me (along with the competitive price).”

What Sara is pointing is that there should be COMPELLING reason to buy and also proof, in the way of pictures, that the product serves the purpose. Any marketing should include these basics. Advertising and marketing should not always leave everything to the imagination. Being clear and transparent is often the way to go (more on this on my next post).

Thoughts? Have you bought something because the photographs made it clear how the product worked?