

Again with public perception

In today's *Washington Post*, Steven Pearlstein writes about Wall Street executives (more specifically AIG executives) who are so blind to public perception that they keep stumbling and looking worse. In case you have been avoiding the news, AIG gave some of its top executives millions of dollars in bonuses, while on the receiving end of government/taxpayer money. Nobody but AIG is happy about this. Currently and mostly due to the economic crisis, there is a tremendous amount of populist rage and ill will toward Wall Street and "fat cats" such as Bernie Madoff, who seem to be living the high life while many people are down in the dumps.

Yesterday I wrote about the Facebook redesign and many others have been writing/complaining across the blogosphere and in real life.

What do AIG and Facebook have in common? Not understanding how they are perceived and that perception matters. Both companies have proceeded with business as usual without so much a look in the rear view mirror. Perception is currency, in the most real, dollar sense, which is why the practice of public relations exists. Companies hire PR agencies to help them manage and in most cases improve the public perception of them.

Sometimes, as in the case of Facebook, there seems to be a complete disregard for how core audiences will react to news and changes. There are simple ways to prevent this: testing in the form of focus groups or surveys or even simple conversations with current users. It's about getting outside the bubble. Come to think of it, don't bubbles always burst? Soap bubbles, housing bubbles, tech bubbles to name a few.

In the case of AIG, it has much to do with Wall Street culture, in which greed is good (as the movie *Wall Street*

pointed out) and money is king. The more money, the better. After all, Wall Street is not some nonprofit organization with some altruistic purpose in mind. The whole raison d'être for it is to make money. So it stands to reason that the only thing AIG execs understand is money. Something soft and unmeasurable like public anger is a small price to pay. Except when it isn't. I think the fat cat era may be nearing its end (at least until the next bubble forms).



How Not to Make Friends

Well folks, Facebook has done it again. It has irritated its legions of users by changing its layout. Apparently the folks at Facebook are not too savvy when it comes to public perception. If this was the first time, then we could let it pass. After all, Matt Zuckerberg is all of 12 years old or something such. But this is the upteenth time the company does something that alienates its core public, and thus creates NEGATIVE publicity for itself. Case in point, read this blog entry in the Huffington Post. Facebook has been down this road before. And it doesn't learn. I really wonder if Facebook understands anything at all about public relations. I don't expect Zuckerberg to understand, but he should know enough to hire somebody that can provide him with communications counsel. If the company keeps doing stuff like this, it will become the Tylenol Poisoning example for the next generation (you know, how Tylenol dealt with crisis back in the 80s when someone tampered with its products...). This is not a crisis, per se, but it creates ill will. Some people will use Facebook less, and that translates into fewer eyeballs for its one major source of revenue, the ads. And do I have to spell out

what less revenue means? If so, let me introduce you to the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, now online only.

It is ironic in the nth degree that Facebook is an online meeting place for friends. Friends like each other, generally speaking, and I am not liking Facebook right now.



Time to sharpen your online skills

The bad news for print continues to pour in. New research from Pew indicates that many Americans do not consider having a local newspaper important. It is as if management knows this. McClatchy, the owner of the *Miami Herald* and other newspapers, just announced personnel cuts this week. The bottom line is that newspapers are hurting and many people don't care. Why? Because many people get their news online or from TV.

Recently, I read how a PR guy was lamenting the downfall of trade publications. I read this on his BLOG. He, like many PR folk, schooled in the "old" days, learned that to do media relations you reached out to print journalists. A nice, print piece in a trade magazine was truly a prize for the client. I also learned to do PR this way. And nothing was more exciting than seeing your client's name in the newspaper, especially on the front page. But the reality has shifted. More and more, the news is being reported on and broken online. Many people do not read the newspaper, and during the day, certainly do not watch TV. What these people do however, is access the Internet. Many offices allow unlimited Internet access, and certain folk, do their work ON the Internet. In any case, it

is time for PR people, and advertising people, and in fact, all communications people, to accept this reality.

Instead of lamenting that blogs now are main sources of information, and that no one is reading trade publications, you must ADAPT to the new realities. Of course, newspapers are not quite dead yet, but teach yourself how to use the online world. Here are a few suggestions:

1) Are there **influential blogs** in your area of expertise? Find out and follow. Not every blog is created equal. The PR guy I mentioned before made the blanket statement that blogs are unreliable. How wrong he is. Very few people would call The Huffington Post or Politico or the Daily Beast unreliable. Yes, they contain opinion, but it is LEADING opinion.

