

# You need a reality check

This morning, I was reading an personal advice column in the Washington Post. It was about a woman whose mother-in-law is constantly bad mouthing her and who is trying to protect her son from the MIL's barbs. The columnist's advice was to keep the MIL away from her impressionable son. But a reader offered a different perspective, saying that kids can see through those things and they can develop good relationships with grandparents in spite of this negativity. I don't know who is right, but it shows the need to look at something from a different perspective or even various viewpoints. In other words, the woman seeking advice needed a reality check.

## **What is a reality check?**

A reality check often provides a perspective we hadn't considered before or that we have discounted. It's why we often seek advice when making big decisions.

## **Why do you need a reality check?**

If you are facing any sort of challenge—marketing, communications, interpersonal—you need a reality check. When you don't get advice or outside perspective, you will make decisions that are not always sound. This is why there's value to doing research and holding focus groups before you launch a product. It's the value of hiring consultants to provide non-organizational viewpoints when you are trying to find a solution.

It's like when you don't get someone to proofread your work and it goes out with a typo or two. (As an aside, last month I saw a big typo in a poster for a large consulting firm's advertising campaign. It was classic...I wish I had a picture). You are so involved in something you no longer have a clear-eyed view of it. You don't see the shortcomings or the mistakes or the errors in judgement.



Pic by Fauxels from Pexels.com

## **It's the value of professional advice and an outside perspective**

In communications, the lack of a reality check often results in you missing the target or having a miscommunication. If you think something is clear because you understand it, it could be that somebody else does not get it. Perhaps you are using jargon that only people in your field use. Perhaps you are using language that is above the grade level of your audience. For example, a few years ago, I wrote some marketing copy for a hotel booking software company. I wrote that using this software would give hotel operators exponential growth. The client hated it! He said that most people won't understand what exponential means. I am not 100% sure he was right, but at the same time, he gave me a reality check about the words I was choosing to use.

## **Reality checks help avoid mistakes**

Reality checks in the form of outside counsel can often save you from making costly mistakes. You get a reality check whenever you hire a professional to do something for you. It

could be market research, or graphic design, or UX design, or copy editing. Let someone who has experience and an outside perspective help you.

Do you need a reality check?

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## Proofing to improve your credibility

It seems not a day goes by without me spotting at least one typo or other error in blog posts, newsletters and other communications (generally the digital type). I've even seen errors on the chyrons for the local news.



Here's a sampling from the past couple of weeks:

In a sub-headline on a TV news website, it said **baht** instead of bath (and spellcheck didn't pick it up because baht is the currency in Thailand).

On a headline on WETA's Tellyvisions blog, there's mention regarding the new season of a show called **Saniton** (which, in actuality is called Sanditon). (I just checked and this typo has been fixed).

In a newsletter from a restaurant it says a new menu will debut on **Wedensday**.

The call-to-action button on a communications agency's newsletter says, "Read the full case study on our **wesite**."

Those are glaringly obvious typos. There are many other not-so-glaring mistakes on stuff such as grammar (e.g., using the wrong pronouns or having a dangling modifier) and wrong information (e.g., saying an event is taking place on Tuesday when it is really taking place on Thursday).

It's human to make mistakes. We all do it. But when you make mistakes on professional or official communications, it undermines your credibility. It makes you look unprofessional, and sometimes it makes you look ignorant.

This need for checking your work is summarized beautifully in the The Freelance Creative article "Why Marketing Writers and Editors Need to Master Fact-Checking" when it says:

*"The more reliable and high-quality [the content] is for readers, the more it confers trust in and value of the brand behind it," Dimond said. "If a reader can't depend on the basic facts of a blog post, it's a clear message that they can't trust the brand."*

In other words, copy that is accurate and error-free helps

build your brand. Yet lately, I've noticed more mistakes than ever. It seems nobody is bothering to proofread, let alone fact check or copy edit.

What is causing this?

