

# How to avoid going to hell

This is not a post about religion or morality. It's a post about how to get things done. It's the "secret" to accomplishing your 2014 goals and resolutions.

I am sure you know the expression "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." What that means, quite simply, is that having a good intentions is not enough to keep you from perdition. You have to act. You have to behave differently, not just think about it.



Bonfire by CP  
Sutcliffe via Flickr

This is the time of the year we are busy setting resolutions and goals for the year ahead. I think this is a great exercise. Certainly, if we take a good look at what we did in 2013, we can see what worked and what didn't. We can decide to change course or stay the course, depending on how things worked out.

**But to accomplish our resolutions and goals, just having the intent to do so is not enough. What you need is an action plan.**

I have a friend who has the best of intentions to get together

and do a “girl’s night out.” I know she has the intent because she tells me we need to do this every single time we have a phone conversation. But she never actually sets aside the time and chooses a date for this mythical get-together. Without an actual plan to go out, it is all just talk. It is meaningless. Bottom line is it ain’t gonna happen.

The same thing happens with your communications goals. You want to blog but you “don’t have the time.” You want to increase your newsletter subscriptions, but you don’t add a subscription button to your website or think about how to incentivize people to sign up. You want to get more publicity for your event, but you don’t contact any media outlets. You want to re-do your website, but you don’t conduct a survey of your current users/audience.

In other words, you have the best intentions in the world, but you are not acting. You are paving the way to get nothing accomplished.

As you survey the year ahead and you formulate your goals and resolutions, avoid having it all go to hell, and develop some action plans. Set deadlines, make dates, gather information, put things in motion.

What are you resolving to do in 2014 and how do you plan to get there?

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## **5 big communications lessons**

# from 2013

We are constantly learning, and ideally, making changes based on what we learn. During 2013, I learned from clients, from professional development events, from Twitter and life in general. Following are my five big communications lessons.

## **1. Write down communications and marketing goals and prioritize them.**

You have to know what you want to accomplish in order to be able to do so. You also have to realize that you may not be able to reach every goal, which is why you need to prioritize those objectives. What is the most important thing that you want to accomplish in the new year? What would be nice to get done, but is not your top priority? If you don't prioritize, you will run around like crazy trying to juggle conflicting actions.

Where this came from: I have seen too many people/organizations that have no clear vision of what is most important and therefore, try to accomplish too much with too few resources. This is especially true at nonprofits.

## **2. Strategy should decide tactics, not the other way around.**

Don't confuse tactics with strategy. You shouldn't let the allure of a certain tactic drive your communications. This is the "shiny object syndrome." Just because Pinterest is hot, doesn't mean it is the right place for your organization. You must think "big picture." What are you trying to accomplish and what is the best way to get there?

Where this came from: Many people and organizations get enamored with what others are doing, even if it doesn't fit in with their mission or goals. A tactic is just that—a way to achieve the larger picture goal or strategy. If you haven't

defined the strategy, you can't define the best tactics.

### **3. Consider usability, SEO and content strategy before creating or re-launching a website.**

Search engine changes such as Google's new Hummingbird algorithm have made having an organized, updated and useful website non-negotiable. Spending time planning a website, and considering all the stakeholders, will pay off.

Where this came from: Every year there are some changes afoot in "web world." This year was definitely one for search engines, which in turn has put more onus on usability (UX) and content strategy. A website has to reflect the larger organization and can't be controlled by just one small group of people. Just because IT has always handled it, doesn't mean that it is a good idea.

### **4. Communications presents the entire organization.**

This year I consulted with an organization that thought the blog and website should be part of the publications department and other marketing communications should be handled by the corporate communications department. And those two departments didn't interact. That's a communications failure.

Why this is important: Too many organizations fail to think about how they are perceived by the public and where that public might be. You can't be doing all sorts of media relations work on one end, and have an intern doing social media and not discussing what you are trying to achieve for the organization. Anything the public has access to about your organization, be it social media, your blog, your latest brochure, a press release or an interview with your company president—it is all communications. It should be unified and it should have one overarching goal—present your organization's best face to the public.

