You aren't on social media???

Those of use who work in a communications-related field have been quick to embrace and promote social media. We use social networks actively, we counsel clients to get on social media, and here's the kicker, some of us frown on those who don't do social media.

But how important is it to business to be on social media?

Just this morning, I read how Gini Dietrich of Spin Sucks is now a Hertz customer because her former favorite car rental company, Avis, failed her on social media. It would seem that businesses are at peril if they ignore customer complaints expressed on social media.

The book <u>Groundswell</u> by Charlene Li also counsels that businesses must adapt to the reality that customers are on social media, and will talk about you whether you participate or not in the conversation.

And yet, there are many many successful businesses that don't have a Facebook page, that are not on Twitter, have never heard of Pinterest—**and don't care**. For example, there's an accounting firm in McLean, VA that created a website seven years ago and has barely updated it since and that has absolutely no social media presence. Or the marketing firm that has a blog last updated more than a year ago. Or the many solo practitioners I have met that don't even have a website.

The truth is you can be in business, and even be successful, without doing social media. Social media is just a platform, like television or radio. If you don't use it, you may not reach a certain segment of the population, but that does not mean that you aren't reaching your target audience.

The big issue is that consumers take to social media to voice their complaints (not so much their compliments) about

businesses. Those consumers figure that the amplification power of social media will shame businesses into fixing their problem. And in many cases, this is exactly what happens. Unlike the mass media of yore, social media allows for far more connection and interaction between businesses and consumers.

But what if your business is not a huge national brand? Does it matter? I don't think it does.

That said, I believe that being on social media is an asset to any business. Social media networks can help grow connections and create new relationships. Social media helps to market and grow a business, and expose it to new audiences.

Businesses do not need social media to thrive, but they should consider using social media to grow.

What do you think? Do you judge businesses if they aren't on social media?

Is robotic social media worth it?

On Wednesday, I wrote about how some Twitter accounts seem to be run by Rosie, the robot maid on The Jetsons. But robotic social media happens on other social networks and even on blogs. Since so many people seem to be doing it, what is the value of robotic social media?

Robotic social media? That's a thing?

First, what do I mean by robotic social media? I mean social media that is cursory, unengaged, formulaic, uninspired, and there because someone thought it was a good idea to be present (but not active) on social networks. It's the one tweet a day that announces a new blog post. Or the automated "thank you for following me" tweet. It's the blog post that has no salient point and seems written just to have some new content on your site. It's the LinkedIn profile that has not seen an update in three years, since it was set up.

Robotic social media nearly always depends on some sort of "social media management tool" that usually cross posts for you, and basically handles social media by algorithm.

Why would you do that?

I have been thinking about why people would use social media in such a non-social way. There are probably several reasons, for example:

- For SEO purposes
- Too busy to manage social media on your own
- To check off social media on the communications plan tactics

Only one of these could has some sort of value: SEO. Certainly, due to changes in search engine algorithms, social media has impact on search results. The theory is that being present on social media *helps* your search results. However, I believe that search engines reward influence, and being robotic (unengaged) does not lead to influence.

Perhaps, it is even counteractive

I wrote about the woman who admitted she uses a Twitter management tool and that she really hadn't known she "knew" me from Twitter. Now, I know that there's no there there. So no more interaction. Davina Brewer in the comments on that post mentions something that happens every day, with big brands and

regular people: no response to direct tweets/messages. In fact, just this morning, I tweeted LinkedIn to ask a question, and still no response.

When I don't get a response, I assume that person/brand/organization doesn't care or doesn't even monitor their messages. I then stop interacting. I bet many people stop interacting or even following brands/organizations when their comments are not even acknowledged.

In my opinion, <u>robotic social media is not worth it</u>. To do something just because you think you have to, and then do it by proxy, is not going to accomplish any goals other than checking something off your to-do list.

As many have said before, social media is a platform not a strategy. If you don't use the platform, it doesn't mean you don't have a communications strategy. Use the platform well, on the other hand, and you will further your communications strategy rather than stymie it.

*Don't be robotic! Come learn how to blog with me in the **How to Write Your Blog** workshop on April 1 in Washington, D.C. You will learn what makes for an effective blog, how to come up with blog post ideas and how to connect with your audience. Details and registration here.*

Who needs grammar?