I think there are three reasons that account for the avalanche of mistakes I've seen lately:

### **1. Speed**

The biggest culprit is most likely speed. People are under pressure to get things done quickly, at the pace of social media. But rushing to get a newsletter out or post an article invariably leads to sloppy or no proofreading.

### **2. You don't know what you don't know and you don't even know to ask**

I got a newsletter a few days ago from a journalist. In it, he writes he made a mistake spelling a subject's name in the previous day's newsletter, something which was pointed out to him by a reader. This says to me that this journalist didn't even do basic fact checking (e.g., Google subject's name to see how it is spelled) nor had a copy editor look at his copy (copy editors routinely check spelling and other facts).

### **3. Lack of quality control**

Too many times people overestimate their abilities and don't take the step to have another person read/proof their work. Sometimes, there simply is no process in place to create a quality check before a communication goes out to the public.

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### **Bottom line**

Mistakes hurt your credibility. You can minimize the damage by creating a proofreading/fact checking/copy editing process

that you follow before sending or publishing every single piece of public communication.

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## 3 actions to improve your marketing communications

### Improving marketing means making it effective

It's not enough for your marketing efforts to include a clever headline, a fantastic design or great graphics. Your marketing communications need to be effective. To be effective, your communications must *resonate* with your intended audience. That is, audiences must *understand* what you are saying, *agree* with the premise, and then *act* (e.g., buy your product, donate to your cause, vote for your candidate).

But sometimes, marketing communications efforts don't achieve their goals. Here are three actions you can take that are guaranteed to improve your efforts. And improving your marketing communications could improve your results.

#### 1. Explain the why

Your primary task is to explain why your customer should do business with you. Is it because you have the best quality, the best prices, the highest reliability? Do you solve an issue your customer has? You also have to establish why someone would choose your organization over another organization that does the same thing.

#### 2. Use plain language

Plain language is about making it easy to understand what you are saying. Perhaps you think using big words and industry

terms makes you look more knowledgeable. It doesn't. It makes it harder for your audience to understand what you are saying. So lose the jargon and the multi-syllable words. Focus on making things easy to read and understand.

(Read my post on plain language: People should understand)

### **3. Pay attention to details**

The other day three packages were delivered to my door. I wasn't expecting anything, and when I opened the door, I saw none of them were for me. The delivery truck was still outside so I called out to the driver. She claimed that the GPS sent her to my house. The house number on the packages was the same as my house, but not the street. If you don't pay attention to details, you end up delivering packages to the wrong address.

You have to check and double check. Fact check and proofread everything, from the headline or the subject line to the website link to the caption. EVERYTHING. If you don't, you risk making sloppy mistakes.

Mistakes (sloppy or factual) result in lost credibility. Lost credibility results in lost support. Yes, details do matter.

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Here's the bottom line: Prioritize the basics of communications to improve your marketing efforts and boost your results.

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# 3 steps to clear customer communications

Clear communications provide accurate and up-to-date information. Being clear will help your audience know what is going on and what to expect from you. This requires making sure that you are not undermining your message by having different information in different places.

## **Pandemic challenges**

The pandemic has created some macro communications challenges around vaccine hesitancy and public health measures and mandates. On a micro level, I've noticed issues for businesses and organizations in communications changes to their customers and patrons. One that keeps cropping up is mask wearing rules. In Montgomery County, Maryland, where I live, mask mandates were dropped in the late spring/early summer and then brought back in early August in response to the Delta variant. These zig zag changes made it difficult for organizations to keep up. When the mask mandates went out, they changed certain webpages and email templates and when they came back, they may have not changed all their communications to reflect the new reality.

Take for example a yoga studio I go to which requires proof of vaccination for attendance. When you go to its website, it tells you that you can unmask because everyone will have shown their vaccine cards. But when you get your class enrollment confirmation email, you are instructed that you must mask up in class.

## **Is that your latest menu?**

But it is not only around COVID and masks that we see different information from different sources from the same organization. It could be different hours of operation on a

sign versus the website. Or a spring menu being listed on a restaurant's website when it's already fall.