### **5. Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good.**

Just because something is not perfect does not mean it is not good. Blog posts are a perfect case in point. You can't spend hours perfecting a post—that's counterproductive. Better to post and then fix, than have the inevitable "paralysis by analysis."

Where this plays in: Some organizations can't move forward because they are afraid of making a mistake. So they cling to the old and fail to embrace change. Sometimes you won't know that something is not working until you launch it (I'd say Healthcare.gov is a perfect case in point). It's easier to fix something than to start from zero.

**What did you take away from 2013? I'd love to hear from you about the lessons you learned from clients or from within your organization.**

I'll be back next week with some marketing/communications resolutions. Until then, I wish you all a very happy holiday!

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# **I can't follow you and that is a problem.**

Just a quick post this morning.

My schedule has been really tight lately and it's been hard to find time to go to the gym. So I decided to buy an exercise video to get a quick workout at home. This morning I popped what purported to be a dance plus cardio "complete" workout in 30 minutes. OK. The presenter, a "celebrity trainer," says she can't teach us non-dancers to dance in a video, but that we

should at least be burning calories. Fine. After her two minute" intro," she gets right into it. No explanation, no instruction, nothing. After a few minutes of trying to follow what she is doing—again, with no cues—I gave up. So much for my idea of working out at home.

What's the communication lesson to learn from this exercise video #fail? Well there's two:

1. Don't assume that people understand you (especially if you are basing it on your presumed celebrity). Provide instructions.

2. Don't fly in the face of convention, especially if it is really not necessary. Conventions are there for a reason. People expect certain things, and during exercise instruction, I expect...instruction. Just like in every exercise video and show I have ever watched, and certainly every exercise class I have taken, the instructor GIVES INSTRUCTIONS. The instructor cues the next move. The instructor counts the reps.

The bottom line is that when we are trying to teach anybody or present new information, we have to work at explaining it so people will get it. We can't assume people will just get it. We can't assume people will just follow.

Now, the question is, can I get my money back?

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## Can the 60 Minutes brand recover?

I have been a loyal *60 Minutes* viewer for years. Every Sunday night at 7:00 p.m. you'll find me watching CBS (unless of

course there is a football game...).

This season, I barely recognize the program that I used to love. First, there was a bizarre disjointed piece ostensibly about humpback whales but I was unclear on the point. Then there was an infomercial for Lamborghini, where Scott Pelley pretty much used *60 Minutes* in order to test drive the world's most expensive car.

A couple of weeks ago, we learned how Amazon will be using drones to deliver packages (maybe), and in the process the Internet behemoth got lots and lots and lots of publicity.

Then, there's the political stuff. Lara Logan based her reporting on an unvetted and unreliable source to excoriate the Obama administration's response in Benghazi. She has since been "disciplined." And last night there was a fluff piece on the NSA. CBS promoted the NSA piece as the first time journalists have ever been let into the secretive agency. In fact, the "journalist" in question was John Miller, a former intelligence guy.

Given the controversy surrounding the NSA and its tactics in light of Edward Snowden's revelations, you'd think *60 Minutes* would want to try to find out what is actually going on. Instead, Miller barely questioned Keith Alexander (the head of the NSA). He actually fed him lines, to the effect of "so, you don't actually listen to people's conversations." There was no counterpoint to Alexander's assertions. No push back. No interviews with people opposed to NSA tactics. Miller seemed to agree with everything Alexander said. Both men thought it was "weird" that Snowden would cover himself and his computer screen when working on it at night. He probably was aware that he was being spied on by the NSA! Esquire has a great piece on it, worth a read: *60 Minutes Weird NSA Propaganda Wasn't Even Good Propaganda*.

In my opinion, *60 Minutes* has failed its brand promise, that

is, to provide tough investigative journalism or original reporting on interesting subjects (in fairness, Bob Simon's piece last night about Egypt's Copts was good). Will *60 Minutes* be able to recover? If it continues on this editorial trajectory it will not. There was a lot of angry and dissatisfied chatter on Twitter about the NSA story. And there has been pushback on the Benghazi report and the Amazon piece too.

