

# Always aim for clarity

Have you ever read something that left you shaking your head, where you wondered what exactly the writer was trying to say? That's what happens when the writer of what you are reading lacks the ability to communicate clearly.

It's important for your communications to be clear, to be easily understood, and not to confuse your audience. How do you achieve this type of clarity? Following are four suggestions:

**1. Know what you are trying to say before you start writing.** Remember in high school when you were taught about a thesis and its supporting points? That lesson should be ingrained in any writer's head. Always have a thesis (your premise or argument) and why you support it. It's helpful to jot down your thesis (for this piece—clarity is essential to communication) and then your top reasons for supporting it (for this piece I jotted down too many words, not knowing what you really want to say).

**2. Balance your assumptions.** Don't assume your audience knows too little or too much—find the middle ground that works for your specific audience. To be able to find the middle ground, you must know who is in your audience. Are they insiders? Are they the general public? How much do they know? Have you ever watched *Washington Week* on PBS? I watch it practically every Friday. One quirk they have is that they insist on spelling out every reference. If a journalist on the panel simply says "McConnell," the host quickly adds: Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. This assumes the audience won't understand the reference to McConnell and yet most people who watch *Washington Week* are fairly informed and interested in all things political.

**3. Write simply.** Often, clarity is compromised by wordiness or

jargon or big words when smaller words would do just fine. It's tempting to stuff articles and blog posts with fancy words, and office speak, but what you end up doing is alienating the audience who may not be conversant in your world. So work to eliminate extra words and jargon, and use plain language instead (e.g., if you see the word "utilize" substitute "use").

#### **4. Reread and edit everything before you make it public.**

Sometimes we write something and then look it over quickly before we hit "publish." It may make sense to us at that moment, but does it make sense to others? Taking the time to read something slowly, copy edit it, and make sure it says what you want it to say will go a long way in making sure it is clear to *others*. If possible, get another person to read your copy (a copy editor and/or proofreader).

Always aim for clarity. If your audience doesn't get what you are trying to say, then you haven't communicated at all.

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## **When you want to be found**

Yesterday, I was browsing through books in my favorite used bookstore (where you can get most soft cover books for \$2 each, a real bargain, and most books are in great shape to boot). As I was making my way through the Fiction section, I came across Diane Ackerman's *The Zookeeper's Wife*, which is the *real* life story of a Polish woman who saved Jews during World War II, thus making it a non-fiction book. I came across a Denise Mina book that should've been housed in the Mystery section. I came across memoirs and biographies. In short, there were a lot of books that were not classified correctly and therefore shelved in the wrong place.



The used bookstore is volunteer-run, and it may be too much to ask volunteers to know what each book is or where it belongs. Since books are donated, there is no inventory. On the other hand, in a regular bookstore, books are shelved by ISBN numbers and inventories are computerized. It'd be rare that book was shelved in the wrong place, unless a customer put it back where it didn't belong. If you were looking for a particular book, you could ask someone to look it up to see if it is available and if so, where it is located.

### **Classification is important, especially on the internet.**

The internet is more like the used bookstore than it is like the organized world of Barnes & Noble. The internet is pretty much volunteer-run and the volunteers are each website's owners. In other words, on the internet you self-classify—you put yourself on the right (or wrong) shelf.

As the website owner or manager, you choose how you want your site to look, what content to include, and what keywords to use. You choose whether you will optimize your site to be found on search engines (SEO) and whether you will do it well (use the right tools, or hire a professional) or not.

When you want to be found, especially online, you have to know how to describe yourself and where people would look for you. You have to know how you are classified and what keywords people use to find you.

### **You must understand yourself and your market.**

In the used bookstore, there are some volunteers who are avid readers, some who are aces at alphabetization and organization, and some who just want to help but have no clues. The volunteers who can alphabetize, organize *and* know books well are the ones who know the right place to shelve a book.

You have to understand exactly what to do, and how the world

classifies you. You may think that you do one thing (like Mattress Firm thinks it sells “sleep solutions”) while most customers see you differently (customers shop for mattresses not sleep solutions). It may be tempting to figure out some fancy description to help you stand out, but unless you classify yourself correctly and use the more common keywords searchers would use, you will not be found.

