

Challenge #1: Tick off verbal tics

Starting **every** sentence with words or phrases such as honestly, frankly, truly or in reality.

Describing things using the **same adjective or adverb** every single time. You know, that show was terrific, it was fantastic, it was tremendous.

(Over) relying on **certain expressions** (generally cliches) such as “at the end of the day” or “right back atcha” or “takes two to tango.”

I think of these as verbal tics. We are not even aware that we are using these verbal crutches. And they can creep into our writing, especially in social media posts. They may distract readers and listeners or even make them tune out what you are saying.

The summer’s first challenge is to rid yourself of verbal tics (or at least reduce them).

Here are the three steps to take:

1. **Identify** these verbal tics in your writing or speaking. Start paying attention to yourself and your writing. Do you find yourself saying certain things over and over?
2. **Figure** out why you are saying this. Why do you have to preface your statement with “honestly?” Are you generally not honest? Is it just habit? Is there any other way to say this?
3. Now, this is the hard part: **eliminate** the word or phrase completely. Try doing this for a day or two. If you catch yourself about to use one of your verbal tics, find another word or phrase to use instead.

This won't be easy. We get into patterns and it's hard to stop. And that's the point of this challenge: becoming aware of your patterns.

What do you think? What is your verbal tic? Are there verbal tics that your colleagues have that drive you nuts? Tell me!

UPDATE:

Seems that even the New York Times has verbal tics, as the article [The New York Times lists its crutch words](#) points out. Verbal tics are crutches for sure!

Make it a challenging summer!

In the marketing communications world, it seems like summer is a quiet time of the year. People are on vacation. Summer Fridays are in force. This makes it a great time of the year to take on a few challenges.

I think summer is a good time to shake things up. On a personal level, you may have certain goals for the next couple of months. Maybe, like me, you want to spend as much time outdoors as possible. Maybe you want to learn a new skill. Maybe you just want to have fun.

How about making it a challenging summer?



Obstacle 14 from the West
Point, The US Military
Academy Flickr stream Photo
by Tommy Gilligan

For the next **eight weeks**, I'll be issuing a weekly challenge to do with your writing, social media and blogging. Although there will be no scoring and no prizes (sorry), it's a way to shake things up and to make things better while you watch the thermometer hit 90 degrees and higher.

The first challenge will be posted tomorrow. To participate, simply read the post. Your comments are welcome here on the blog or you can post on Twitter using the hashtag #summerchallenge.

The namaste guide to smart marketing

Namaste.

"The light in me honors the light in you." That's what *namaste* means in Sanskrit. It's a beautiful greeting that is often used at the end of a yoga class (or sometimes at the beginning).

Good yoga teachers honor their students. They respect their limitations and seek to teach them to work with their bodies. What does this have to do with marketing? It's simple. Like yoga teachers, good marketers honor their customers by getting to know them and understanding their needs and then

customizing messages (and media) for the customers.

You should know that I have practiced yoga for more than ten years, and have been to many studios and had many teachers. I've been taking a break for the past couple years, but yesterday, I attended my first class in a long time at a new-to-me studio.

Not-so-good yoga teacher (no knowledge of students)

The teacher walked in to the studio and although she smiled and said hello to me, she did not introduce herself or ask me my name or more importantly, any questions regarding my knowledge of yoga. She also did not ask the class as a whole if there were any injuries or issues she should be aware of. She started the class (late but that is another story) and pretty much assumed everybody understood everything, to the point she was using the Sanskrit terms for many of the poses. As I mentioned, it's been a while, and I did not recall the difference between *utrasana* (standing forward bend) and *utkatasana* (chair pose). Everybody seemed to be following, but I could not help but think a real beginner would be completely lost. And forget somebody with injuries although she did offer a few modifications (if your knee hurts, don't do this).

Much better yoga teacher (customizes teachings to students' needs)

Contrast her disinterest with another teacher I had at another studio. He wanted to know how much yoga I had practiced and if I had any physical limitations. I told him that my knee had been bothering me and he made a point of explaining what I could do differently and how to protect myself from injury or further pain. **He tailored his teaching to my needs.** Instead of telling me not to do something because it hurt, he offered alternative poses or different ways of

doing the pose. He took into account the levels of knowledge in the class. It was very clear he wanted to teach yoga to people while honoring their bodies and their limitations (there is actually a Sanskrit term for this – *ahimsa*– to not injure).

