

Getting a reality check

Last night I attended an event where the sole purpose was to get feedback on a new website from community attendees. It was fairly informal—the creators of the website asked for opinions and reactions to the website, which you did on a one-to-one basis.

I found this exercise incredibly interesting because it can be so useful. But I wonder how often it is done. My sense is that it isn't done often enough! The examples abound: websites that are hard to navigate, brochures that are pointless, ads that fail to entice, and on and on.

Get a reality check!

As a marketer or communications person, you should seek outside opinions. This is why in-house communications often employs consultants or agencies. This is why market research exists. But even (perhaps especially) if you are an entrepreneur, you should find someone to discuss your marketing, positioning or other business-related issues. Everybody needs a reality check!

There are structured ways to get a reality check. As mentioned above, you could hire a consultant (for personal marketing, perhaps this consultant is a life coach or therapist).

- Big businesses could hire a market research firm.
- Nonprofits can tap into their board of directors or their volunteers.
- Entrepreneurs or solopreneurs may consider joining a peer group or create an ad-hoc advisory council of trusted people.
- Smaller businesses can conduct informal focus groups like the one I attended.

You most definitely need to conduct a reality check BEFORE you

launch—an idea, a product, a marketing piece or a website. Many businesses seem to be afraid of hearing that their idea/ad campaign/marketing materials may be missing the mark.

However scary or uncomfortable it may be, getting a reality check will be immensely valuable. It's easier to fix something before it is out there in the public eye.

Do you get reality checks? If so, from whom or how? Please share in the comments.

The (higher) power of a great tagline

A great tagline will help sell your product, and when it is really great, it will also make you memorable. If I say “just do it” you immediately know it's Nike's tagline. Not many companies can claim a great tagline like that one.

Developing a great (or even a good) tagline is no easy feat. You need to be succinct, clever and find the essence of what you are trying to communicate. A good tagline “tags” you—that is, it identifies you, easily and immediately.



I have been
tagged—photo by Jody
McNary Photography, on
Flickr.

An online dating service catering to Christians,

ChristianMingle.com, has come up with a really good tagline: Find God's match for you. The Washington Post's Paul Farhi has written about it today in "Evoking God has been good to ChristianMingle." Farhi writes:

It might be the most audacious, and perhaps the most presumptuous, ad slogan ever devised.

"Find God's Match for You," sayeth ChristianMingle.com, an online dating service that suggests in its advertising that its computer-generated matches are, well, made in heaven.

Farhi then goes on to report on whether the tagline can be construed as false advertising. Read the article to see why.

But whether or not a tagline can be accused of setting up false expectations, I think that a strong (memorable) tagline (one that immediately communicates your objective) is one of the strongest tools in your marketing communications arsenal.

Take a look at your tagline today. Is it powerful? Is it memorable? Does it identify you?

Why would you highlight that?

It's great to highlight your USP (Unique Selling Proposition). In fact, you should. You should communicate to your target audience what makes you special or different than others, especially if you are in a crowded marketplace. A couple of days ago, I came across this ad in the newspaper:

**Free Pickup
& Delivery**
Includes Moving
Furniture, Rolling
and Relaying
Your Rugs!

Hadeed

ORIENTAL RUG CLEANING
& IN-HOME/OFFICE SERVICES

*If You Stand
On It,
Joe Hadeed
Stands Behind It!*

GRAND OPENING! of our RUG SALES SHOWROOM!

Every Size Available! 2x3 All
The Way to Embassy Size!

Incredible Selection with a
3 Million Dollar Inventory!

**RUGS
30%-50%
OFF!**



Scan This
to See Our
Entire
Inventory!

839 W Maple Ave. Vienna, VA 703-962-6384

25% Off
First Cleaning
OR
50% Off
Initial
Cleaning
With a 6-time
service package
**Maid
Service**

*Expires 1/19/13.
Not valid w/any
other offers.

Any 3 Areas (400 sf)
\$99*
4 to 7 Areas (600 sf)
\$169*
8-10 Areas (1000 sf)
\$269*

**Wall to Wall
Steam
Cleaning**

*Expires 1/19/13.
Not valid w/any other
offers. Basic steam
clean

**10%
Off**

**In-Plant
Rug
Cleaning**

*Expires 1/19/13.
Not valid w/any
other offers.