**Don't be the memoir languishing in the fiction section. Classify your website correctly and use the right keywords.**

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## **Care matters more than marketing**

A few weeks ago, I dropped my old Samsung smartphone, rendering it useless. Panicked at the thought of not being able to check Facebook on the fly (kidding), I ran over to the ATT store nearest me. There, a very young person pretending to be a customer service agent, did *not* help me get a phone.

### **Here's why care matters**

First, I had a contact lens emergency. I asked to use the restroom to deal with it. The young lady said no restroom was available. Evidently, ATT does not care about the well being and comfort of visitors to its stores.

Second, I asked her to see a Galaxy S7. She told me they don't have them in stock. Only the more expensive Galaxy S8s. I don't want to spend the extra money I told her. She then said maybe it could be shipped to me, but that it would take a week. A week? Without a phone? I asked her if she could check availability at nearby retailers. No, she said, she couldn't

possibly do that. Could she expedite shipping then? No, she couldn't do that either.

Third, and finally, I said: "What if I go over to the Sprint or T-Mobile store then? I am not under contract with ATT." She shrugged. She didn't care. I left.

### **Another young person without a clue**

I drove up the street to BestBuy. There, the store did have some Galaxy S7s in stock. However, the young (notice a theme here) "sales" person was not super helpful. He did get me a phone, but only after telling me several times that I should get the S8. He also tried to scare me into getting GeekSquad protection. And into getting a screen protector, case, charger, etc. In short, he was being a real pain. And to boot, he would not even try to get my contacts and other information off my old phone. I am not even going into the whole story but suffice it to say that the 24-year-old had a horrible attitude.

### **Being helpful and trying to resolve problems goes a very long way**

I ended up speaking to the kid's manager, who promised to speak to him and to help me out. The next day, the much nicer (and older) manager spent nearly two hours with me, getting the stuff off the old phone and transferring it to my new phone and to a flash drive. He saved the day for me, and gave me a much more positive view of BestBuy.

### **Complaining to ATT garnered zero action**

I called ATT and after dealing with the most annoying robot, I got through to a customer care agent. I told her I had a complaint about the store I went to. She put me through to a manager who didn't see a problem, didn't even ask what store it was or the name of the employee. I then tweeted the wrongly named @attcares. No care there either.

## **Is all well that ends well?**

In the end, I have a working phone. I have my contacts. I have my photos. I don't have voice mail but that is the subject for another day.

ATT can market all they want but unless they start showing some care, I will not stick with them as a customer. Their Twitter "customer service" is slow to respond, and that makes it nearly useless. Their customer service via phone has gone down hill. If you have a problem with ATT, it seems you are on your own.

We are fine with any company until there is a problem that the company will not *try* to solve. If a company shows genuine care (like the BestBuy manager did), you are willing to overlook the problem. If a company does not show care (like ATT), you are not willing to give it a second chance.

What do you think? Do you stick with companies that treat you poorly? How important for you is it to get good customer service?

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## **Does PBS get the support of viewers like you?**

**We need your support and we will interrupt your viewing until you give us money!**

This seems to be the PBS mission during its pledge drive

Currently, it's the upteenth day during the upteenth time this

year that my local PBS station, WETA, is looking for support from viewers. It may not be endless, but it sure feels like it.

Pledge month (?) is the time when the station starts playing “specials” that have been played dozens of times before, and interrupting them every fifteen minutes to ask for your support. In return, you will get any number of mugs/bags/videos/books based on the size of your contribution. Also, every other show seems to get interrupted—the Newshour, Washington Week, and most egregiously, the finale of the Great British Baking Show.

## **Enough!**

Viewers like me do not like to watch tired, old “specials.” Viewers like me hate having shows interrupted multiple times by the same talking heads giving repetitious pitches on why to give to the station. Viewers like me do not want mugs or tote bags. Viewers like me click off PBS the instant this pledge madness starts.

## **How can this model work today?**

Here’s a newsflash for PBS: Times have changed.