Twitter just reminded me that today is National Grammar Day so I shelved what I was going to write (something about nonprofit communications, which I will post later on in the month) so that I could mark this momentous occasion and pay tribute to the power of grammar.

Proper grammar (and punctuation, usage and spelling) makes both written and spoken communication better and easier to understand. Without it, we are left wondering what was meant exactly. After all, if you're trying to make your point, you wouldn't want to mess it up by using the wrong possessive or contraction. And it would affect your writing if you didn't know the effect of your word choice.

Now, I am no grammar queen. That would be Grammar Girl. I recommend buying (and reading too) her very useful reference book: Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing.

Another favorite reference is Eats Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation by Lynne Truss.

You really need to have at least one grammar book on your shelves or in your electronic library.

Who needs grammar? We all do! Oh, and by the way, March is National Reading Month. If you want to improve your grammar, reading (the more, the better) is the key.

Come learn to blog with me! My next How to Write Your Blog workshop takes place on April 1 in Washington, DC. Get more details and secure your place here.

One action that guarantees

social media success

Yesterday, an acquaintance posted a picture of an elaborate, girly birthday cake she had made for her daughter's birthday. She had written "Happy 4th Birthday to my baby" as a caption. I commented saying "Beautiful cake! How old is she?" Someone, let's call her Jane, wrote back "ummmm Deborah. She's 4." I then looked at the post and realized that it indeed said the little girl had turned four. I was focused one the picture and my eyes just skipped the "4th" and read happy birthday to my baby." So I responded: "Sorry Jane. I was looking at the picture. Excuse my stupidity." To which Jane (someone I don't know and who doesn't know me): "I know. I just couldn't resist. It just struck me as so funny!"

Now I don't know Jane, but it was pretty obvious that she was trying to make fun of me, a stranger, in front of our mutual acquaintance and all of her friends. If she had stopped for just a couple of seconds and asked herself if the comment was necessary, she may have opted to skip it. People reading it would have realized I didn't read the caption correctly or they would have ignored it.

This is pretty mild stuff, I know. But people routinely post stuff quickly and with little thought to the consequence. For a "heavier" example, there's the Virginia politician who posted on his Facebook page that pregnant women are simply "hosts" for the baby. He did this to defend his viewpoint that abortion should be illegal. When people criticized him, he redacted the comment, but not before it made news as far away as England, as this article in the Daily Mail shows.

Social media allows people to engage in real-time conversation, but unlike in-person spoken conversation, social media posts are public, searchable and in many cases, permanent.

In person, we can say something dumb or insensitive, and then move on. Perhaps we apologize or explain ourselves. The comments we make are not visible to anybody else outside our conversation (unless perhaps they are recorded, and you don't know it, in which case you may have bigger problems than just saying something stupid).

In social media, we have the illusion that we are having an intimate conversation with one person or a group, but in reality, we are making our thoughts completely public.

Before we post ANYTHING to social media, **we should stop** and ask ourselves: Is this really necessary? Does this comment have the capacity to offend? How will people perceive this comment?

Now, I am not advocating that you spend all day deciding whether to say something on social media nor am I saying you need to edit and approve every uttering. That would be counterproductive. You should simply take a moment and think about what you are saying.

On Monday, Brad Phillips wrote a post called "No Word Was Ever as Effective As A Rightly Timed Pause," on his Mr. Media Training blog. His argument is that a pause in conversation has two main effects. One is to give the person who is pausing a moment to pull his/her thoughts together instead of blurting out whatever comes to mind. The second is to give the listener the impression that the person is confident enough to pause, and thoughtful enough to give a well-reasoned response.

So next time to you are going to write a comment on Facebook, respond to someone on Twitter or even compose a blog post, PAUSE and think about what you are doing.

In the DC area and interested in improving your blogging skills? Attend the next How to Write Your Blog workshop on April 1. Details and registration are available on Eventbrite.

The red flags of interpersonal communication to watch out for

There are two main types of human communication: interpersonal and mass communication. Interpersonal communication refers to communication between one person and another (or a few others) and mass communication is the relaying of information between individuals or entities to large groups of people using mass media (TV, internet, etc.).

Interpersonal communication can further be broken down into written, oral and non-verbal communication.

Can you be a good mass communicator if you aren't a good interpersonal communicator? That's the question I have been thinking about lately as I see people who work in communications jobs (PR, advertising, design, etc.) who seem to have issues communicating one-to-one. I believe the better your interpersonal communication skills are, the better you are able to do mass communication.