## **Be accurate and consistent—here's how**

You can make sure that your communications are accurate and consistent across all your channels. Following are the three steps you'll need to take.

### **Step 1: Create a trigger list**

What kinds of things do you need to tell your audience about?

- *Changes (including updates) to:*
  - Policies
  - Staff/personnel
  - Hours
  - Location
  - Dates
- *Additions*
  - For example, you've added new classes or staff members
- *Deletions*
  - Perhaps your pool is closed for the season, or you are no longer offering a product.

### **Step 2: Audit your communication platforms**

You'll have to do an in-depth assessment of all the places you communicate with your customers, patrons, or donors. You want to know everywhere that people get information about you. While you are doing this, take the opportunity to make sure the information is consistent and updated. This includes (and is not limited to):

- Website (and remember to list ALL pages/areas of the website where information is listed). For example, you may have your hours listed on your homepage and then on

- your contact page.
- Email communications
- Signage
- Advertising and other marketing materials
- Staff (e.g., receptionist, information desk personnel, etc.)

### **Step 3: Create a checklist**

Create a checklist that you follow whenever a trigger occurs. You may choose to make this very specific. If your organization changes board members every year, you would list it followed by the places you need to update, such as the website about us or leadership page, the organizational letterhead, signage in your office, and so forth. The checklist could be a Word or Excel document that is accessed each time one of your trigger list items occurs. You'll then have a systematic way to make sure that each of your communication platforms is updated at the same time.

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Bottom line is that maintaining all your information updated, accurate and consistent keeps your customers and other patrons in the know.

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## **Storytelling versus writing**

I am a huge Scandi-noir fiction fan. Recently, I was reading (yet again) a mystery by an Icelandic author (in translation, of course). I noticed the writing was a bit stilted. Some of

the phrases didn't sound right, and I can only imagine this was a translation/translator issue. Translating is hard work. You need to understand the language, obviously. And you also need to understand author's tone and intent so you can choose the best word or phrase when many will do. This is especially true with colloquial expressions that don't translate directly. And I am sure these colloquialisms, and some peculiarities of Icelandic culture didn't quite make it in the translation. And yet there was a blurb on the book jacket by an American crime author, praising the Icelandic author, saying she was a "magnificent writer." I doubt that the American read the work in the original Icelandic, so she had no way to judge the writing. What she was judging, and rightly so, was the *storytelling*.

### **Storytelling versus writing**

Good storytelling is not the same as good writing, and neither is good writing also good storytelling. Writing and storytelling are two different, albeit related, skills.

Good storytelling pulls you in. It makes you want to know more.

Good writing is about knowing how to use language and its mechanics to communicate ideas clearly.

Can you have one without the other? Yes, you can. And I would argue that the best stories are also the best written.





Photo by Yaroslav Shuraev from Pexels

## **Think about your favorite book**

If you've ever read a book with an intriguing plot, but with utilitarian writing, you understand that storytelling is a skill separate from writing. Books written by good storytellers who are mediocre writers are readable because you are interested in the story and you want to know more.

If you've ever read a book that's so well written, where the words sing, but there is no discernible plot or the story being told is boring, chances are you stopped reading or read the book super slowly. Beautiful writing alone does not make a readable book.

And I would bet that your favorite books, the ones you recommend or perhaps even re-read, are the ones that have a great story and are well written.

## **Here's the bottom line for content writers**

For those of us who write any sort of content, focusing on *what* we are trying to say should come first. Then, we should think about *how* to say it. If we get both these elements—storytelling and writing—done right, we'll create content worth reading.

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# **Success starts with being targeted**

## **When you're left shaking your head**

The other day I got an email from someone who wanted to write

a guest blog post (presumably for this website) about how to get better sleep. Do you know what I did with that email? I deleted it. Why? Because if you take even a cursory look at this blog/website, you will note that it is not about sleeping, or health, or wellness, or anything related to getting better sleep. Also of note is that I write all posts on the blog. I don't have guest bloggers or any information on how to submit a guest blog.