### *Hundreds of viewing options*

All TV channels are under intense competition—both for viewers and for advertising dollars. This is because viewers have many more options for entertainment than ever before: There are hundreds of cable and streaming channels, and also an internet chock-full of stuff to watch, read, react to and interact with.

### *It’s an on-demand world*

With DVRs and/or access to content on demand, people can watch shows on whatever schedule they choose. They can ignore advertising (and pledge drives).



*There's a streaming channel for that*

It used to be that you could only watch British shows like Downton Abbey or Inspector Morse on PBS. Now, you can stream them on specialized British TV/movies channels, and even watch them on Netflix.

*Watch TV wherever you are, whenever you want*

Smartphones and tablets can access the internet anywhere and everywhere. And users of these devices can buy/rent/download all sorts of entertainment to watch even when there is no internet access.

**Interrupting viewer with a push-message is really old school**

These days, inbound marketing is in favor. That's when potential customers/supporters come to you because you are providing great content/reasons for them to interact and buy/support from you. Forcing yourself on viewers, like the pledge drive on PBS does, is the complete opposite. It assumes a static audience that does not have any option but to sit there and listen to a sales pitch. It assumes that pushing a message is the best way to get action. It's the old way of doing things. And it may help PBS shed viewers, not gain them.

**Is annoying viewers for a \$60 donation the best way to keep PBS afloat?**

When you are aiming for lots of small donations, you have to do a lot more work. In this case, it means interrupting viewing more times, more often. It gets annoying. It's a turn-off. And I don't believe it's effective. I think it would be far more effective to concentrate on getting and retaining big, corporate or foundation sponsorships.

I understand PBS wants community support too. Perhaps instead of asking viewers to donate, PBS could emphasize obtaining a yearly membership with (real) special benefits (currently this

is not clear on the PBS website). Instead of having pledge drives, PBS could include a 15-second ad/message for membership before popular shows.

What do you think? Do you watch PBS? Do you support PBS? Why or why not?

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## Check for accuracy STAT

The other night, I heard a loud, scratching noise in my chimney. It sounded as if an animal had gotten in. My first thought (and fear) was that a small bat was in there and it would then come into the house. Since it was close to midnight, there was nothing I could do except check the website for the local animal trapping company that I've seen working in my neighborhood. According to Google results, their office opened at 7:00 a.m. The website listed an 800 number, and four local-area numbers. I decided to call first thing to see if they would send someone right away.

At 7:00 the next morning I called up the company. I got a message saying their offices opened at 8:00 a.m. Their Google My Business listing was wrong and their website did not list hours at all.

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Sometimes companies spend more time and money on developing new marketing or on sales pitches, and they forget to check

the basics. So, before you do anything else marketing-related, check your current stuff for accuracy. Do it now. Seriously.

### **What to check:**

- Business name (is it complete, spelled correctly?)
- Address/es (accurate, current?)
- Telephone number/s (accurate, current?)
- Website URL
- Hours/days of operation
- Staff names/positions/contact information
- Email addresses
- Pricing information

### **Where to check:**

- Your website
  - Your social media pages (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, etc.)
  - Google results/Google maps/Google My Business
  - Yelp and other review or listing sites (e.g., Angie's List) you appear in
  - Printed materials (business cards, brochures, letterhead, postcards, etc.)
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In the end, I was able to get the animal trapping company to come to my house later in the day. They checked the chimney and nothing was there (thank goodness!). They put some mesh on the chimney cap to prevent bats or birds from getting in.

This company has plenty of business around here. I've seen their trucks before as squirrels are constantly getting into attics (and bats are always in the belfry). They certainly have developed brand recognition. But you only call them when you need them and it is usually an urgent situation. Having

multiple phone numbers and inaccurate hours is not helpful for anybody needing their services.

**Any organization needs to consider what information potential users/customers/donors need to have, and then make sure that information is easily *available and accurate*. It just makes good marketing/communications sense.**

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## Why Scaramucci failed

I was going to write a post about how Anthony Scaramucci, the shortest-lived White House Communications Director in history, embodies the problem at the core of the Trump administration's communications failures, and then the "Mooch" got fired after 10 days on the job.

