

# When perception can be dangerous

According to an article in the New York Times, people perceive diabetes as a disease that is not as serious as heart disease or cancer. Apparently this perception is wrong and can be deadly. Diabetes is very serious and has many ill effects on the body.

The story illustrates just how important communication can be in educating people about disease and treatment. But it also shows that some diseases face a branding problem. Diabetes has not been properly “branded” as a deadly disease. We all know cancer is serious, but we don’t feel the same about diabetes. I will be interested to see what the American Diabetes Association does, from a communications standpoint to communicate the seriousness and change this misperception.

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## Who needs book reviews?

Marketing books is tough. So many get published and in order to make a profit, the publishers have to sell quite a number. Good reviews help tremendously. Word of mouth, author talks, buzz...all help to sell a book. If an author is not established, he/she faces a long road ahead. Of course, an Oprah review catapults any book to the top of the heap. Today, however, I saw a posting on Craig’s List that really amazed me. An author is trying to create buzz/readership for his book via social networking. The deal is that you write him, he sends you a copy of his book and you review and share it with your social network and his social network. According to him, the return is that

you make lots of new contacts, and obviously for him, the return is that he gets you and your contacts as potential book buyers and some self-created buzz. I haven't seen it before but I bet this is the new it thing to do for book publishers and writers. Increasingly, we are skipping the middleperson and going to the masses. Is this really what Web 2.0 is aiming for? If you've read Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*, you know that the mavens are the ones who have the info who they pass to the salespeople who in turn use connectors to get the word out to a larger audience. I can see it now—through Twitter hundreds of people get updated that so and so just read It Book and they now can get on their iPhone and order it directly from Amazon. The book shoots up the charts and now we have a new bestseller.

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## Bags Fly Free

Yes they do—on Southwest. What a great campaign for them. As the “legacy” carriers tack on more and more fees, cut flights, increase fares and generally screw the passenger, Southwest is going gangbusters (relatively speaking). They are actually adding routes and eschewing bag fees. Who do you think will keep or increase its customer base?

On the other hand, American cut all flights to Albany, NY and is charging \$30 roundtrip for the first checked bag, \$50 for the second. Additionally, they have added many fees and surcharges for everything from checking odd-sized bags, flying with a pet and changing your ticket.

I fail to see the marketing sense in what the large carriers are doing. If you are hurting for money, do you do everything you can to make sure your customers think twice about doing

business with you? If what you are doing is ridiculed by many, and fodder for anger, is this not a public relations nightmare? What good news are you hearing about the airlines? Is there any additional perk that is being given to passengers who are paying through the nose? Why would you fly if you can drive for less money? Bottom line is that Southwest seems to get it and American, et al just don't. All you have to do is look at JetBlue. They started flying as the other airlines had started cutting back on the perks of travel. JetBlue gave passengers a real alternative, that cost less and get this: was more comfortable and had more amenities. This made JetBlue an extremely popular airline. In fact, the only reason JetBlue is not the biggest airline, in my opinion, is that they travel to secondary airports.

I just read an article on CNN regarding the fees and cutbacks. The article also quotes travel experts who think the fares will keep climbing. I wonder if the airlines will be forced to slow down fare increases and nickel and dime if enough customers say no way. Southwest is definitely capitalizing on these sentiments and running an enticing campaign plus putting in place some smart operational plans.

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## **Do you buy celebrity?**

If a celebrity you admire is touting a product, do you buy it? Apparently, you do. Today, the New York Times has a very interesting article about celebrity endorsements. It discusses among other items, Totes' (umbrella makers) decision to use Rihanna (pop singer) as a celebrity endorser. Rihanna had a hit song called, aptly enough, Umbrella, which made Totes' executive think this was a good match.

I think celebrity endorsements are overrated. The article talks about Nicole Kidman appearing for Chanel #5 and Ellen Degeneres appearing for American Express. I like both these actresses yet I would not get either product. I happen to think the AmEx ads are great—always entertaining. It boils down to relevance and need. I don't need another credit card, so it is irrelevant that Ellen hawks AmEx. Sometimes, I just don't believe the celebrity actually uses the product. You are going to tell me that Queen Latifah uses Cover Girl? Or that Jennifer Love Hewitt uses Hanes? Please! One of the most annoying ads on TV today, in my opinion, is the Jamie Lee Curtis ad for Danon Activia. Why on earth is this a good idea?

Celebrity endorsements are almost a way to get rid of advertising creativity. Here, look, this celebrity uses the product, and so should you. So the adoring masses go and buy the product. That is the thought process the marketing execs are using. Instead, a creative team would have to think of all the great product attributes and come up with an interesting/funny/smart way to promote the product. Hmm...which is more labor intensive?

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## **The branding that goes beyond**

We may tend to think of branding as limited to logos, ads, boilerplates in press releases, corporate identity kits that define colors on websites, or any number of marketing tools that are used to create a cohesive image. Of course, that is the part of branding that a marketing communications person would be involved with. But there is a part of branding that is more elusive but I think as important: the front lines of your organization or company. What do I mean by front lines? I mean the first impression that your company gives a visitor

when he or she is visiting in person. The front line is the receptionist, the waiting area or lobby, the building, the office, whatever the visitor sees first. You can learn a lot about a company from observing this space. Recently, I went to an office where the receptionist greeted me coldly, the waiting area was cold in feel and by design. It was all marble, with nary a magazine or any other reading material in sight. Their company logo had a cold, stark look to it. In short, it was not very welcoming. I sat there (because the person I was waiting for was running late...another bad impression) and thought about what they were trying to convey. Perhaps they were aiming for efficiency? Or they didn't want anyone to linger? Or most likely, they did not give a thought to the image they are giving off. In my experience, this is a very weak link in most organizations' image creation "plans." Last year, I had a client that was trying to promote high end, expensive products. You would think that the store would be rich and comfortable. It was not. I tried to convince the client that no matter how brilliant our marketing plan was, potential customers would be turned off when walking in to the store. In other words, we could get people there but we couldn't make people buy. It would be in lots of companies' best interest to take a tour of their reception areas with new eyes. Is the receptionist courteous? Presenting the company image (whatever that may be—professional or casual)? How would a visitor feel in the waiting area? How do you look to an outsider? Is that look in line with your mission/vision?