**5%
Off**

**In-Plant Rug
Restoration
& Repair**

*Expires 1/19/13.
Not valid w/any
other offers.

\$80
Each Bathroom
Floor
Coloring & Sealing
Available Upon
Request
\$99 minimum order.

**Tile and
Grout
Cleaning**

*Ceramic & Porcelain
only. Expires 1/19/13.
Not valid w/any other
offers. Residential only.

\$85 Off
Whole House
Air Duct
Cleaning
(Per System)

**Dryer Vent
Cleaning only**

\$95

*Expires 1/19/13.
Not valid w/any
other offers.

Call or visit
our website
For Details!

Hurry Enroll in the

1BUCKS!

Rewards Program

All Loyalty Cards Come
Preloaded with \$50-\$3000!

A Trusted Resource Since 1955
for Cleaning, Repair, and
Restoration of the Region's
Finest Carpets & Rugs.

USHII

All Hadeed Employees Go Through
a Rigorous Background Check by
**UNITED STATES HOMELAND
INVESTIGATIONS INC.**

Have Peace of Mind Knowing That All of Our
Employees Are Professional & Courteous with
No Criminal Background! Drug Free &
Authorized to work in the U.S.

You Must
Check Out Our
New Website!

206 Duke St. Alexandria, VA 1-703-466-9704 1-801-637-1163

Find a complete listing of all our
convenient drop-off locations at... **HadeedCarpet.com**

above has numerous claims for your attention: special pricing, free pick up, new showroom, new website AND that they have vetted their employees. In short, there's too much. They sell rugs but they also clean rugs.

Besides having too much information, the fact this company is making sure you know that all their employees are checked out—that they have no criminal background, are drug-free and authorized to work in the US—is problematic.

The problem is that this company is bringing up a question that perhaps was not even on their customers' minds. Sure, it's good to say employees are carefully vetted, but to highlight that they have been submitted to a "rigorous background check" makes me wonder if a) they have had a problem with dishonest/criminal employees before; 2) whether this particular industry has a problem with criminals (and if so, why?) or 3) is this the most important thing I need to know about this company?

What do most customers want to know before they contract with a carpet cleaning company? That's the key question. This ad does not answer that. It tells me price is important as is location. I should be enticed by free pick up and delivery, and that I should rest assured that none of the employees I deal with are "illegal immigrants" or druggies or have a criminal background.

What you choose to highlight in your marketing communications pieces should be relevant to your audience's needs.

Your thoughts?

Marketers who assume targets are stupid

There are marketers out there who believe that their target audience is made up of stupid people. People who will buy anything, believe anything and do anything.

These marketers are the bottom-feeder telemarketers who tend to use robo-calls or use auto-dialers to call frequently at different times on different days. They play the CALLER ID system by using non-specific identifiers such as “Card Services” or “Holiday Rebate.” (I got a call today that had the CALLER ID as “Important Call”– yes, really.) They ignore the Do Not Call List and refuse to take you off their rolls.

These marketers use direct mail with no targeting or culling of lists. They send offers that are too good to be true. They ask for sensitive information just to enter you in a drawing for a fantastic prize you have zero chance of winning.

These marketers think that by running the same TV ad or print ad over and over and over and over again you will finally be convinced to cough up three convenient payments of \$19.99 plus shipping and handling.

These marketers think that by using an actor dressed as a doctor in an advertisement they are proving their miracle pill has been tested and approved by a reliable source.

These marketers think that sending spam email that says “Secure Notification” on the subject line will make you open an email from a bank with which you have no business.

These marketers think people are stupid and will buy anything that sounds great or will be scared by a letter that says this is your final notice (even though you haven’t gotten any notice before or even do business with that company).

Preying on people's stupidity or gullibility or fear is not ethical. It is not good marketing. And marketers who engage in these practices give all marketers a bad name.

The DVR Factor

Chances are good that if you have a cable service, you also have a DVR (digital video recorder). In fact, according to a Nielsen study, quoted in Mashable.com (here), the use of DVRs increased five-fold from 2006 to 2011. It seems that of all the devices connected to our TV, we use the DVR the most.