2) **Learn where your potential clients/customers/target audience goes to get their news AND entertainment.** After all, the Web is not just about information. Lots of people play games on the Internet, listen to music and find out about their hobbies.

3) Enhance your **web writing skills**. Writing for the web is not the same as writing for print. You have to be more concise. You have to be more choppy. People read differently online than in print.

4) **Explore multimedia.** People are more visual on the web. And the web allows for video/audio in addition to text.

In sum, stay ahead of the game. Nothing is to be gained from wringing our hands and lamenting the end of print. Instead, find new opportunities. I am sure in the late 1940s, PR people everywhere were concerned about the box in everyone's livingroom. By now, most PR agencies are experts at B-roll and media training. Right?



Overuse syndrome

You've probably seen or heard some words or phrases in ads/commercials so much that they have become meaningless. They do nothing to bring you in or tell you anything about the product or service. Yet, you will continue seeing and hearing them. Why? Because copywriters and in certain cases the advertising manager is enamored of the word or words and can't think of others.

At the top of my list of most overused words in advertising (and thus most meaningless) is the word **unique**. You've heard things like "a unique product," "unique way," etc. BTW, this is also overused in PR. Very few things in this world are unique, and then ad folk decide that some things are not only unique, but truly unique. Truly? (as opposed to fakely?). Other words/phrases that are overused as to become meaningless are: special, best, time of your life, out of the box, outside the lines, and so on.

If you find yourself about to use an overused phrase, think to yourself, is this a cliché? What other thing can be highlighted about my product? What is its USP—and that can't be that it is unique, but what **MAKES** it unique. No, it is not easy, and that is why we see these words and phrases used over and over. But if you want your materials to communicate the essence of what you are trying to sell, then you will benefit from being unique in avoiding this word.

What are your most overused words?



Going online and staying on message

Two separate items caught my attention this morning on Yahoo! News.

First, the Seattle Post-Intelligencer may become an online-only newspaper. Its owner, Hearst, has been unable to find a buyer and had threatened to close down the paper completely. Read the story [here](#).

The second item has to do with President Obama. Apparently, he NEVER gives any speech, to large or small audiences, without using a teleprompter. According to the article (found on Yahoo! but originally from Politico.com), he wanted to wean himself off this habit during the campaign, but when he has given a speech without the help of visual aids, he has stumbled. His aides say it is especially important during this time to not mess up. I find it interesting that everyone compliments Obama's oratory, but the truth is he only gives good speeches when he can read them (they are canned). He has shown what happens when he ad-libs: he screws up. A few weeks ago I wrote about him speaking off the cuff, and now I know he truly has a problem being casual.

So, the moral of these stories is simple. The future of print is online and it is important to stay on message.

Everything Must Go!

As I was driving up Wisconsin Avenue, fairly congested and busy road here in Bethesda, I saw those yellow signs plastered in the windows of two stores: Store Closing! Going Out of Business! Everything Must Go! It got me thinking about what message that sends us. On the one hand, the bargain hunter in us always goes into alert mode when we see those blaring signs. Perhaps we can get a great deal. And that is the main reason those signs go up, and are so prominent. But, if we are not shopping say, for Oriental rugs, then what do we think when we see those signs? I, for one, see them as the tangible signs of the economic recession. And I think that it adds to the burdens of the troubling economic news we see every day. It adds to the perception that business is buckling completely under the strain of the economic downturn. It also makes you feel it is everywhere. Another bad sign (sorry for the inevitable play on words) is all the For Lease signs in now empty store windows. Restaurants and retailers are closing their doors and all the landlords can do is post signs. But if you see too many For Lease signs on one block or area, what do you think?

What do you think about this? Should businesses blare that they are closing?

Update: On Reuters I found a story on what a town in England is doing about empty shop windows: displaying art. I tried to link here but could not.

Happy Grammar Day!

I love this! Check out the National Grammar Day website. I especially like the Top Ten Grammar Tips. CRUCIAL reading for anyone who writes for a living (or just writes).

Thanks to Kristen King for tweeting and blogging about this.



It's all in the details

Print ads need to work hard for you. They must grab your attention and then they must tell you something interesting. Lastly, they should motivate action. Generally speaking, this is the AIDA model (attention, interest, desire, action). It is not always easy to do all this within the constraints of a small space. If you are a small business, chances are you can't afford a full page, or even a half page. So you have to pack it in to small ads. The smaller the ad the more you have to think about what you write.