Here are some red flags that I have been noticing:

Passive-aggressive/indirect communication. Not saying what you mean or being underhanded is not effective communication.

Jargon-laden communication. Often people think that they will impress others by using jargon. Or worse, they assume that everyone understands what they are saying. In either case, by using jargon, people are failing to communicate simply and

therefore are being ineffective.

One-way communication. This is a big one. It may be evidenced by constantly interrupting the other person or not listening to what he/she is saying or displaying a lack of curiosity by not asking questions. Some people carry on monologues and don't seem to be aware of or care about what others think. By not caring about or adjusting to your audience, you are not being an effective communicator.

Not being "human." People who don't acknowledge others or are incapable of social niceties (greeting people, asking about their weekend, etc.) are also communicating that they are not interested. Lack of interest in the person you are communicating with is a recipe for failed interactions.

If you come across this behavior in a communications professional (e.g., PR practitioner, a writer or an advertising executive) you should be wary. If someone is incapable of effective interpersonal communication, why should you trust that he or she can communicate on a larger scale?

In big media news, CNN announced it will cancel Piers Morgan Live after only three years. I'm not surprised. Last week, I watched an entire episode for the first time, and what struck me was that Piers tended to interrupt his guests many times. He continually interjected his thoughts and didn't allow the guests to finish talking. It was highly annoying to watch, and I am sure, highly annoying for the guests too. Piers seems to be a master at one-way communication. Unfortunately, that doesn't make for effective (or interesting) TV. What a contrast from his predecessor Larry King, who was known for showing an interest in his guests.

What red flags do you notice in interpersonal communication? Do you think there is a correlation between being good at interpersonal communication and succeeding at mass communication?

Please mind the details

If you've been to London and ridden the Underground, you are familiar with the phrase "please mind the gap." It's a repeated warning for people to watch their step getting on and off the trains as there is a space between the train and the platform. It is posted everywhere inside the stations because people need to be reminded and London's transportation authority certainly doesn't want accidents.

Mind the Gap by nikoretro on Flickr

I wish we had a similar reminder for communications managers, especially those who deal with event publicity and marketing. Instead of "mind the gap" it would say "mind the details." Because it's all about the details: the where, when, how, who, why and how much.

Common mistakes, which I have seen just these past few days:

Sending an email blast announcing an event and neglecting to include the date and time (or location).

Announcing an event and getting the dates mixed up (saying it is Tuesday, February 12 instead of Wednesday, February

12).

Website page about an event including a "more information"
button for an event, but not providing any information about
what the cost will be.

Details matter and they matter more when you are doing any
type of event planning. Please mind the details. Double check
them. Have somebody else check them. Don't assume that people
will figure things out.

Finally, realize that if you don't provide the proper details
or you provide the wrong details you are making it very hard
for people to attend your event.

If everything is important, nothing stands out

Have you ever been in a situation where a client (internal or
external) keeps wanting to add "news" to a press release or
material to a brochure or more stuff to the website? "It's
important" they'll say. "We NEED to include this. It MUST be
in there."

You then end up with a press release that is three pages or
longer; a blog post that could double as a PhD dissertation;
and a website that will give readers a headache. I will bet
good money that everybody out there has come across this type
of thing.

But, the thing is it doesn't have to be that way. Most things are really not that important. The client only thinks they are, usually because someone else (a donor, a higher up, a PIA person) has some stake in that particular bit of information (or "content" as we are now referring to it).

Here's the bottom line: if you include all the so-called important stuff, nothing, and I mean nothing, will stand out. And then all your efforts will be wasted.

Instead of including everything and anything, as a communications person you will need to step in and do the following:

1. **Prioritize.** Among those important things are the ones that are extremely important, right?
2. **Assign different information to different areas.** Perhaps one important bit is appropriate to a press release and the other should go on the blog.
3. **Edit**. And then edit again. Be ruthless. Remove excess information if you want your message to be heard.

Thoughts? How do you handle lots of "important" information?

Is your website really

working for you?

I am assuming your business/organization/service/product has a website. If not, well, that is another story. For the purposes of this post, you do have a website and it is functional. It may even be pretty (I mean "well designed").