HD DVR photo by Apalapala on Flickr

Like the VCR of yore, the DVR lets you record a show for viewing at your convenience. Perhaps you are at work during the latest episode of Dr. Phil or you have to attend a family gathering during the Oscars. And unlike the VCR, DVRs use hard disk space, giving you hundreds of hours of recording time. A DVR would have been a tremendous help to me during the last episode of Felicity back in the 90s, which due to a VCR glitch, did not record and I never was able to watch it (but I digress).

Yesterday's New York Times has an article that says the

networks are now blaming the DVR for weaker ratings (although weaker shows may be more to blame).

There is no doubt that DVRs are affecting how we view TV. One immediate effect for most people is that we no longer view the commercials thanks to the fast forward button. Does this mean that advertisers should re-evaluate whether to even have TV commercials in the advertising mix? Well, yes, they should. Clearly, relying on TV commercials, especially on shows that people tend to record (perhaps daytime shows or late night shows), is a risky proposition.

However, keep in mind that fast forward does not mean delete. You have to watch the screen while you are fast forwarding, so an intriguing commercial may actually catch your eye and make you hit play.

The DVR Factor is that forgettable or boring commercials will not attract attention anymore, and will even be ignored. On the other hand, interesting and creative commercials will stand out and perhaps even be more memorable and effective.

We are surrounded by advertising—much of which we can skip or ignore. But we still pay attention to advertising messages that resonate with us, whether because they are eye-catching or interesting.

What do you think? Do you watch ads at all?

Can you sell on social media?

All sort of companies sell (sponsored Tweets, for example) on social media, so a better question is should you? In my opinion, the answer is no.

Wedding crashers

Think of it this way: you are at a wedding reception. You are busy chatting with relatives you haven't seen in ages while enjoying one or two glasses of champagne. Then, someone (think of this person as a wedding crasher) pops up, out of nowhere, and starts discussing health insurance options with you. First, you know this person is not invited to the wedding. Second, this person is a buzz kill. Right?

Time and place

Same thing happens when you are on Facebook or Twitter and someone you don't know is talking to you about something you don't want to discuss right then. And the truth is you may be interested in the product or service being offered, but the time and place are all wrong. It is wrong because you are on social networks to be social. You are not there to shop.

Are you pushing?

This is not to say you can't market or communicate with target audiences on social networks. If your emphasis is brand awareness or image building, I think social networks can be hugely helpful. But selling is a "push." And people don't like to be pushed when they are relaxed.

Perhaps this is a personal bias of mine, but I don't like being sold in general. The other day I was doing a bit of shopping at Tysons Corner (and I was in the buying mode), and I got hawked walking from store to store from the various vendors who sell their wares from carts. I found it hugely annoying (one of them even asked me if I was lazy because I didn't have a manicure and she was selling a manicure kit).

Do you think selling on social networks is effective? Have you bought something that was advertised to you on a social network?

Fostering creativity and other ideas from Ad Week DC

Yesterday, I attended the first day of Advertising Week DC, a yearly event that is hosted by the Ad Club of Metropolitan Washington. The theme of this year's week is "awe," as in awesome. It quickly became an annoying trope used throughout the day. I think what the organizers were trying to tap into was creativity—because that is what drives awesome campaigns, ads and/or concepts.

Of the nine presentations I attended yesterday, three stood out in regards to creativity.

Mad Women

The first was a presentation by Jane Maas, who has written a book about women in advertizing during the 1960s called *Mad Women*. Ms. Maas started her advertising career as a copywriter in the days when most women in advertising were secretaries. We've seen those days portrayed in *Mad Men*, and apparently, according to Maas, the portrayal is not far from the truth. People in the advertising world back then were busy smoking, drinking and having sex. Of course, people today are busy doing that, just not at the office. Drinking heavily at lunch was *de rigeur*. She gave the sense that advertising work was freer from constraints back then. There was more loyalty from clients, and ad agencies were willing to experiment. Perhaps the experimentation was fueled by alcohol, regardless, there seemed to be an attempt to push the envelope and see things differently.