Good yoga teachers work to understand students' limitations and then offer modifications. Good yoga teachers do not push students to do something that is not within their level of practice. Good yoga teachers practice namaste –honoring others–by understanding those others.

Knowledge + customization = smart marketing

Smart marketers work hard to understand their customers. They know who and where their customers are and what they want and need. Then, with this knowledge, they tailor their marketing messages to the customer's needs.

Think about the last spam email you got. Perhaps you got an email about a “miracle” diet pill or getting listed in a mythical directory. You probably deleted those emails right away because those messages were not tailored to you. Spam marketers are not smart marketers. They are mass marketers. They send the same message to everyone and hope something sticks.

Honor your customers. Provide messages and offers that make sense for them.

Namaste.

The best way not to get business

Friends, I got a spam email today that just has to be read to be believed. Here it is in its entirety, my comments below:

Dear business owner of deborahbrody.com

Your deborahbrody.com business is losing THOUSANDS of DOLLARS every year, maybe more!

Why? How?

Your credit card processor HIDES THEIR FEES. Don't believe it? Check your statement, I'm sure you will be just as confused as the next business owner.

□DO NOT WORRY – I have the solution as I just saved a similar to your business in your street about \$5700 in yearly credit card processing fees. The guy is so happy – I have the same offer for you!

I'm a business consultant specialist and this offer isn't available for everyone. Only for deborahbrody.com – FOR FREE. Cost to you is NOTHING but 5 minutes of your time.

If you are interested, just let me know and I'll provide more information for you. I apologize if this email is an inconvenience, I just know what I have done for others in your business, and didn't want you to miss too good of an opportunity in.

There are only so many your type of business we can sign up though – so if you are going to do it, I'll need to hear from you now.

Oh yeah, I know the area where you are located, know it pretty well actually.

☐Thanks for your time!

Cheers!

Jessica

Business Consultant

This could be a textbook example of how not to send an query/pitch letter. Here's what's wrong:

1. **No personalization.** If "Jessica" can find my website, she can also find my name.
2. **Making (wrong) assumptions.** I am losing thousands in credit card fees? Do I even do any credit card processing? And would I be confused by fees?
3. **Poor grammar.** There aren't any spelling mistakes, but "Jessica" certainly did not get an A in her high school English class with this sentence "didn't want you to miss too good of an opportunity in."
4. **Being too informal.** "Oh yeah, I know the area where you are located, know it pretty well actually." (Also, what is that supposed to mean and why is it relevant?)
5. **Being shady.** Notice "Jessica" does not say what she actually does. She also doesn't provide any contact information, business name or anything else.
6. **Insulting my intelligence.** Five minutes of my time is all I need to save thousands. I am sure she also has bridges in Brooklyn for sale for cheap.

The only reason I did not immediate delete this email is because I thought it would make a great blog post.

Have you received these types of emails? What makes you cringe? Please share!

The most important trait for any communicator

Several months ago I attended a presentation on content marketing. The presenter has become a mini-celebrity in the field, and has even published a book on the subject. However, this person had the unfortunate tendency to let her voice lower so much you had to strain to hear her. It was completely distracting and seriously took away from the content of the presentation. I don't think I could sit through another presentation *in spite of her expertise in the field*.

Just this morning, I came across an article from Inc. Magazine entitled "5 Ways People Hurt Their Credibility." It points out that you can seem less credible by not controlling your voice (the situation I pointed out above) or by having poor posture. **Obviously, as a communicator, it's important to establish your credibility.** Credibility is key to convincing your clients that your communications plan will help boost their recognition or establish their brand. You won't get far in pitching the media if you lack credibility.

There's no doubt that you must establish and protect your credibility and the trait that will allow you do so is **self-awareness**. If you aren't self-aware, you won't even be able to recognize any of the behaviors pointed out in the Inc. article.

So many people are blind to their shortcomings precisely because their biggest shortcoming is a lack of self-awareness. If you aren't able to examine your behaviors and beliefs to find areas for improvement, you aren't able to change. And you will continue to do stuff that may be detrimental to your career.