A friend was telling me just the other day how she got a call about her expired car warranty. Except she doesn't even have a car.

And then there's the gas company that calls about your gas bill, and you don't even have gas at your house.

### **It probably is spam**

Yes, these are all examples of spam. We know spammers don't have time to research and target a message that is specific to you. That is why they are spammers. They send out the same message to everyone and hope that one hits the right target.

### **Effective marketing is not spam. It is targeted.**

The opposite of spamming is targeting. If you target your message to the right audience, you have a much better chance of success.

### **How do you target?**

To be targeted, you have to start with definition. You must understand exactly who needs or wants your product or service, and be able to describe those people or organizations. Once you know who you are selling to, you know your target audience. For example, if you are selling extended car warranties, your audience is people who own cars that are out of warranty. Perhaps you can further narrow it down by how old the car is and where these people are located.

Once you've defined your target audience, you have to figure out where you can find this group. Where does this group go to find information?

### **Bottom line**

Send your message to the right audience and you will be much more effective.

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## **Wishing for better communications in 2021**

Count me in as one of the many who are glad that 2020 is over. I am optimistic about the year ahead, in spite of the horrendous and deadly insurrection last week at the U.S. Capitol.

There's a lot to look forward to this year: a new administration, worldwide COVID vaccinations, and the subsequent return to normalcy. Maybe by the end of 2021 we'll be back to attending in-person events!



As a communicator, I thought the biggest lesson of 2020 was the need to adapt and quickly. Events went from in-person to virtual. Many workers were no longer commuting to their offices (I wonder what happened to drive time radio costs!). There was (and continues to be) a lot of stress and anxiety. Those realities impacted marketing efforts. We saw an increase in email marketing, on-line presentations and events, and a general toning down of advertising.

Now that we are in a new year, I have five wishes to make 2021 the year for more effective, high-impact communications.

### **1. Use email marketing more effectively**

At the end of the year I got bombarded with donation pleas from many nonprofits—and I mean several in just one day. On December 31, 2020 it was particularly bad, as I got emails from each and every organization I have supported, and one organization sent me four or five emails! And then there's Overstock.com, which sends at least an email every single day—one day offering me 12% off and the next 15%. The lesson here is: Don't overwhelm your customer or donors. Be strategic and think of your recipient. And then there's the many small groups who are still sending all-image emails. The problem here is that unless the recipient downloads the images, your email appears blank. Follow some guidelines before you send out that next email. Jill Kurtz wrote a great Email Marketing Checklist, which is worth a read.

### **2. Leverage your website**

Your website is your reception desk to the world. If people have questions, chances are they will check your website before they call. It follows your website should have all the information they need. Keep it updated, especially with any COVID protocols you are following. For many, the idea of spending money to update a website in these times may be anathema. However, an outdated website will result in customer

frustration and maybe even lost business.

### **3. Focus your social media efforts.**

This is they year to choose your social media platforms and embrace them. The truth is that you can't effectively manage too many platforms. You won't be able to have meaningful engagement if you have to monitor too many streams. Choose the platforms that *perform* best for you, where you have the most traction and/or where the majority of your audience is. Do you really need to be on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, TikTok, etc? I am not saying that you can't try out a new outlet, but if you do, and it works well, perhaps you replace instead of adding. And if you are using multiple platforms, create content with each platform in mind. The post you use on LinkedIn should not be the same as the one you use on Twitter.

### **4. Use Zoom or Livestream more effectively.**

Check out my post about this. I've spent too much time having to hear people explain how to use Zoom, muting/unmuting, and just plain wasting time reading lengthy presenter bios. People are spending much more time in front of computer screens, and want you to get to the point. I can read the bio myself if you send it in an email or provide a link to it during the presentation.