A cool office...and CEO

Andrew Graff is the CEO of Boston agency Allen & Gerritsen. Graff spoke about how he has created a pretty cool environment at his agency, which is designed to foster creative thinking. First, he has given his staffers tons of perks, like free breakfast every day and pet health insurance. Second, he has built an office environment where people can work in different locations—cafe, sofa or cubicle. Third, he has implemented a mentorship program where he is being mentored by a 23-year-old. This has allowed Graff to understand how another generation thinks. The main points here are that people should enjoy coming to work and that work should not be structured in a traditional way. Graff says that if you are someone who needs a lot of structure to work, you won't be happy at Allen & Gerritsen (nor would you likely be hired). **To be creative—to think differently—you have to be able to see beyond structure.**

Cannes award-winning campaigns

The last program (before the kick-off reception) was a reel of the winners of the 2012 Cannes Lions International Advertising Festival. What's great about being able to see these diverse campaigns is that it showcases creative and impactful work from all over the world. A couple campaigns really stood out to me.

One was to save a library in Troy, OH. The people who were in favor of closing the library were saying that it was a tax issue. To counter that narrative the save-the-library folks came up with a social media campaign saying that they would be burning all the books once the library was closed. Folks were outraged at that suggestion. Then the save-the-library people said that closing the library was equivalent to burning books—effectively shutting down the taxes argument.

The other campaign that I thought was very creative was to encourage employers to hire workers with Down Syndrome. The campaign showed well known advertising (this was in Italy) but

replaced the people in the ads with people who have Down's. It was designed to make people see Down Syndrome in a more positive light.

What are you doing to foster creativity?

Lately, I have noticed the lack of creativity in commercials. It seems as though the same ideas are cycled over and over. Chances are that ad agencies are not fostering creativity as much as they are kowtowing to clients who are unwilling to take risks. There is no creativity without some degree of risk.

Pepco really really wants you to believe a story

Well, faithful blog readers, I thought I was done writing about Pepco's advertising efforts, but then I saw this nearly-full page ad in yesterday's (Sunday, July 29) *Washington Post* (again, I had to scan it in two parts):

In case you can't read the ad above, let me provide the content:

It's popular right now, even convenient, to beat up on Pepco. And because the facts have been misrepresented, that's easy to do.

But there's another side of the story. Some of our customers too the time to tell it. We thought we'd share.

If I understand this correctly, Pepco is saying that government officials like Rep. Chris Van Hollen, the Montgomery County Council, DC Mayor Gray, the media, and customers who are complaining about Pepco's dismal service are "beating up" on Pepco because the "facts have been misrepresented." What facts is the ad alluding to? We know (we lived) the facts: 780,000 of Pepco's customers lost power, and of those, most received power by July 4, five days after the storm. Other customers weren't restored until July 6. Those are the facts on the ground and they have not been misrepresented.

Pepco is attempting to convince you that you are wrong if you believe the narrative that Pepco did not do enough to restore power during the derecho (which was exactly one month ago from the date of the ad). Instead, Pepco parades 17 customer testimonials that are praising Pepco's performance (out of the 780,000 affected by the outage—that is an extremely meager 0.00217%).

The ad continues:

We know this isn't the way everyone feels—that many of our customers were frustrated. We want them to know that though our work is far from over, we are committed to continuing to improve. And despite what they may hear, our response to the derecho was swift, aggressive and in line with our neighboring utilities. That is an inconvenient truth that doesn't fit the storyline.

Thanks to the customers who took the time to shed some light on the real story.

So, Pepco is saying that it knows "some" customers are frustrated, but in essence, they have no right to feel that way because it doesn't fit the Pepco storyline. The Pepco storyline (and that is exactly what it is, a story that Pepco tells itself) is that Pepco works hard and that people have no

right to expect anything more from it. The 17 customers that they quote in the ad understand this “real story.”

Honestly, in my nearly 20-year marketing career, I have never seen something like this. It truly is a waste of advertising dollars (which Pepco customers are footing the bill for). To run an ad in the newspaper of record to tell customers that they are wrong to feel frustrated because they are being misguided by “misrepresented facts” is truly an outrage.

Again, Pepco’s communications department seems to be tone-deaf, and really really bad at advertising. Rule number one of advertising is that you don’t insult your customers.