Basically, Scaramucci got fired because he failed at Communications 101. He was bound to fail also because he was not the right person for the job. He had no experience in communications, and his actions showed it. As the wrong person for the job, he got hired by a boss and an administration that don't understand communications fundamentals.

### **The communications person is never the story**

First, Scaramucci failed because he broke the cardinal rule for communications pros: he became the story. As anybody who has worked in public relations/communications knows, the comms person is there to help get the story out. Under no circumstances are you to become the story.

### **You have to know how news reporters work**

Second, Scaramucci did not seem to understand that unless you explicitly state otherwise, everything you say can be quoted.

If you have not said something is off the record, it's on the record. Period. Reporters are always looking for quotes. That's what they do.

**Just because you feel that you are simpatico, does not mean you are pals hanging out at a bar**

Third, Scaramucci made himself look extremely crass and stupid by using obscenities where none were needed. We all curse, but we know that in certain circumstances we don't. Scaramucci also seems to lack imagination—and here it is—an ability to communicate, in order to convey his thoughts without resorting to obscenities.

**But the larger problem is a White House that doesn't get it**

In TrumpWorld, it seems communications is *all* about marketing. It's *all* about persuasion. And it's not about sharing information and facts. I don't think this country has ever seen such a fact-averse White House ever.

When you practice communications you are aiming to inform, and yes, to persuade. But persuasion is not something to be done with threats and alternative facts. As I have written before, Sean Spicer (the former communications director/press secretary) thought he was in a fight with the White House press corps. He berated them and belittled them and even refused to provide them with information they requested. He turned the cameras off for briefings, thinking that by cutting off video he would be able to control the narrative. He cherry-picked media outlets to respond to that were sympathetic to the president and would not ask any hard questions.

**Communications is not a one-way street**

To communicate, you must inform. You can't simply try to force your viewpoint on everyone. We see Trump using Twitter to talk directly to the people. What you don't see is Trump using

Twitter to respond to questions from the people. To Trump, communication is a one-way street (sort of how he views loyalty too): push your message out and steamroll anyone who questions it.

**Scaramucci's failure is indicative of a much larger problem that does not seem to have a solution: a White House that does not value real communication.**

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## **Proof that local TV news still matters**

This past Saturday, Jim Vance died after being diagnosed with cancer back in May. Jim Vance was the long-time (45 years!) anchor at Washington's NBC affiliate, WRC (channel 4). His death created a tremendous outpouring of grief, from his colleagues, and from the many people in the area who watched him on TV. You can see how NBC4 reported it [here](#).

When I first read the news of Vance's death on Saturday morning I was not surprised (he had announced on air he had cancer and I hadn't seen him on the news desk in several weeks even though he had said he would work as his treatment allowed), but I was incredibly saddened. I've watched NBC4's evening news for many years, and liked watching him and his anchor partner Doreen Gentzler. I liked how they interacted, how genuinely friendly they were with each other and with the other reporters. I especially remember how Vance paid tribute to Doreen when she celebrated her 25 years of sharing the anchor desk with him.

Since his death, I have come to learn more about Jim Vance. He was incredibly active in his community—speaking at high school

graduations, funding scholarships, mentoring others. Many of his colleagues said he lived life to the fullest. A friend of mine told me that as a teen, he met Vance. In other words, Vance was accessible. He was not a distant celebrity, but was part and parcel of his community.

Every night on NBC4 this week, they have paid tribute to Vance. You can see how deeply they feel his loss. And what is interesting is how the community misses Vance too. What's more, his competitors at other TV stations also paid tribute to him. The news community in DC is tightly-knit. Many reporters have worked at more than one local station. Bruce Johnson, who now anchors at the CBS affiliate, WUSA-9, had been friends with Vance. He devoted his show, Off Script, on Monday night to Jim Vance and to helping people quit smoking, an addiction which most likely caused Vance's cancer.

**Local TV news still matters.** Whether you watch at 6:00 a.m. to get a read on the day's traffic and weather, or at 11:00 p.m. to see what happened in your community, you watch the local TV news to connect to where you live. And because you probably do this habitually, you connect to the people who deliver the news to you. They also live here. They know how hot or how cold or how rainy it is, because they too had to deal with it on their way to work. Local news anchors care about traffic and construction and local crime, because it affects them personally and their families. And because they care about what is going on here, we care about them.

