

We shall overcome

My apologies to Martin Luther King, Jr., but some advertisers have to work to overcome any bad feelings customers have about them. Comcast is a case in point. There are Comcast customers out there who have had a less than positive experience. In fact, Comcast has a pretty bad perception to overcome. Some of their commercials are rather funny...the one with the Slowskys, the family of turtles who prefer DSL because its slow, for instance. But does the humor help overcome the negativity? This is when the product has to live up to the advertising. Same with Verizon. I happen to like the Verizon Wireless ads—you know, “it’s the network.” And Verizon indeed has the network, but it is plagued by similar customer service problems to Comcast. So in the end, the commercials help to bring in people that don’t already have an opinion, but when a STRONG and/or NEGATIVE opinion exists, no amount of funny and/or clever advertising is going to help. I am sure there are many other examples of companies that have great advertising, but negative public perception.

Will Newspapers Survive?

Last night, I attended a forum on politics and the Internet. The Internet has changed the way politicians campaign. Every self-respecting candidate has a website AND an Internet strategy. Candidates have Facebook/MySpace profiles and supporters use YouTube and other social media to post items in favor of their candidate/opposing the other candidates. It certainly has opened the playing field far and wide. Yet candidates are still spending millions of dollars on TV advertising. It seems that only 50% of Americans have

broadband access so the various graphics/videos available on the Internet are not available to everyone. People still watch TV, but do people still read newspapers? I do, but declining numbers have certainly been the trend in recent years. As more and more people get their information ONLINE (even from newspapers websites) and as more people are concerned about environmental issues (paper=trees), are printed newspapers going to disappear? The biggest advertisers in print are retailers. Everyone has seen the full page ads for Macy's and other department stores. In fact, I would bet that 90% of all print ads are retail oriented. In this case, printed newspapers are not going away soon. It is not the same to peruse a website for news as it is to read through a newspaper and look at the ads, especially if you are looking for a specific item or a sale. But will retail traffic be able to save newspapers in a recession-bound economy? I am not sure. Also, the younger generation definitely does not read newspapers and baby boomers are headed toward senior citizen status. Perhaps in another generation or so the newspaper will go the way of the videotape and become a recollection of how things USED to be done.

Design counts

I once worked with a graphic designer who told me the Mac and its software were just tools, same as pen and paper. He was 100% right. Just having the tools does not mean you know how to use them, or better yet, use them effectively. Many people today have access to InDesign, Publisher, Dreamweaver, Photoshop and a myriad of other design software. And these people use these tools without any clue as to what goes into design. You can see the results in poorly designed, often unattractive brochures, ads and other marketing communications

materials. It's the same with writing. We all know how to write, but not everyone knows how to write well.

Design is the first thing we notice about a piece, whether it be the color scheme or the layout, the font or the images. A good designer knows how to entice you to read the piece and also to use the design to communicate certain elements of the product or service. I have been fortunate to work with great designers and I have also worked with mediocre designers. There is a difference. But either way, any professional designer is better than an amateur who thinks he or she knows what she is doing. We should all acknowledge our areas of expertise and leave some stuff to the professionals. It makes a tremendous difference. Here are some things a professional considers: readability, flow of information, aesthetics, color palette, suitable typeface and amount of white space. Another item that a professional brings to the table: creativity.

You wouldn't go to an amateur to build your house, why would you use an amateur to create your brand identity for the world to see?

Podcasting, really?

According to an article in the Baltimore Business Journal –available here, but may be for subscribers only: <http://baltimore.bizjournals.com/baltimore/stories/2008/03/24/focus1.html?b=1206331200^1607621&page=1> podcasting is the most targeted way to reach an audience. Perhaps I am showing technological resistance, but I have yet to go to a business or philanthropic website and listen to a podcast. The article states that companies don't yet know how to best use podcasting.

