

Are you reinforcing your message?

I had a conversation with a potential client the other day, and she was saying she wasn't sure she needed to continue advertising as most of her customers came from word of mouth/referral.

Word-of-mouth and referrals are very powerful marketing forces, but they do not operate in a vacuum. Most people take their time making a decision, even when they have a referral (or referrals) in hand. People often like to do some research themselves, even when they have glowing recommendations (just because a hair salon did wonders for straight-haired Jane does not mean they can do wonders for curly-haired Joan). This is why you need to reinforce your message.

Often, you need to remind your potential clients/customers of why they should consider working for you. You also need to let them know the basics: how to contact you, where you are located, who you work with, how much you charge, what your services/products are.

How do you reinforce your message? You can do it several ways:

1. Have an updated, attractive, easy-to-navigate website.
2. Have marketing materials such as ads, brochures, etc. as necessary for your target. For example, if your target audience reads specialized journals, it makes sense to advertise there. If your target walks past your store, it may make sense to have brochures or information cards available.
3. Have an updated, complete LinkedIn profile and on other social media channels as appropriate.

Relying on word of mouth without reinforcing the positive referral will not always result in business for you and could actually work against you.

What are you doing to reinforce your message?

Why Uber is successful

Have you heard about Uber? Basically, it's an on-demand a car service that you "hail" via app, web or text message. The service is available in major cities in the US, including San Francisco, Boston, New York and Washington, DC, some European capitals and a few cities in Asia, including Singapore.

I started hearing about Uber on Twitter, but had never experienced it personally until recently. My friend Barb Jump had invited me to join her at the Kennedy Center. After the performance, *in the elevator*, Barb said she would get a car service to pick us up.

Barb texted Uber, Uber sent back a confirmation, and nine minutes later, Kareem (the driver) was pulling up to pick up in a town car, complete with bottled water, tissues and mints. Apparently nine minutes is a long wait time, because Barb says they are usually there in about four minutes, which if you live in Washington, means it is much quicker than waiting for the Metro.

What turned Barb on to Uber were two basic issues: she doesn't carry cash and she doesn't feel safe hailing a cab at night as a woman alone in the city. Uber solves these two issues. Since you must set up an account beforehand, the payment is charged to your credit card on file, thus there is no need for cash (or figuring out the tip, since there is no tipping).

And, since you are directly ordering a car from Uber, you are not getting some random cabby. Uber also sends you the name of the driver and his/her picture so you know who to expect.

Fill a need and differentiate from the competition

Uber is successful because it found some very specific needs that were not being met by traditional taxis or car services. As its website says quite succinctly, these three needs are: request from anywhere, ride with style and convenience, and hassle-free payment. These could also be called DIFFERENTIATORS. As a plus, for Barb (and for other women), these also translate to added safety.

The bottom line is that for a business to succeed it has to meet a need that is not being adequately met by others in the marketplace. And to be uber-successful (jeez, aren't I clever?) it has to meet those needs while differentiating itself from any competition.

Fulfill your brand promise

Everybody knows that saying something and doing it are two different things. If you do what you say you do, you are, in effect, fulfilling your brand promise. Uber's tagline is Everyone's Private Driver. I think Uber certainly lives up to that tagline's promise—anyone can set up account, "hail" an Uber from their smartphone (anywhere they may be) and get a driver whom they will recognize because Uber provides this information beforehand.

Have you experienced Uber or other companies that are succeeding by differentiating well and living up to their promise?

Wait—why you can't rely on spell-check

Yesterday, while working out at the gym, I nearly fell off the treadmill when I spotted the following ad from Sephora in InStyle magazine:

Sephora ad

At first, I thought perhaps Sephora was engaging in a not-so-clever play on words, since the wait could be over for a weight-less product. But I see no evidence in the copy that Sephora is highlighting any weightlessness in this product. In fact, the sub-headline says: "Finally, smoother, softer, satiny style in half the time." Clearly, the concept is about time, so the appropriate word would have been wait, not weight.

It is hard to believe that Sephora's ad people would have let this one go to print. Back when I was a print buyer in the 90s, we sent actual film to our magazines. A mistake in the film would be a major problem, and fixing it would involve high cost. Today, ad agencies send over PDF's, which are way easier to fix and re-send.