In this age where it seems social media dominates, it's important to realize that people still watch TV news, and they connect with the people they see on the anchor desk.

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# 4 lessons from WordCamp DC that will improve your website

This past weekend, I attended my sixth WordCamp (!). This time I only had to travel as far as Washington, D.C., which (finally) was hosting its first WordCamp. The past few times I've been to Baltimore and Philadelphia. In case you don't know, WordCamp is a volunteer-led conference featuring talks and workshops on various WordPress and website/blog related issues. Since this website/blog is built on WordPress, and WordPress is also a platform for so many other websites big and small, I find it extremely useful to learn more about WordPress and attend WordCamp.

This time, I made it to about 11 presentations out of a total 60. As usual, some of the presentations were really useful and/or interesting. Although I picked up several nuggets, I had four big take-aways.

## **Be generous**

Have you ever clicked on a blog post that promised you some good information, but found out instead that the post was a sales pitch for the book/webinar/course where you could pay to access the information? I hate that and so does Tracy Schorn, who is the author of the very popular Chump Lady blog. Her main advice from "How to Build a Popular Blog and Master WordPress Even If You Are a Liberal Arts Major" is to be generous. Tracy says you should offer solutions, help people and be a resource for your readers.

Of course, Tracy works hard at her blog too. She writes a post every weekday, and answers her readers' questions. Tracy is definitely on to something, as she is living the blogger's dream. Her blog became so popular that she was able to write a



book, get it published and then get it optioned for a TV series! Oh, and she makes money of her blog too.

## **Many ways to improve your SEO**

John Victoria runs a SEO/digital marketing agency and his talk was “10 Reasons Why Your Site is Nowhere to be Found on Google (and what to do about it).” The answer to getting your site to be found on Google is SEO—search engine optimization. Being in the first page of Google’s organic search results is crucial if you want potential customers to find you.

Among his suggestions:

- Check your site loading speed—a slow load will turn off readers
- Submit your URL to Google
- Backlinks to your site matter. But, do not, under any circumstances, pay to get lots of backlinks to your site. Focus on quality not quantity.
- Submitting an article to a leading publication/site in your field is a great way to build quality backlinks and third-party credibility
- Use your keywords judiciously—do not keyword stuff and think of other ways of saying the same thing (e.g., dentist, dental practice).

## **Take a step now toward enhanced website security**

Websites get hacked all the time. Sometimes the hackers are trying to make money by redirecting your traffic to another site. Sometimes they are trying to spread malware. Whatever the reason, this is something you, as a website/blog owner, need to work hard to avoid. And it does take work and know-how. According to Adam Warner of SiteLock, from his talk “5 Steps to Personal and Website Security,” even taking one step helps. Some of what he recommended:

- Have strong passwords, do not repeat them and consider

using a password manager

- Install SSL on your website, which, as a bonus, gives you an SEO boost
- Use a plug-in to limit the amount of logins into your site
- Do not use public Wi-Fi networks that are not password protected

## **Design matters**

I really liked Annie Smidt's talk "Easy Design Tips for Non Designers." She says (and I completely agree) that design can make your site look credible, and can also help visitors like your site. We all know how important it is to make a good first impression.

Some things Annie suggested non-designers should consider:

- Have a hierarchy—the most important message must stand out
- Consistency is important
- Your color palette should match your audience and the mood you are trying to create (Annie provided some great sites/ideas on how to come up with palettes too)
- Typography increases comprehension, so choose typefaces carefully and don't use too many fonts (she says having two is good: one serif, one sans serif)

One important tidbit I learned from Annie was how to make em-dashes on WordPress. All you have to do is use the Omega button to access special characters. I've already done it in this post!

You can read her slides [here](#), and see her excellent suggestions on where to get color palette ideas.

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There were dozens of other sessions on three different tracks. Some were targeted to developers and some to those who work in government or big institutions. Most of them should be available on WordPress TV.