How do you become more self-aware? You start with the knowledge that you will need to start paying close attention to what you are doing and how people are reacting to you. You can also ask for feedback to see if how people perceive you is the same as the way you perceive yourself.

Do you agree that self-awareness is the most important trait any communicator should have? If not, what do you think? Let me know in the comments.

Is professional development worth it?

In communications-related professions (PR, advertising, marketing, etc.), we aren't really required or obligated to complete Continuing Education Units (CEUs) to stay up to date or licensed in our fields. That's too bad because things change all the time and you must keep up if you want to stay relevant and informed.

So yes, I think professional development is a must. Since we don't have a defined, structured program like CPAs or social workers trying to maintain licenses and accreditation, how and where do we get our professional development? And how much do

we need to pay for it?

There is no one communications industry conference we must attend, but yet there are dozens of communications-related conferences around the country, such as Content Marketing World and PRSA International Conference and others. Some of them are really expensive, as in nearly \$2,000, not including airfare and hotel. Is professional development worth that?

Of course, there are dozens of local lower-cost options, such as lunch and learns, offered to members and nonmembers by the various comms/marketing organizations (IABC, PRSA, AMA, etc.). Webinars are also becoming very popular. And then there are some free options, including various Meetups. But is low cost or even free professional development worthwhile?

My answer is that it depends. An expensive conference may be worth the cost if you learn a lot and make good networking connections. A free meetup may not be worth it if you don't even pick up a useful bit of information. **It's not about cost, it is about value.**

The trouble is that it can be pretty hard to determine the value.

I have attended several lower cost professional development events that have been extremely worthwhile, and then I have gone to some that have been a complete waste of money, time and effort. It' all depends on the quality and background of the presenters and the moderators, and also of the organization. Is the room suited for the presentation? Will you be able to hear and see OK?

Last night I attended a free nonprofit/tech happy hour at a bar (in a private area) with a speaker, who spoke for about ten minutes. I didn't learn anything new. But then again, he didn't have a formal presentation (no PowerPoint) and he was at a very informal setting. Contrast that with a free MeetUp that I attended a couple of weeks ago, in a more formal

setting, where the speaker spoke for 45 minutes or longer and had a presentation deck to refer to. I came away from that one with lots of food for thought. Both opportunities were free, both about related subjects, but one had much more value than the other.

One of my favorite, and very inexpensive, professional development opportunities is WordCamp (a volunteer-run, volunteer-led presentation on all things WordPress). I have been to three already, and am planning to attend WordCamp Philly in a couple of weeks. For the \$20-\$30 price of attendance, I have picked up quite a lot of useful information.

The bottom line is that as a communicator, you must budget time and money for professional development. You'll have to research and attend several types of events to find the ones that offer the most value. Staying current is crucial in communications.

Answer these basic questions

I was watching the midday news today. We had a lot of rain overnight and there was flooding in some areas. Apparently, there was even flooding in Rockville, where I live. A reporter was out somewhere in Rockville telling about how a car got stuck in a flooded road. Except she never said where in Rockville this road was located. And that's what I really wanted (needed) to know: **where exactly** is it flooded so I can avoid the area.

Perhaps this reporter has forgotten her Journalism 101 class, which teaches that every story should answer these questions:

Who?

What?

Where?

Why?

When?

How?

In fact, the answers to these basic questions are the basis for any story, whether told by a reporter on TV or a public relations practitioner in a press release or a website copywriter. To answer those questions means to tell the most important part of any story. Everything else is additional detail and description that can make a story more compelling or interesting.

And yet, how many press releases are missing answers to these questions? How many websites don't answer the why or the how of whatever product or service they are promoting?

If you want to succeed at storytelling and content marketing, you must answer each and every one of these questions. If you can't, you need more information. If you won't, you are probably trying to hide something or you didn't do your homework.

Need to tell the complete story in your marketing materials? Contact me to see how we can work together

to get beyond the basics.

What my gym's #fail can teach you about marketing

At the gym this morning, we experienced a paper towel fail. There are two automated paper towel dispensers on the main floor, and both were out of paper. Since you are supposed to wipe your machine down after exercising (and some of us, knowing most people don't do that, wipe it down before), and people need the paper to do this, we could potentially be looking at many sweat and germ drenched machines.