### **5. Copy edit and proofread all your marketing materials, including (perhaps especially) social media posts.**

The other day, my local police department posted about how a driver ended up with her car on the train tracks because she used the gas pedal instead of the "breaks." And the local weather Twitter feed told me there would be "peaks" of sun. These are very small examples, but when you make these type of mistakes, you are showing a lack of care. So, proof everything before it goes live. And say what you mean clearly and concisely, and if you need help doing so, use a copy editor!

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Happy New Year 2021! Let's work on making it better for our communications. If you have a 2021 communications wishes, share them with me in the comments.

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## What helps businesses thrive during COVID-19?

While many businesses, especially restaurants and small retailers, have seen their revenue drop because of COVID-19, others have thrived.

Some business failures are due to circumstance and public health regulations, such as lock down orders and capacity restrictions. But in some cases, businesses failed because they were unable to respond to the new situation.

### **Not adapting to the situation:**

I know a small, local gift store carries an item I was shopping for. I went to Google and found the store has no website. According to the Google business information, this store opens weekdays at 10:00 a.m. I headed out to the store on a Wednesday around 2 p.m. I found a handwritten note on the door listing the shop's (reduced) hours, which said the store opens Monday through Thursday noon to 4:00 p.m. However, the lights were off and the store was closed, and I was not able to buy what I needed.

To recap, this store has:

- No website (and thus no way to shop online)
- No updated Google business information

- No social media

### **Making the best of the situation:**

Then, because I still needed this item, I checked out a larger gift store within 10 miles of the small store. This other store does have a website, with online ordering, so I was able to determine whether they carry what I am looking for. It also has updated its Google information, which reflects that it provides curbside pickup. I explore the website, and I find out exactly what COVID measures the store is taking (i.e., requiring masks, providing sanitizer, restricting the number of people in store, widening the aisles to allow for social distancing, and increasing the air circulation).

This second store has:

- Updated website that includes COVID-specific information and the ability to order online
- Updated Google business information
- Social media, with a robust Facebook presence that includes videos and special deals.

### **How do businesses thrive during COVID? Here are three must-dos:**

**Embrace digital more than ever.** Restaurants and small retailers embraced online ordering (just as the big box stores have done for years). My local library switched to an online ordering and appointments-based way to get books. Successful organizations use all types of digital presence:—social media, websites, Google profiles, e-newsletters, etc.—to communicate with customers, clients, or donors. With many people choosing to stay home or working from home, the internet has become even more important.

**Be aware of the situation and explain how you are responding.** Do you understand how your customers feel? Are they anxious about getting the virus? Do they want to shop safely? Do they

want to save money? COVID has changed the reality for everyone. You have to make changes, and more importantly, you have to make sure your customers know what you are doing to respond to the situation.

**Go virtual and like it.** Many organizations and businesses use events to drum up support and sales. In 2020, events went from being in person to being virtual. Using a virtual format is not the same as being in person, but to succeed, organizations need to embrace this reality and adapt to it. Churches and synagogues started using Zoom and other livestreaming software to provide religious services to their congregants. Associations moved their annual meetings to be virtual. Some stores, such as the second example above, switched their product demonstrations to platforms such as Facebook Live.

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The bottom line is that to thrive during COVID, businesses have to adapt. Failure to adapt will also mean failure to thrive.

Have you seen good examples of adaptation? Please share in the comments.

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## **Avoid Zooming and frustrating your audience**

**We've all become Zoom pros, or have we?**

Sure, we know what Zoom is, and we've probably used it dozens of times in the past few months, but are we really pros at it?

Based on my recent experiences with Zoom presentations, I would say no.

Just yesterday, I was on two different online meetings. In the first meeting, one of the presenters was having audio difficulties (her talk was garbled). She went on for several minutes and the audience could not make out what she was saying. Then several minutes more were wasted in telling her to call in, etc. In the second meeting, somebody “forgot” to turn off his/her mic and we could hear cooking sounds in the background, and then chewing as this person settled down with the dinner he/she had prepared. It was immensely distracting and annoying.