But, and this is a big but, **does it have all the information that your AUDIENCE needs?**

I have been working on a project that involved getting information about documentaries from various sources, including the filmmakers' websites. The information I needed was fairly basic: synopsis of the film, year made, how long it is (running time), name of director and other people involved in production and country of origin. And guess what, even though virtually every film had a website, precious few websites had anything resembling basic information. Some listed awards or screenings. Some listed reviews. Some had blogs (not always updated) that talked about the filmmaking process. But basics—which are needed for anybody that is planning to screen a film—LACKING.

And that is not just limited to film websites. Have you ever gone to a restaurant website looking for a menu or for hours of operation and not found either? Have you tried to find a phone number from a service provider's website and be forced to email or look for another provider?

It is truly astonishing how many websites lack basic, useful and needed information. Many sites get so caught up in bells and whistles (don't get me started on websites with flash or self-playing video) that they forget their basic mission is to provide information. Information that their target audience (read: potential customers) wants and needs.

Your website is not working for you if your target cannot find the information it needs.

Of course, this leads to another conversation that has to do with planning and strategy. Websites are not simply pretty things to make sure you have an internet presence. They play a big part in your communications and marketing efforts.

Before you build a website (and before you do anything communications-related)**, you must be able to answer these four questions**

1. Who is your target audience?
2. Why would they visit your website?
3. What are they going to do when they are on your site?
4. What information does your target audience absolutely, positively need? (Hint: it is always the stuff that is most basic—address, hours, location (map), telephone number, contact person/people, pricing, etc.)

What do you think? And more importantly, have you checked to see if your website is working for you?

Don't be a fashion victim…you will freeze!

We are in our third straight week of sub-freezing weather here in Washington. The Potomac is frozen and so are some people's brains apparently. I am talking about the fashion victims. There are two major categories:

- Stuck in the past
- Too cool for school

Those that are **stuck in the past** unpack their winter coats

from the time machine closet. Take for example a lady I saw on the Metro the other day. She was sporting an oversize circa 1980 LL Bean barn jacket. I didn't see her shoes, but I would not have been surprised to see some Bean duck boots on them. That, in conjunction with her mullet hair cut (I am totally not making this up), made me stare in amazement. I kept thinking that this woman was desperately ready for some new clothes, and a makeover.

Don't be that fashion victim! Know when to <u>refresh your image.</u> Perhaps you need a new website. Perhaps your logo colors could change. Or that Times New Roman you have been using in your print materials could be upgraded for something a bit more modern.

You know some people are totally **too cool** when they go out in subfreezing weather with no socks on. Apparently (and since I am not so cool) wearing socks is never fashionable, even when there is a wind chill factor of -15 and snow on the ground. I most often see young women fashion victims. They are wrapped up in their not so warm coat, no hat (that apparently is also not cool) and walking around in ballet slipper shoes with no hosiery of any type. I did also see a skinny-jean wearing dude with boat shoes and no socks…in January in Washington DC.

Don't be so fashionable that you can't dress appropriately for the weather. Or in communications, don't do things because everybody else is doing it or because it's so cool. Sure, all the home decor people are crazy about Pinterest, but perhaps your law office just doesn't have the visuals for it. Maybe orange is the new black, but your elderly audience needs heavy, large black type to read what you are saying.

The only one that gets hurt by being a fashion victim is you…

Stop! Don't start on that next project until you can answer this

It's January and chances are you are working hard to get the year off to a good start. You may be in charge of creating something—a newsletter, a flyer, an ad—that is intended to achieve a communications or marketing objective. It may be to publicize an upcoming event or perhaps to solicit support for a cause or maybe you are advocating for a policy change. We'll assume that this project is part of a larger strategy and will help further your overall communications goals.

Before you start any marketing/communications project you should be able to answer these five questions:

1. What is the main **objective** for the piece? Or ask yourself this: What do you want the audience to do with this piece?

2. Who is the **target audience**? Really, who is it? Be specific.

3. What are the top **three messages** you want to convey?

4. Knowing who the target is, what is the **best way to**

communicate your message? Will you use graphics? Which ones? What kind of language will you use?

5. Has this piece been **done before?** If so, why are you doing it again? What was it that worked or didn't work before? If not, why are you doing it now?

This may seem obvious to some, simplistic to others, but surprisingly, many people trying to create communications aren't able to answer these questions. Why else do you think we are inundated with useless letters, flyers and brochures? Even if you are a pro, doing this exercise will help you to create a better product, guaranteed!

What is your process for getting communications projects done? Please share!