News organizations depend on trust. If you don't trust them, there is little point to what they are doing. You would never pick up a tabloid and believe everything you read there. You know its gossip and its meant to entertain. But when you watch *60 Minutes*, you expect well researched stories. Well, maybe not any more.

Thoughts?

#### **UPDATE:**

The New York Times Media Equation column has an excellent look into this:

"When 60 Minutes Checks Its Journalistic Skepticism at the Door."

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## **Get off your high horse (if you really want to communicate)**

We've all met people who are desperately trying to make sure everybody knows how smart or how powerful or how well-connected they are. These people do things like sweep into a



room and speak very loudly, making sure they become the center of attention. They may also love to name-drop. And sometimes they think that by using sentences packed with big words and jargon, you will be mesmerized into thinking they really know what they are talking about.

But the opposite always happens. The harder people try to impress you, the more you tend to see through them. Same thing happens with your written communications—blogs, websites, letters, whatever. If you try to impress, especially by filling your writing with jargon and big words, the less you are communicating.



Merry Go Round by Mike Rawlins on Flickr.

As Mack Collier wrote in his blog post, “You Don’t Look Smarter by Making Others Feel Stupid.”:

*Make your ideas more accessible and empower your audience to learn at a pace that’s comfortable to them. Remember that if your words make the reader feel dumb then the reader might decide that you’re not an ‘expert’ after all*

So, if you think that throwing big words around will result in you looking smarter, you are dead wrong. (P.S.: I LOVE that quote from Albert Einstein: “If you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand it well enough.”)

It reminds me of a time when I was visiting a friend in

Florida. She had a little baby at the the time, and she had another friend visiting who also had a baby with her. Both women were in the pool and both babies were naked. They asked if I wanted to get in. I said I really did not want to be swimming in baby pee. The friend looked at me and said that baby pee was sterile, and that I needn't be concerned. She added she knew this because she was a physician. Yes, she called herself a physician. To which I promptly replied: "Oh you're a doctor. What is your specialty?" (I think she was a dermatologist, but I don't remember.) I couldn't get over that she thought calling herself a physician somehow made her more authoritative.

In everyday conversation we visit our doctors and have our lawyers—not our attorneys—draw up contracts. When someone asks us where we live, we don't say we "reside" in a certain neighborhood. If someone asks why we are taking night classes, we usually say we are trying to learn more about the topic, not "augmenting our knowledge base." If we get a new gadget, we tell people how much it has changed our lives, not "it is a disruptive technology."

**So, next time you want to appear like you know what you are talking about, get off your high horse and use the words most people would actually use in conversation.**

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## **Why you need to have a style**

When writers talk about style they are rarely talking about fashion. They are talking about editorial style. They discuss

whether to use the Associated Press Style or the New York Times Style or Chicago Manual. There are probably four or five major published style guides that people follow. In journalism and by extension, public relations, most people adhere to the AP Style. In government circles, people tend to follow the Government Printing Office (GPO) Style. (Here's a great article on Roll Call about the chairman of the GOP Style Board.)

**There is one reason to have an editorial style: consistency.**

Consistency helps unify your writing. Let's use a common example. It's Chicago Manual style to write Web site (two words, web is capitalized always). It's AP Style to write website (one word, lowercase). **Either way is correct.** But if you use AP in one press release and then Chicago on a white paper, you are being inconsistent. Worse would be to use both styles in one document.

**Choose one style and stick with it.**

Organizations should develop style guides editorial and branding/image purposes. These written documents (in this case, the oral tradition just won't do!) will help to make sure everyone in the organization is on the same page, bolstering organizational consistency.

Editorial guides should cover issues like:

- Word usage (website versus Web site; do you say chairman, chairperson or chair?)
- Punctuation (use em dashes or not?)
- Preferred date and time usage (do you say April 24 or April 24th?, 6 PM or 6:00 p.m.?)

Branding/image guides should clarify issues like:

- Logo size and positioning
- Organizational colors

- Acceptable fonts

There are a great many resources on the web, and even templates to follow. Large organizations like the World Bank have style guides that you can download.

If you don't have an organizational style guide, this year-end may be a great time to develop one or make it a goal to develop one in 2014.