Treadmills by Montage H0A
on Flickr

In any case, I got the last bit of paper out of one, and was able to wipe my machine and start exercising. After me, at

least ten people walked up to the machines, waved at them fruitlessly and walked away. Most just left their machines without wiping them off. A couple of people walked over to the other room and got paper there. And then someone finally reported the missing paper to the front desk.

What is the marketing lesson here? There are three:

1. Most people will not speak up. It seems to be something about human psychology that most people will not rock the boat, even if something is wrong.

Marketers should never assume that because no one has said anything, everything is OK. That's why it's so important to measure and check!

2. Most people will not go out of their way, even if they know they should do something. It may be laziness or hurry or something else, but most people will not take extra steps or go out of their way.

Marketers (especially of causes) have to make things as easy as possible. Too many steps will just make people give up.

3. People are completely self-involved. Most people don't notice what is going around them. If so, all those people would have seen there was no paper instead of standing there doing what another person did five seconds before them.

Marketers have to break through both the clutter and the self-involvement.

Comments are always appreciated!

Need help with your marketing materials? If so, contact me to

discuss how we can cut through the clutter and make change happen.

Are you scaring off your prospects?

It seems that many vendors and service providers are resorting to scare tactics to get prospects to do something: renew, register, etc. They use pressure terms and frequent reminders to communicate that if you don't do something right at this moment you will forever be suspended, terminated, interrupted or be victim to some other dire scenario. You won't pass go and you won't collect \$200 for sure.

For example, just this morning I received a renewal email from a county program I am enrolled in. This is the first paragraph, which I have redacted to hide the sender's identity:

Deborah Brody,

Your certification as a registered vendor in the XXX Program will expire within the next 90 days. If you wish to remain in this program, you must renew your registration before 08/04/2014. If you have not renewed your registration by 08/04/2014, your participation in the XXXX will be suspended until you have done so.

Granted, this is not the scariest email, but it is not very friendly. To say my participation will be suspended sounds a

bit threatening. What if, instead, it said something like:

Dear Deborah Brody,

You are currently certified as a vendor in the XXXX Program, and your certification is due to expire August 4. We value your participation and ask that you renew your registration by August 4 so that you can remain in the program without interruption.

Better no?

And then there are the endless emails I get from Network Solutions with subject lines like: *Your Services Will Be Interrupted*. Mind you, I have more than a month until I have to renew, but yet NetSol sends me variations on this email two and three times a day! I feel harassed, and now I am searching for another registrar.

Pressuring your prospects can become a turn-off. Sending too many emails is a form of pressure, and often, adds to the prospect's stress level. You don't want to stress your prospect, do you? What you want is to encourage him/her to make a decision.

Think about motivations, and how people respond. Do people respond positively to a negative pitch? Perhaps some do. However, as the refrain goes, you attract more bees with honey than with vinegar. Compliments are better than criticisms. Feeling like a hero is better than feeling like a deadbeat loser.

What do you think? How do you respond to negative emails? Do you ever feel harassed or threatened by vendors and service providers?

You need a great headline...and great content

We all know how important headlines are. When we are constantly scanning our devices, we need to be able to select what we want to read quickly, and headlines help us do that. So, no argument here about great headlines.

However, what happens when the article associated with the great headline is not so great?

Case in point: My mother happened to see a headline promising seven secrets to getting the best seats on a plane. She was intrigued as she flies quite frequently. And as anybody who has flown in the past year knows, comfortable seating is now a thing of the past as airlines try to cram more seats in a plane while charging fees for sitting in areas like the bulkhead and emergency row.

Well, guess what the main “secret” to getting a better seat is? Pay for it. Seriously. This article, promising seven “secrets” to get better seats, had **two** main suggestions (a more accurate term for what the article offered): check the aircraft seating map and pay if you have to.

Needless to say, this useless article did not live up to its headline. Since the article was so poor, I don't even remember who wrote it. However, I do know what website this garbage was on. It makes me question whether other articles on that website are as bad.

The bottom line is that writing a great headline is not enough. If your content fails to live up to headline what you are doing is tricking your readers, and readers do not like to be tricked.

Getting readers to your content is important, but if your

content disappoints, you will end up with disappointed readers. That is not a strategy for growth.

Have you come across articles that don't live up to their headlines? Did that change your behavior toward the source?