I highly recommend attending a WordCamp in person. It's fun, you'll learn new stuff and great hacks, meet new people, and not to mention, you'll get a t-shirt. For a list of upcoming WordCamps, just check WordCamp Central. There are WordCamps everywhere!

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## **Events can be great marketing, or not**

A couple of months ago, I found out that Kramerbooks, an independent bookstore in Washington, had started doing book events. After checking their events website, I saw an author I wanted to see (Derek Thompson, author of Hitmakers). I went to the Thompson event, which took place in Kramerbook's new and pretty tight "event" space, with enough seating for about 20 or so, and standing space for about 20 or so more. I thought Thompson was very interesting, and I actually went home and got his book from the library (and I will be sharing thoughts on it in a future blog post).

Based on my positive experience, I kept tabs on the Kramerbook's online event calendar. Soon, there was another event I wanted to attend. It was three journalists who cover the White House (and being a politics and news junkie, this was totally up my alley). So I put it in my calendar. In the back of my mind I thought this would be a very crowded event, this being DC and the space being so small. Well, I took the

Metro from Rockville, and got there around 5:20. Even though the event wasn't scheduled to start until 6:30p.m., there was a line around the block. It was very hot, and based on the space constraints, I knew I wouldn't get in, so I decided not to stand in line for an hour in the sun and heat.

It costs \$6 to ride Metro from where I live to Dupont Circle, where Kramerbooks is. I basically wasted \$12 and well over an hour. I was not happy.

The next day, I noticed that Kramerbooks had tweeted about a livestream. I tweeted back that had I known I would have skipped going down there. I got back a reply that they tweeted it, and put it on Facebook and Instagram, and they were sorry (more like sorry, not sorry) that I hadn't seen it. I asked why they hadn't included this information on their event page. And I got no response back.

Based on this experience, I may never attend try to attend an event at Kramerbooks again. Transportation is just too costly and time-consuming, and getting a seat is too much of a crapshoot. I also didn't care for their social media response. A much better response to empathize and then to send me a link to the recording of the event.

Events can be great marketing tools. In this case, Kramer's gets people in the door, and hopefully, checking out their book selection or eating at their restaurant. Events can also generate publicity. But when done poorly, events can have a negative effect.

There's another independent bookstore in Washington, Politics and Prose, which has been holding author events for years. They have an event nearly every single day, mostly free and in their bookstore (which has way more space than Kramerbooks). When they have a big author or an event likely to draw large crowds, they sell tickets and hold the events at Sixth and I (a synagogue and event space in D.C.), which can seat

hundreds. This tactic has made Politics and Prose a leader in author and literary events, and probably also has generated considerable book sales.

The difference between these two bookstores and their event marketing strategies is stark. One has the experience to understand that some talks require larger spaces, and have partnered with another organization to address the need while also generating ticket and book sales. The other is still learning what to do with their space.

Have you ever attended an event that ended up being terrible? What made it so and what were the consequences for you? Let me know in the comments.

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## **Is it time for the corporate blog to die?**

At a communications event last week, the three panelists were asked what communications channel they felt was overrated. The answer that stood out to me the most was the panelist who said she just wanted to see the corporate blog die already because, in her opinion, nobody visits/reads corporate blogs.

I disagree. Here are a few reasons why:

The corporate/organizational blog is an integral part of any **content marketing strategy**.

It's **owned media** that can help with your SEO, though leadership, lead generation and so much more.

For smaller organizations, blogs are an **easy way to add fresh content** regularly.

Blogs are **flexible and media friendly**—you can post images, graphics, video, audio and/or text.

Regularly updated blogs serve as a clue to your website visitors that your website (and your organization) is **current**.

Blog posts are a great **opportunity to respond** to current events/situations/policies in a timely manner, and in more depth than on other social media outlets.

Organizational blogs serve a purpose, when done thoughtfully and strategically. But far too many organizations don't consider what they wish to achieve with the blog that they feel they must have.

So yes, corporate blogs without a strategy or purpose behind them should die. But they can and should be resurrected to achieve one of the many things I have pointed out above. What do you think? What's your experience with corporate/organizational blogs? When do you read them?