First impressions count, right?

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# A fine journalist

Tim Russert died today at 58. He was too young and he was too wise. In TV news, where too often people talk nonsense, he did not. I started watching Russert when he became moderator of Meet the Press. I watched the show almost religiously for many years. I always enjoyed his questions and his guests. From what I have heard through the years, and especially in tributes tonight, Russert was a family oriented person, who really seemed to care about those he worked with. I can only say he was a fine journalist, and I am sad the he will no longer be on the air. My condolences to his family. I think many political junkies are sharing in your sadness.

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## **Communication is important. No, really?**

Sometimes it takes crisis for companies to understand that communicating (actually, communicating effectively) is important. Washington's Metro has been having a really bad couple of weeks. First, the tracks at one station were blocked by a freak storm. Then there was a derailment, then a kink in the tracks and today, they have a fire in one of the tunnels. (All of which begs the question how safe is Metro, but that is another story). Metro has been repeatedly criticized for not communicating effectively with its customers. The problem starts with really bad PA systems, which make it impossible to understand what is being said. Then, they have internal communications issues, where headquarters knows something that people on the ground don't or vice versa. In fact, the general manager of Metro was on the air this week saying that they can

always improve their communications. Of course they can. They have to! When there is a bad situation, people want to know about it so they can make a decision on how they will respond. If there is a delay on Metro of over an hour, maybe it is worth it to take a cab or walk or whatever. Same thing happens on the airlines. It is frustrating when you are sitting in a gate area seeing the minutes tick by and not knowing why you haven't boarded yet.

Clear and real communications are important in all situations, but more so in a crisis situation. In Metro's case, they need a complete overhaul of their communications systems. In other cases, it is almost common sense. Tell people what is happening. Don't misinform or propagandize. People see through that or will resent it. You know the drill—nothing is happening, just a minor delay. Instead say, there is a delay and we do not yet know the extent of it. We will get you more information as we get it.

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## **So simple and so effective?**

Sometimes due to budget constraints or sometimes due to plan, advertisers choose to go the simple and cheap route. I noticed one such attempt yesterday. I saw a simple lawn sign, by the side of busy road here in Bethesda, that said simply Single? and then the advertisers URL. It was in black and white, and I didn't see another sign around. This is cheaper than cheap, so any return on investment has got to be high. But does this work? Is a small sign enough to drive traffic to a website? There are several advantages to this approach. Clearly, the headline says it all. And there is no clutter around it. Geographically targeted. The disadvantages are that since there is no frequency, perhaps the URL does not get across. Is

it measurable?

Politicians have been using lawn signs for years. But those are more a sign of solidarity than a call to action. It does prove however, that sometimes simple is all you need (as a start) when your message is simple. When you have to explain attributes or compare your product or service, you will need a bigger forum than a lawn sign. Of course, that is where the URL comes in. Certainly a website gives you the space to make your case.

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## **Getting religious about branding**

Seriously. This isn't about working all night on the re-branding project, it's about what certain words connote in a religious context. Apparently, the Alexandria, VA-based Baptist Temple was suffering from dwindling membership. What did they resolve to do? Hold a membership drive? No! Re-brand the church. See, apparently the name "Baptist Temple" carries bad or unclear connotations. Baptist is tied to the far right conservative movement, and this church is progressive. And temple? Well, apparently that made this place sound hippy-dippy. So, the pastor begged his flock to rename the church and the new name is...Commonwealth Baptist Church. They didn't stop there. With true branding and marketing savvy, they will add a tagline, which has not been chosen yet but may be something like "A Progressive Community of Faith."

Read the whole Washington Post article for more information. This is such a great example of how a name can make all the difference. It goes back to what I was saying before about

perception. I find it interesting that the pastor in this church thought that by changing their name, they would literally save their church. I will be interested to see if it does make a difference.

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## Speech is powerful

We've all heard that sticks and stones can break your bones but words can't. Words may not break bones but they can be a call to action that could result in broken bones. Speech can be powerful. As many PR/marketing practitioners know, writing a speech can be one of the most difficult tasks. You want to get across a message, while maintaining a tone that resonates with the audience. You have to choose words carefully and you have to use humor judiciously. In short, it's a difficult task. But a good speech and more importantly, a well delivered speech can really sway minds.

I had the privilege of listening to Barack Obama speak this morning. He's a fantastic orator. I also heard John McCain speak on Monday. Obama is a stronger speaker than McCain, and that is something that can't be underestimated. This contest will really come down to the power of speech because a good speech can certainly influence opinion. President Reagan was known for his speaking abilities and I would say that is what won him the presidency and kept him there through two terms. George Bush is not known for being a good speaker. Yes, he won the presidency but he won against Kerry, who is certainly not a good speaker. Gore also was known as sounding very wooden. So the bottom line is that it is important what you say (this is where the speechwriters earn their money) but how you say it can make all the difference.