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## How I read the news and why it matters

I am an avid news follower. I have been reading a newspaper daily since I was eight years old (really). At times, I even read two and three dailies (when I was in grad school up at Boston University, I decided I should read the *Wall Street Journal*, in addition to the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe*. The *Globe* was not owned by the *Times* then, but I digress). Additionally, I read lots of stuff online plus I watch the CBS and/or NBC evening news broadcasts when I can.



Reading the newspaper in park by Zoetnet on Flickr

When I read the newspaper, what I am really doing is scanning. I scan all the headlines first. If the headline is about an interesting subject, then I read the first few paragraphs (same goes for op-eds). I usually discard the sports section, but only after reading the main headline on the front page (it is important to know the results of the game, but I have no patience for the analysis of why).

I don't read long articles—never have and never will. I don't have the patience or the time.

Even though most people don't read printed newspapers, they are acting the same online: **They scan. They skip long form. They only read what interests them.**

Lessons here are:

- Headlines matter A LOT.
- Longer is not necessarily better.
- People will always read *only* what interests them.

**In other words, keep it short and keep it interesting.**

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# **Information overload and what it means to your message**

I just got back from a few days of vacation in Florida. During my five days off, which included the weekend, I had limited Internet access. I was able to access email on my phone, and use WiFi on my laptop a couple of times.

## **Emails galore.**

Every single day I had around 70 emails—of which only two or three were addressed to me exclusively. The rest were marketing emails, listserv stuff, and subscription emails I get every day. I deleted most of these messages without reading.

## **Lots of stuff on my reader.**

Then, there was my Feedly to check. I had limited time to read through, so I marked a great amount of as read, and looked only at a very few items.

## **Twitter keeps going and going and going...**

If you only check Twitter once a day or so, it is impossible to keep up with what is going on. You check your @ replies and your direct messages, and what is there in the general stream at that moment.

## **Facebook is congestion central.**

Some people post every once in a while and others post ALL the

time (like my young cousin who posts every thought and feeling he has plus every image/story he finds interesting). Mobile Facebook reminds you of people's birthdays or I would have missed congratulating my friends Jordan and Dan.

**How did I deal with information overload? I prioritized the personal and business-related and skimmed the rest.**

*What does information overload mean for your message?*

*It means, quite simply, that your message is very likely to get lost.*

People are getting bombarded with information from many sources, and if they don't keep up with it immediately, they are forced to ignore it and/or delete it. There just isn't enough time in the day to get stuff done (or take a vacation) and read all your emails and other messages.

How do we, as communicators, deal with this problem?

1.) Realize that **your message is competing very hard for attention.**

2.) Realize that your message may need both **reach and frequency** with the caveat that frequency is part of the problem for the receiver. Sending the same message too many times can be annoying or part of overload...but it may break through the clutter.

3.) Realize that **timing is key**. You will have to figure out when is the best time to reach most of your subjects, while understanding that you will never reach everyone at the same time.

4.) Realize that **relevance is what is most important**. If the message is not relevant to your subject, it will more easily be deleted or ignored.

Thoughts on this? How do you deal with information overload?

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# It may be all about likeability

There's all sorts of analysis going on right now about Tuesday's election results. Chris Christie, a Republican, got re-elected as New Jersey governor with a 30% or so margin over his opponent. In Virginia, Terry McAuliffe, a Democrat, won the governorship with a razor-thin margin of 2% over his opponent Ken Cuccinelli.

If you have been following the Virginia race, you know that Ken Cuccinelli is very conservative. He has publicly-known views against abortion, birth control access, equal rights for homosexuals and he denies climate change. He is also very vocal in his opposition to the Affordable Care Act known as Obamacare. Apparently, many people in Virginia share these views, but not enough people to catapult him into the governorship.

Pundits have been saying that Cuccinelli lost because he was outspent by McAuliffe. Some say it is because of how the nominating process took place (no primary, just a convention of the party faithful who tend to be more to the right of the general voting population).