So next time you think you proofread your document and used spell-check to do so, I suggest you wait, and read it again.

Do you think the headline is right? Let me know why.

Do you know what your customer's experience is really like?

It's painfully obvious that in many companies, marketing is completely separate from customer service and on another planet from company operations. This is why we often see marketing communications that have nothing in common with the actual experience of using a product or service.

I have written about this several times before, but **as long as marketing is divorced from customer experience, companies will cultivate poor relationships with their customers.**

Recently, I stayed at a Holiday Inn Express. You know, where the marketing says that you will be smarter just by staying there. In reality, the walls were paper thin, making sleeping a challenge; the bathroom was cramped, making getting ready a challenge; and to top it off, I could smell breakfast cooking in my room, half-way down the hall on the second floor at 6:30 in the morning. Oh, and if this weren't enough, when I tried to work out in the fitness closet, I was greeted by an overheated room, with no temperature controls, and outdated, hard-to-use equipment. It didn't help that the front desk seem disinterested, and not once greeted me when I walked in the door.

I did not feel smarter by staying at the Holiday Inn. In fact, I felt taken. Their pricing for this location is on par with a hotel, not the motel they truly are.

While I was staying at this hotel I kept thinking that the hotel manager and the front desk people had never spent a

night at their own motel. Or perhaps they had, which is why they were rarely to be seen and seemed so unenthusiastic about their jobs. What I know for certain is that whoever does the marketing for Holiday Inn Express wants you to believe that this place is tops. But, you will only believe it if you have a positive customer experience. **If you, like me, have a negative customer experience, not only will you scoff at the marketing, but you will likely become a vampire instead of brand ambassador. That is, you will take away customers rather than bring business.**

If you want to have marketing communications that work LONG TERM, then you must learn about your customer's experiences with your product or service. You want to know the unvarnished truth. **If the experience is consistently bad, you have to fix the experience, not the marketing.**

Ultimately, the most amazing communications/marketing campaign can't sell a bad product or service.

The two actions that will make your communications more effective

There are two actions that will improve your communications efforts. These are:

- **Listening** (really listening, not just nodding your head)
- **Saying what you mean**

It sounds absurdly simple, but chances are that you are not doing one or both well.

Listening is crucial.

Yesterday, I went to a large home improvement store (I won't name names). I was on the search for an edger/trimmer for my pocket-sized lawn. I have never bought this item and I have no idea what I need. I flagged down an associate and I explained that I have a small lawn, and that the grass is hard to cut near the fence, and that I did not want to spend too much money. So this associate points me to the high end trimmers, starting at \$100. And then he says to me: "well, you said you wanted to cut your shrubs." Huh? I said NOTHING about shrubs since I don't have shrubs. Clearly, this associate was not listening. He was also not very qualified to talk about edgers, but that is a different story.

If you don't listen, you are not going to "get" the story, whatever it may be.

The other side of the communications equation is **saying what you mean**. Lots of people (and organizations) say what they think the other person (or their target audience) wants to hear. Saying what you mean is not burying things in fine print or in if-thens. **Be clear! And please, be sincere.** People can tell when you are not saying what you mean. And then they don't trust you.

Mattress stores don't say what they mean

A great example of communications that don't say what they mean is mattress store advertisements. Having just gone through mattress shopping, I can tell you, just ignore the ads. They are designed to entice you into the store. Once you are in the store, you find out the real deal. Generally in the world of mattress sales, the enticement is free something or the other (free box spring, free delivery, free set-up, free TV, etc.). The reality is that the pricing is structured so that you can't compare it to other stores, and there are caveats. If you get a mattress priced over \$X, then you get

free delivery. If you want to price match, we have to make sure it is the same mattress (and since mattresses are made specifically for each store, there is no exact same name). If you want us to remove your old bed, then we charge you a fee. If you want the ten-year warranty, then you have to buy our overpriced mattress cover. And on and on.

No clarity. No saying what they mean. Making people distrust what you are saying. That is not communications!

It is about effective communications. Effective means that something is successful in achieving the intended result. If you are intending to sell mattresses or edgers or any product, service or opinion, you should both listen and say what you mean.

How to write your blog workshop

What are you doing on May 17? Why not sign up for my How to write your blog workshop? You will learn how to make your blog more effective, how to come up with blog post ideas and lots of other good stuff. Details and registration [here](#).