Certainly in today's new media/social media environment, organizations have to be as cutting edge as possible. A good website is no longer enough—it must be updated. Blogs have definitely had an impact, but unless they are updated frequently with information that is useful, they are useless. I know of a graphic designer who has a blog with nothing on it other than some self-serving news. Why not talk about design? And now the move toward audio and video via podcasts. Again, you must have something relevant to say, and as the article above points out, production values are important. So a cheesy do-it-yourself podcast may end up hurting you and not helping you by making you look unprofessional or amateurish.

I don't know if I agree that podcasting is the next frontier in targeted marketing. I think it is just another tool in an expanding arsenal of online possibilities. Thoughts out there?

Do you believe in the power of branding?

I just bought a new vacuum cleaner. My old vacuum cleaner was just losing suction every day. There were several types, brands and price points in the vacuum section at my local discount store. The range went from \$39 Dirt Devil stick vacuums all the way to \$350 Dysons. It's been ten years since I last bought a vacuum, a Eureka. Naturally, I checked out Eureka's, and also the Hoovers and Bissells and Dirt Devils. Dyson was just out of my price range. But you know what kept going through my head? "Bissell, We Mean Clean." That is the power of great tagline. So I bought a Bissell. But before you think that the tagline made me buy it, I chose it MAINLY because of price and features. The price was right and the

features were good (bagless, 12 amps, lighter than the Eureka, onboard tools, HEPA filter).

I figured that Bissell had to be good. I didn't check out consumer reports. I didn't ask around to see what other people had. However, I have seen countless commercials for Bissell. It is not an unknown. That is the power of branding. You come to know and believe in a brand. Brand is not always enough to influence purchase. I know, for instance, that Dyson never loses suction (according to their commercials), but \$350 is just not in my budget for a vacuum cleaner. I have been using a Eureka without problems for 10 years, but the Eureka model in the store was four pounds heavier than the Bissell.

Are there any brands that you won't give up on, regardless of price and features? For one, I always buy Tylenol, not store brand acetaminophen. But I stopped buying branded zip top and trash bags when I found the store brand was practically the same and a lot cheaper.

Junk Part II

Today's **Washington Post** reports that the United States Postal Service in association with the Direct Marketing Association are working hard to quash "do not mail" initiatives. Read the full article here

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/03/18/AR2008031802893.html>

Most consumers who want out of direct mail want to stop the flow of paper into their homes. They are concerned about the environment and the wastefulness of unwanted mail. Yet the USPS and the DMA are blocking this initiative. According to the article, the DMA went so far as to write their members and

instructing them to ignore requests from Catalog Choice, a service that allows consumers to opt out of receiving catalogs.

In my opinion, this is another example of marketing gone awry. I understand that direct marketers and their affiliates (printers, writers, mailhouses, and the USPS) make money off direct mail. They stand to make less money if less people opt to get direct mail. However, there are two major issues at play here: 1) REAL concerns about the environment and 2) disinterested parties. It is high time that businesses take a more thoughtful approach to environmental issues. More and more, the public is concerned, and rightfully so, about the long-term impact of human action on the earth and the very real consequences of global warming. In their own interest, why not market only to those people who are receptive to marketing? To send dozens of unwanted letters, catalogs, credit card offers into the homes of consumers who not only don't want them but are actively seeking to stop this barrage will surely cause ill will on their part. Remember targeted marketing?

The bottom line is that marketers are looking at their bottom line. And holding on to outdated modes of communication. My suggestion to them is for them to evolve. When the Internet starting taking over, what did banks do? They started online banking. Why not reinvent direct marketing so that it becomes environmentally acceptable? Why not think of new ways to reach your targets without creating harmful waste?

The buzz

Certain things are just not advertised, but you know about them anyway. That is the power of buzz. I think one of the most buzzed about items is Facebook. Even I am buzzing about it. Yet, you probably haven't ever seen a Facebook ad, received a piece of mail about Facebook or picked up a Facebook brochure. In fact, if you are on it, it is because you got invited to "friend" someone you know. Or, you read about it (Facebook does engage in public/media relations). In fact, in the last couple weeks I have read two articles in women's magazines about Facebook. One talked about the addictive quality of Facebook, and the collecting of friends, where the other discussed pros and cons versus the other large social networking site, MySpace.

