

Why SEO and content marketing are not enough

The really bad news today is that the US government is shut down (let's hope temporarily). Another piece of bad news (for content marketers) is what I learned last night at the Web Content Mavens Meet Up about findability and search, and how search engine personalization is playing into it.

Findability is key

The first speaker last night was Jill MacNeice, who is an information architect for the Library of Congress (LOC). She explained how the LOC is working to make their millions of documents and images findable by using a "findability framework" that is built around the idea that people should be able to find what they are looking for both inside the site, and from external search engines. It makes search visible and easy to find. It depends on metadata, good descriptions and URL design that makes it human readable, shorter and more shareable.

The LOC is an example of why SEO and search in general is important. After all, if people can't find you, then why are you on the web?

Personalization throws a wrench in search

But then Katherine Watier Ong, Ketchum's VP of Online Strategy and Market Insights, got up to speak about personalization and the semantic web. And if I were to boil down what she said to one phrase it is that personalization is making search engine optimization more challenging. It is no longer enough to have the right keywords, tags and content because Google and Bing and all your social media sites are personalizing the content they show you based on your profile and previous activity.

If you want to see how much information Google has about you, just check your Google Dashboard (search Google to find it). Bing uses your Facebook data to suggest things your friends like.

Did you know that you don't see every tweet in your Twitter stream? Twitter shows you what it "thinks" is most relevant to you, even from people you follow, based on your previous interactions and interests. Isn't that a tad scary? You sign up to follow someone and you may not see his/her tweets.

Katherine says the really creepy personalization is visible on LinkedIn. I have noticed that too recently. Since I liked a couple people's new photos, LinkedIn always shows me new photos and for several days. And how does it know which people I may know?

Search engines and social networks like Twitter and LinkedIn are moving toward developing a sort of artificial intelligence that tries to figure out what you are looking for and then practically jump ahead of your request, which is why you are seeing all these suggestions (you may want to follow so-and-so, you may want to check these items for sale, etc.)

All this personalization is useful for you because if not you would be drowning in extraneous information but it is really bad news for small businesses/websites. For example, search for your name on Google. For you, your name will appear at the top of your results. Now have John Doe do the same search on his computer wherever he may be living. Guess what, you will not appear near the top (unless you have a very unusual name or are someone like President Obama).

How do marketers deal with personalized results?

How do we work to cut through the personalization? Katherine suggested several actions:

- Create personas for your target audience so you can

market appropriately

- Personalize your website (just like when you go to Amazon and it recognizes you) using tools like Marketo.
- Build social relationships.
- Stay on top of changes in search
- Use a content management system (CMS) that uses schema

In short, **personalization is a big challenge for search marketers**. Now, you don't only need to cut through the clutter of millions of websites, you have to cut through results that are personalized for each searcher.

If you work in marketing or communications, you need to be aware of how people find you. It is not enough to have a website and a blog. You have to understand SEO and the latest changes to search. You have to see the relationships between social media and search engines.

Self-monitor or ...

Do you follow yourself? It's not easy to do, but it's essential. You should be monitoring your external communications efforts or else, you just won't know what is going on.

I have followed my own blog (first on Google Reader, and now on Feedly, though that may change) for years. Why? Because I want to see how other people see my blog. I want to make sure it is showing up and how it appears when it does. This is how I knew there was a problem with Feedly and my blog feed (detailed in this post—read the comments please). I subscribe to my blog via email too, to make sure Feedburner is operating

as it should.

When I send out email campaigns, I send it to two different emails of mine (one is Gmail and the other I monitor via Outlook). Again, I want to make sure everything looks OK. I try to check them on my smartphone too.

Although you can't monitor for every iteration (for example, I don't own an iPad or Apple anything), you need to know how your communications are showing up in different environments, as best as possible. Perhaps you can recruit some volunteers to check for you (trusted friends or colleagues who don't mind giving you a hand). Imagine that you are not optimizing your email for smartphones, and most of your audience reads it on that platform. If you don't know you aren't optimized, you can't address it.