Wasting time and making it hard to hear a speaker adds up to audience frustration. So, if your organization uses online video conferencing to engage with your audience/conduct meetings/host events, it is time to lay out some ground rules so that you can avoid chaos and have a smooth online experience.



Photo by Anna Shvets from Pexels

## **Select the correct online video conferencing provider and package**

Although Zoom has become the most popular platform, there are other video conferencing providers, including GotoMeeting, Webex and others. Read more about the best alternatives to Zoom in ZDNet and Wired.

To select the proper platform, you'll need to determine what will suit your needs best. Questions to ask yourself include:

- What will you be using the videoconferencing for? Staff meetings, presentations, online conferences
- What functionality do you need? Recording capability, audience interaction, question and answer, breakout sessions, ability to share screens/videos/slides, etc.
- What's your budget?

## **Map out your online event.**

Your meeting or presentation should be planned out, with time allocating to each participant/speaker, and with a written agenda if possible. Mapping out how an event will go, will make it easier to keep it on track.

## **But, build in time and plan for technical difficulties**

There will be glitches. Your presenter may not have strong enough internet signal, or the provider could be experiencing problems. Know beforehand what you will do if a presenter can't log on, or the video software is not working. Have a Plan B, which could include a reschedule date, alternative presenter, alternative software, etc.

## **Have a moderator and make sure he or she sets up ground rules**

Do not start any meeting or presentation without making sure everybody is following some ground rules. Perhaps everybody's

mic is muted, or everybody's video is on (or off). Tell your audience who to contact if there are technical difficulties, and how. Make sure to let people know if you are recording, and when/whether the recording will be available. If this event is public, you could sent participants an email explaining the ground rules, and also make sure your moderator repeats them at the beginning of the event.

### **Understand Zoom fatigue is real**

Online video conferencing has been a godsend, but it is not the same as an in-person event. When we've convened people in person, we probably have given them comfy seats, or provided snacks and drinks, and time to schmooze. But when we present online, people are sitting where they always have, in an environment that is probably the same day after day. Dispense with the long introductions, and the long lists of thank yous. Send those in an email. Get to the point. People have limited patience for you.

### **The bottom line**

Cut down the distractions, and make the screen time worthwhile for your audience.

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## **Are you asking the right questions?**

No doubt, you've heard that Congress is looking into new Postmaster General Louis DeJoy's handling of the USPS. In the last few weeks since DeJoy took his post, the mail has slowed

down, sorting machines have been removed and the post office has told the states to be aware of these issues in planning for mail-in ballots. DeJoy was asked to appear before the Senate on Friday, and the House on Monday.

### **Representative Katie Porter is very good at asking questions**

On Monday, Representative Katie Porter (D-CA), used her questioning skills to establish just how little DeJoy knows about the agency that he is leading. Rep. Porter asked DeJoy if he knew the cost of postcard stamp (he didn't) or how many people vote by mail (he didn't). You can read more about it in [this Rolling Stone article](#) or [this one in Vox](#).

Rep. Porter knew what information she wanted to obtain from DeJoy to expose how unqualified he is to lead this agency, let alone reform it, and she asked the right questions to get what she wanted.

### **Asking the right questions is crucial to getting what you want.**

If you ask the wrong questions or not enough questions, you are not going to get the information you need.

Over the weekend, I reviewed a promotional article for a small nonprofit. The article was long and did not get to the point until the last paragraph. I re-organized the paragraphs, and added some crucial information. The nonprofit hadn't known enough to ask the right questions.

### **What questions do you need answers to?**

When you are writing any communication materials, you need to ask the right questions. These include:

- Who is the intended audience for this piece?
- What do I want the audience to know?
- What does the audience need to know in order to act?
- What is the most relevant information that I need to

communicate?

If you don't ask these questions, you are not going to produce the right information or what you produce is not going to be effective.

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Bottom line: To produce effective communications, you must start with asking yourself the right questions.