I just bought some prints on Shutterfly. You never see ads for it, or its competitors like Snapfish. Yet everyone is using these sites to print out their digital photos. Or at least it seems like everyone is doing it—and that is exactly what buzz is about. Truly, buzz marketing is the ultimate type of marketing. It puts in question the future of people like me and other marketing people. Buzz depends on word of mouth. It creates an epidemic, to borrow from Malcolm Gladwell's excellent *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*. In fact, *The Tipping Point* is buzz's bible, since it explains just how the buzz phenomenon can "tip" something, that is, making it bigger and badder. According to Gladwell, ideas move through society because of three types of people: connectors, mavens and salespeople. Basically, they all influence their circles and in interconnection, they influence the larger sphere. Facebook is a great example of something that has tipped. Today, it has become a larger phenomenon than its competitors and it is everywhere around the world.

Is Spam Marketing?

How much spam email do you get every day? I get at least 20 spam emails, even though I have some sort of mailguard. I delete them immediately. However, somewhere, someone, is opening spam, and responding to it. Otherwise, why would spam exist? Whether it is cheap medication or some financial scheme, some people out there are intrigued by their spam email. That shows me a few things: 1) headlines (subject lines) are tremendously important; 2) the offer is what makes the sale; 3) there is an audience for everything!

Spam operates on the same principle of any direct mail—a good Return on Investment (ROI). In fact, most direct mail averages a 4 percent success rate, but that 4 percent actually buy something or donate to the cause, making the mailing worthwhile. With spam, postage is not an issue, so spammers can afford to have a very very low success rate—even less than 1 percent. This is why spam has proliferated. There is no tangible cost (postage or printing). The cost boils down to an Internet Service Provider (ISP) fee, and the spammers time. And they don't spend a ton of time on those emails—how many have egregious spelling mistakes?

Bottom line is that spam is direct marketing gone awry. It is direct marketing without principles. Their target demographic is reduced to people who have email. Spam really is another get rich quick scheme that preys on the uninformed. When spam is phishing, it is even more insidious—targeting careless or naive people to get their credit card/account/other ID information.

Good Ol' Martha Stewart

Have you seen the new commercials for Macy's? I just saw one featuring Usher, selling his perfume, and Martha Stewart. Martha is talking about how much time she spent in research and development. Usher says he worked on two products and asks her how many products she did. She answers 2000 or so. He shakes his head and says, when do you sleep girl? Cute, funny. Take on the whole Martha Stewart quest for perfection. My question is, does this make people go to Macy's? Is it image advertising? Am I supposed to think Macy's is perfect? Or is it that Macy's is funny? Or that Macy's attracts top names like Usher and Martha Stewart? Actually the tag line for the campaign is something like "where the stars are." Their logo is a star. I am starting to get it.

Macy's is one of the biggest newspaper and television advertisers. But how are their sales doing? Is their advertising working? Well according to a story in the Wall Street Journal, as of March 2008, Macy's will no longer release their monthly sales figures. Today, the Washington Post reports that discount retailers have seen sales go up while traditional stores have had sales go down, as a result of general belt-tightening in the U.S. economy. Begs the question...

Intrusive marketing hits a

nerve

Love it or hate it, direct marketing is here for the time being. However, it seems that more people hate it than love it. Or at least are more vocal about it. Other than the character Sammy, in Kristen Gore's funny book Sammy's Hill, I don't know anyone who talks to telemarketers. This blog just received a post from a group that is seeking to limit political "robo-calls." All this begs the question, if so many people are annoyed, why do marketers continue doing it? I know the "robo-calls" were particularly insidious in the last election. Perhaps marketers are looking to cover all bases. Even a four percent return on investment might make the difference. But what if it creates bad will? Does a little bit of good will compensate for a lot of bad will?

Again, as a marketing person, I think all messaging should be targeted and tailored. Calls generated by computer are targeted geographically, but lack the personalization that helps make direct marketing more successful. I also think it is much easier to hang up on a recorded voice than it is to hang up on a live person asking to speak to Mr. or Mrs. butchered last name.