Pepco management is desperate to improve its public perception. However, through these misguided and mismanaged advertising efforts, it is only hurting itself further.

Dominion vs. Pepco: How ads reflect corporate culture

Last week, I wrote about an ad campaign Pepco is currently running (there have been at least two or three more of the same ad I mentioned) in the Washington Post. Today, I noticed a full page ad on the back page of Section A in the Post, by Dominion Power (which services parts of Virginia and which had a million or so customers without power).

Because of the size of Dominion’s ad, here it is scanned in two parts:

Notice anything? Dominion ACKNOWLEDGES the problem, and focuses on their customers. There is no apology here either, but there is a more human touch to this ad than Pepco's. Both Pepco and Dominion say the same thing – the storm was devastating and the circumstances were challenging—but with different sentiment.

I believe that all marketing communications reflect a company's corporate culture. Some companies are more formal, some are more humane and some are more playful or fun. Some companies—think law firms—are all about formality and adherence to strict protocols. These companies will usually have dress codes and rigid standards of conduct. Their advertising/communications will also be formal and rigid. Other companies—think entertainment—are more relaxed. Their advertising is generally more creative.

WTOP (news radio here in Washington) hosted an incredible session last week with eight utility executives. Each company had suffered power losses from the derecho storm. They all said similar things—the storm was unexpected, they weren't prepared, tree trimming would not have helped since whole trees came down and burying power lines is very expensive. What was different amongst them was the tone. Dominion's executive said almost the same thing Pepco's Tom Graham said, but he said it without the condescension. He acknowledged how hard it was for the customers—Graham was concerned with his talking point (“reliability”) and with making excuses.

You can see the difference in corporate culture in Pepco's advertising versus Dominion's. Dominion is more down to earth, whereas Pepco doesn't seem to understand that “customers” are people. Pepco is more formal, more wordy. Dominion was inclusive (“Storms can tear things apart, but they can also bring us together”) while Pepco was divisive (We were tested and we responded). For Dominion, there's an attempt at

solidarity with customers.

What do you think? Do you think these ads reflect different corporate cultures and priorities?

Working hard or hardly working? Pepco strikes again

Maryland, Virginia and DC were hit hard last Friday night by a storm called a Derecho. It came straight at us with winds clocked at 70 miles per hour, lightning and rain, all which brought down branches and even whole trees. My house shook, the lights flickered, and then the power went out. I got out flashlight and immediately called Pepco. The initial message said crews were being assigned and I should have power restored by midnight. When I called the next 15 times, I got the same message each time: Crews would be assigned shortly.

Meanwhile, a million electric customers in the region were also without power, also not getting answers from their utilities. Intersections were dark and tempers were frayed—because not only was there no power, but record-breaking heat and humidity. I decamped to my local Cosi, which thankfully had power, coffee and free Wi-Fi. Pepco's website informed me that the more than 1000 customers in my section did not have an estimated restoration time. By Sunday, after Pepco finished surveying the damage, it announced a "global estimated restoration time" of Friday, July 6 at 11 pm (yes, a whole week later).

Now, Pepco has been running an ad campaign for the past several months. Here's a sample:

Notice the message: Pepco is working hard to improve its reliability.

But is Pepco doing enough? Is it reliable? After this fiasco, the answer seems to be no.

The commercial above makes claims that fly in the face of what happened on the ground. And what's more, taking a week to restore power (during a heat wave), seems to me to indicate that Pepco is not working hard enough (or has enough crews, etc.).

Yesterday, Marc Fisher from the Washington Post called me because he had seen my previous blog posts on Pepco. He asked me what I would recommend that Pepco do, communications-wise. Should they not advertise? I am not sure what the answer is. I do know that a commercial like the one above does not ring true, and I will bet that the ad gets taken off the air. Perhaps the best course for Pepco is to invest its ad budget into infrastructure, and when it has made REAL, significant improvements, then have a PR campaign to inform its public about what exactly has been done. Just a thought.

Here's Marc Fisher's article, that ran today (I am quoted on the second page): For Pepco customers still without power, patience wears thin.

It seems that Pepco's work still continues, and continues and continues. It is a long way from being what I would consider a reliable company.