I think that one of the reasons Cuccinelli lost is because he is not likeable. You could never imagine hanging out with him. He rarely smiles and when he does, it is not a "real" smile. Contrast that with Christie. Christie is a big bear of a man—hugging people left and right. He is a huge fan of Bruce Springsteen and not afraid to let that be known. You could



definitely see yourself having a beer (or two) with Chris Christie.

Cuccinelli is a sour, judgmental kind of a guy. He doesn't approve of many things and he has made it his mission to rid Virginia of these things. His rigidity is antithetical to likeability. Christie, on the other hand, is more pragmatic. In spite of his party's opposition to Obama, he embraced him (literally and figuratively) in the aftermath of Sandy. His pragmatism helps boost his likeability.

The Washington Post reported that Cuccinelli did not call McAuliffe to concede or congratulate him after the election and he says he will *never* call him. That sounds like both sour grapes and lack of sportsmanship. Not likeable.

People don't elect people they don't like. It's that simple. It goes beyond politics and policy and it comes down to likeability. I think George W. Bush won against John Kerry because Bush is the more likeable person. Kerry seemed very patrician and detached (not unlike Mitt Romney, if you think about it) while Bush had his Texas twang and swagger.

How does this translate into marketing and communications? Simple. Focus on the likeability of your product or service. Don't advertise a product by denigrating the user or a potential user. People like positivity, and they are turned off by negativity.

**It's not random that Facebook asks you to "like" pages/companies/products. If you like something, you want to find out more about it, right?**

*Do you want to improve your blogging? Attend the How to Write Your Blog workshop next Tuesday, November 12 in Washington, DC. Only five spots are left, so register today!*

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# Why customer communication is marketing

Not every business needs to spend lots of money on marketing communications (ads, PR, etc.) but every business should spend time/effort/money on communicating with existing customers. Why? Because these businesses probably depend on referrals for their livelihood.

Even if you don't have a marketing budget (although you should have some dollars set aside for your website and social media efforts), you must budget for customer communications. Keeping in touch with current customers is a serious no-brainer. There are several ways to do it, depending on the size of your customer base: newsletters (electronic or print), postcards, letters, blogging on your website and even phone calls.

At a bare minimum, your existing customers need to hear from you once a year. And yet, how many businesses do not communicate with customers at all?

Let me give you a personal example. I bought my home insurance from an agency recommended by my real estate agent. In the three years I have had this insurance this is the number of times I have heard from the insurance agency: zero. Not once. This past week, I got a policy renewal that listed a 20% increase in my premium. I called the insurer to find out what happened. It turns out that there has been a statewide, across-the-board increase, which, by the way, was announced in February. Except that I didn't know. Because my insurance agency did not bother to inform me.

Since my agency does not communicate with me at all, I will be shopping for a new agency this week. I have no need to be

loyal to the agency because they have shown absolutely no loyalty to me as a customer. They haven't kept me informed about insurance changes. They haven't inquired as to whether I need any type of other insurance. They have never even asked me if I am satisfied with my insurer.

Having a customer communication program is marketing. It can help maintain current customer relationships and it can lead to referrals. It keeps your business top of mind. The company that painted my house knows this, which is why it sent a card at Christmas. My heat/AC contractors send out postcard reminders in the spring and fall that it is time to have the system checked. The mechanics send discount coupons and reminders it is time for service on the car.

## **Set up a customer communication program**

The first step is to develop and/or refine your **customer database**. You must collect basic customer information: address, phone number, email.

Assign a **budget**. Call it marketing or call it customer retention or call it a referral program. Just budget for it.

**Decide how many times per year you will have contact with your customers**, taking into account factors including your budget, how you will communicate with customers, and the nature of your business. If you are a seasonal business (you sell Christmas baskets or you do taxes for example), then you could send out your communications once a year. If you depend on having informed customers (you deal with investments), you may need to have a monthly or even weekly newsletter.

Decide what **type of information** your customers need.

Line up the right **vendors** (printers, direct mail companies, e-marketing, etc.)

Do you have a customer communications plan? If so, what do you

take into account?

*Want to learn how to have a more effective blog? Attend my next How to Write Your Blog workshop on November 12, 2013 in Washington, DC. Get the details and register today!*