Are you being coy?

Someone I know posted this update on Facebook:

“A real game of yuck this week.”

Who knows what she meant. I am sure you have seen similar coy or opaque statements that just beg followers to ask for more information. And that is what the poster wants...you to ask for details. This may or may not be a good tactic to get attention

on Facebook. It certainly is a bad tactic to use if you are trying to get attention in your email marketing, your blog posts, and other marketing content.

Say you have an email newsletter you send to your clients. You write:

Spring is a lovely time of year. Good things happen in the spring, it is a time of renewal. Tulips are blooming and spring sales are everywhere.

Unless you want to get people upset at your opaqueness, there is little use for being coy in marketing communication. Instead, you should know what you want and ask for it. Instead of rhapsodizing about spring in your newsletter, why not figure out what action you want your target audience to take (this is your **call to action**, in marketing terms). Don't make your audience guess. Tell them, clearly and precisely. Here are a few examples:

- Spring means renewal! Time to renew your subscription to our newsletter
- Spring classes are starting. Here is how to enroll in our next class.
- Spring sales are on! Check out the reduced prices on our newest product

These are all **specific actions** you want your audience to take.

Are you being coy in your communications? Why not start being direct and asking for what you want?!

How to blog workshop on May 17

Sign up today to get your early registration discount to my next How to Blog workshop taking place on May 17. For more details and to register visit howtowriteyourblog4.eventbrite.com .

To advertise or not to advertise

Yesterday, somebody on Twitter asked me whether she should advertise on Facebook. I asked what she was trying to accomplish. Her answer was to get more readers to her blog. Is that enough information to decide whether it is worth it to advertise? Not at all.

Let me preface the following by saying that I don't believe that you should do advertising on a case-by-case basis. It is much smarter to look at your overall marketing communications goals and have a plan to meet them. **Advertising is a tactic** that you should use to bolster your strategy.

Goals (measurable is better)

First, you have to figure out what your goal really is. In this case, the blog owner could say she would like to increase her readership by 10% (that is, if she has the numbers for her current readership). But the real question is why? Why does she want more readers? What will having more readers mean? Depending on your type of organization, it could mean increased sales or donations or votes.

Target audience

Second, you have to figure out exactly who your audience is and where you can find them.

Budget

Third, you have to figure out your advertising budget. Throwing a few dollars here and a few dollars there is not a budget. Advertising is an investment in your business. How much are you able or willing to invest?

Trial

Fourth, once you have done your homework (if you know your audience, you have a target, you have budgeted a certain amount) then you are ready to try advertising.

Tracking and measurement

Lastly, once you are running a campaign, you will need to pay special attention to your metrics. Where are people finding you from? How will you track it?

Figuring out how to do advertising is not a science. There is art to it. I know, I was a media buyer eons ago, and I learned that some things look great on paper but don't work out. You can analyze CPM (cost per thousand) all you want, but sometimes, you have to let your instinct guide you. Also, just because something is affordable, doesn't mean you should include it in your advertising plan. Sometimes, you don't know until you try it!

If you want help figuring out your advertising plan, contact me. Advertising planning is a process, which should be part of your overall communications plan.

The power to recognize

advertising is not enough

Long-time readers of this blog know that I have written before about Pepco, the Potomac Electric Power Company, which serves nearly 800,000 customers in Maryland and Washington, D.C. My posts have focused on the fact that Pepco's advertising does not match people's experiences with the power company.

Last night, viewers of Super Bowl 47 were surprised to see the lights go out during the game in the Superdome in New Orleans, where the game was being played. In fact, the power was out for about 35 minutes. Entergy, the electricity provider in New Orleans said that the issue was not with them but with the stadium. As of right now, I am not sure what caused the power failure but I do know what people in Maryland and DC thought about it by their postings on Twitter: Pepco must surely be involved.

Pepco's reliability has become a joke. It has a negative perception so deeply ingrained in customers' minds that comments like: "Who knew **Pepco** was the official energy provider for the Super Bowl" by @djrothkopf or "Talked to **Pepco** and they're confident power will be restored to all parts of the stadium by Wednesday" by @timothypmurphy were rampant (and often retweeted) on Twitter on Sunday night.