I came across an ad for a ballet studio in a local women's magazine. The headline says: "4 Week Introductory Sessions \$30." That left me thinking—does this mean four weeks for \$30? How many classes per week? Does the introductory session last four weeks? Already not clear.

The body copy goes like this:

Teen & Adult Classes

Jazz, Ballet, Pilates, Zumba, Musical Theater

Just for you! This wonderful program will ignite your passion for dance and exercise. Our extraordinary teachers will guide you every step of the way with a specialized curriculum in our lovely studios. Join us in class! (Telephone number and email address follow).

OK. What is missing here? LOCATION! From the phone, I know it is located in Maryland, but that could be anywhere in a 30-mile radius. No website either—I can figure it out from the email. Basically, missing key details.

What about the copy? Well, its like someone looked up adjectives and strung them all together in a sentence: wonderful, extraordinary, lovely, specialized. Those meaningless (and overused) words take up valuable real estate. Also, the copy refers to a (single) program, yet they tell me they offer at least five different types of classes.

My conclusion is that this ad does not work. If you are a small business, and you are going to spend money on advertising, think about what you want to accomplish. Of course, a professional can help you with this, but using some common sense is always helpful.

UPDATE: I checked out the studio's website, and it turns out they have multiple locations. However, the website was not updated to reflect the aforementioned classes. If you are going to start running advertising, you better have information to back it up. Don't make potential customers work so hard to find out!!!!



The death of newspapers

We've spoken about it before on this blog, and the bad news for newspapers continues to come in. As you probably know, the *Rocky Mountain News*, Colorado's oldest newspaper, ceased publication as of Friday (Feb. 27). Add to that, the continual bad news concerning all print media, and you know that the outlook for newspapers in particular, and print media in general, is not good. The reasons boil down to: 1) fewer advertisers/less ad dollars; 2) the Internet and 3) the environment (and perhaps not in that order). We've seen the print news industry has been battered by reductions in advertising, and also, in reductions in people buying the print edition since they can get most content for free online. And some people are not buying paper because of the environmental consequences. So there you have it— we know the reasons why print media is going to be gone sooner rather than later. But how will we get our news if there are no newspapers?

In today's *Washington Post* there are two articles I'd like to bring to your attention. In one, Howard Kurtz, the Post's media commentator, discusses this phenomenon in detail. And another, by Marc Fisher, has to do with the lack of reporters covering Washington news. Indeed, this is the problem. If there are no newspapers, there are no reporters. With no reporters, there is no news.

Of course, part of the answer is adaptation. Newspapers will have to figure out a revenue stream from the online versions of their products and they will have to adapt what was essential reporting for print to reporting for the Internet age. However, the issue of advertising and paying for content will be just as relevant for the online versions of newspapers. If advertisers are cutting back, they are cutting back across the board. And if people are watching their pennies, they will also not pay for content.

Well, time will tell. In the meantime, I will continue to read my print newspaper as long as it continues to exist. And I will also read it and other newspapers online (after all, I am a news junkie). What will you do?

[poll daddy poll=1413884]



DIY and other economic realities

In the midst of economic crisis, we don't flaunt wealth or advertise luxury goods. Instead, we emphasize savings and value. A few weeks ago, I wrote about banks emphasize how solid they are, and how some retailers like Walmart are running campaigns about saving. In fact, Walmart is currently running a commercial that talks about eating in as a saving strategy (and you can get all your ingredients at Walmart). And in today's *Washington Post* there is an article that says Americans are doing more things for themselves, things they used to pay someone else to do. Things like mowing the lawn, walking the dog, dying hair, and others. The Post reports on one retailer that is using the trend in its advertising: Target, with its "brand new day" campaign. Target's advertising has consistently been cutting-edge. In the ads, which you may have seen, against a catchy tune, Target shows you how several products it carries can be used to save money. It is clever and it is really responsive to the culture.

In general, advertisers are most definitely acknowledging the new economic realities. More and more I see the word "save" or "savings" in ads, across the board. Big Lots is running an ad

showing a couple who bought a dining set for a lot less than it would have cost elsewhere. So basically the theme is you can save money but please buy from us. I wonder what advertising was like during the Great Depression. It must have been similar, putting emphasis on value and savings. If anyone has any examples, please share in the comments.