No amount of advertising will fix a real, on-the-ground problem. Other organizations, such as the Washington Metropolitan Transportation Authority (WMATA), need to learn this lesson too. When you have let your customers down repeatedly, they will no longer trust you. Your advertising and your public relations will not rehabilitate your image.

In order to change people's perceptions of your brand, you need to move beyond just communications. You need to make positive changes and be able to provide proof that you have done so. Once you have made measurable progress and you have

something tangible to report, you can move forward with a communications program. Even then, bad experiences are difficult to overcome.

It will take actual reliability and good experiences with Pepco for customers to learn to trust this company. As I have said before, you can tell me in your advertising that you are working on your reliability, but if I am sitting in the dark for days on end (like I was during last summer's Derecho storm), I am going to doubt you are doing very much at all.

What are your thoughts? If you are in Maryland or DC did you also joke that Pepco was behind the power outage at the Super Bowl?

An ad to promote a TV commercial...

You know the stakes are high when an advertiser takes out a full page ad to promote a TV commercial. Of course, it's not just any TV commercial—it's a commercial during the Super Bowl.



Top quarter of full page cars.com ad in Feb. 1 Washington Post

Super Bowl advertising costs are at an all-time high. According to Lisa de Moraes' TV column in today's Washington Post, CBS is charging nearly \$4 million per 30-second spot. De Moraes says that due to the high cost and the clutter, advertisers are doing what they can to promote their commercials. Some advertisers are releasing the commercial prior to the game and others are giving viewers the option of choosing the ad ending.

Cars.com seems to think that producing a full page ad will focus eye balls on their commercial. Notice that in addition, the ad is promoting this website, where, in meta-fashion, they have some drama about the focus group about the impact of the ad. Let's see, based on this, I think we can expect a dramatic ad, or an ad with drama, or an ironic take on car buying, or an exaggeration. Or maybe the point is that we won't know what to expect.

I am not sure this tack works. For one, the need to advertise an advertisement seems bizarre. And second, it sets up a very high expectation that this ad is going to stand out. If the commercial doesn't meet expectations, then no one wins. The

advertiser will have spent \$4 million plus the cost of producing the video about the commercial plus the cost of advertising the ad (design, placement, etc.). I would say cars.com's investment is a minimum of \$5 million (and I don't know how much the Super Bowl commercial cost to produce or how many newspapers the print ad ran in).

Will you be watching the Super Bowl?

Want to learn to blog?

If you would like to have a successful blog (consistent, interesting, and focused on your audience) and you are in the Washington, DC metro area, check out my next blogging workshop on February 28. More details and registration [here](#).

What you can learn from coffee filters

As anybody who knows me (or sees the theme in this website), I like coffee. I brew a huge mugful every morning. For years, I have been using store brand (ok, cheaper) unbleached filters and thought nothing of it. However, I hosted a brunch in December, and was out of coffee and filters, so I bought premium coffee and premium filters (always want to treat my guests right). Brunch was great and who knew my cousin was such a huge coffee drinker (brewed three pots!).



“I love coffee” by Kristopher Winther Balling on Flickr

After I ran out of premium coffee, I reverted back to my usual (good) coffee, but still using the premium filters. And then, two days ago, I ran out of premium filters and was back to store brand. Guess what? My coffee tasted different—and not in a good way. It was more bitter.

Being a coffee lover, I had to correct this situation and promptly ran out and bought the premium filters again. Coffee this morning tasted good. The filters make a difference.

These are tough times, and many of us need to economize. But, we choose our battles and sometimes price does not win over quality.

Let me rephrase that: quality can trump price.

Marketing lesson here is simple: price is not the best unique selling proposition (USP). This is not the same as talking about value. If you are betting that your target audience will be swayed by price alone, you will be disappointed. People may try a product because it is cheaper, but if the

quality is not there, they won't buy again. In a sense, generic brands "get" this. How often do you see a generic advertised? Never, because the only reason to buy a generic is because it often has a lower price. You don't promote generic/store brand products as being of HIGHER quality than brands, just comparable in quality but lower in price.

Find what makes your product (or service) special outside of the price. If your target values that attribute, the target will buy it very often regardless of price.

In other words, it's about showing value and not about discussing price.

What say you? Are there products you buy because you think they have a higher value?