Too many marketers (agencies included) don't bother to monitor their own communications. There's a rather prominent PR agency whose blog is a disaster, but apparently, no one has thought to check it as an outside reader, or follow it or even try to share it on social media. Then there are the countless email marketing messages that are not only not optimized for mobile or for social sharing, but that are RIFE with mistakes (grammar, spelling, content).

You must monitor yourself or direct others to monitor on your behalf. If not, you risk not knowing how people actually see you.

Are you monitoring your communications? If so, how do you do it? If not, what are you waiting for?

Where is the soap dish? (Or why UX is important.)

Several weeks ago, I told you all about the awful experience that passes itself off as the Holiday Inn Express. One of the smaller, yet super annoying, things wrong there was the fact that in the (cramped) bathroom, there was no soap dish. A stand holding the usual hotel toiletries, including soap bars, was cluttering the minimal counter space, but there was no place to put the soap once you opened the plastic wrapping. The soap kept sliding to the floor after I washed my hands.



Soap by Radio.Guy on Flickr

Just a few weeks before my stay at the HIE, I stayed at a boutique inn in the same city. Among the many amenities was a soap dish in the bathroom. It was a nice touch. It showed the inn had considered the guest's needs (and that someone somewhere had actually used soap to wash their hands at some point, which apparently the managers at the HIE never had done).

It's really very simple: You have to consider people's needs and how they do things. Providing a great hotel experience OR

an effective website **DEPENDS** on whether you are considering your end user (your guest, your audience). How does a person use your product? What does a person need to navigate your site?

Have you ever been to a website where you can't find what you are looking for? I bet you have! Those websites are generally cluttered with tons of information that is not organized for the user but rather for the idiosyncrasies of the various organizational departments (Sales & Promotion says we need to include this, Legal says we have to include that).

The other day I was looking for a blog on an organizational website and I didn't see it where you would normally. I figured it did not exist. I was wrong. It was under "publications." Why? Because the Publications Department is in charge of the blog. Publications clearly doesn't understand website visitors. Those visitors aren't familiar with (nor do they care about) your organizational hierarchy!

This is where user experience or UX comes in. UX specialists are there to make your website friendly to visitors. If a visitor wants to find your calendar of events, he or she will find it easily instead of clicking through various places. There are ways to make website navigation easy and sensible.

Perhaps you are a small organization that can't afford to hire a usability expert to assess and fix your website. Just think about the soap dish. Do you have what your visitors need? Where would they easily find it?

If you fail to think about how people actually use your product or service, then you will fail to serve their needs.

Hosting a speaker or a panel? Read this first.

Have you been to an event where the speaker did not meet your expectations? It may not have been the speaker's fault. He or she may have not been well prepared or well chosen for that particular event. Having been asked to speak at a few different events, I can tell you it is up to the host to prepare the speaker.



Empty Podium by Karin Dalziel on Flickr

If you (or your organization) is hosting an event featuring speakers, here are a few things to do:

1. Determine exactly what your topic is and whether you have a theme you want to highlight.
2. Make sure you understand your audience. Who will be coming to your event and why? If it is a professional development event, for example, what level of understanding does the

audience have about the subject?

3. When choosing your speakers, make sure their experience matches your topic and audience. Recently, a friend attended a talk where the speaker's understanding of the topic was BELOW the audience's. Generally, the audience wants to learn something.

4. Prepare your speakers. Give them all the information they will need for the event, including date, time and location. I know several speakers who have been late to an event (causing them to get frazzled) because they were confused about how to get there or the exact start time. Tell your speakers how many people are expected, who they are and what you told the audience to expect.

5. Talk to the speaker a couple of days before the event. What will he or she be talking about exactly? Does he or she need any special equipment?

6. Have a plan B (or be prepared for things to go off track: missing presentations, faulty AV equipment, missing speakers, etc.)

7. Prepare you audience by giving an introduction of both the speaker and the topic. Make sure the program handout includes the speaker's bio and contact information. When introducing the speaker, stay topline. Nothing is more boring (and more time-wasting) than having the host read the entire biography to the audience.

The bottom line is that most speaking events don't go well because the host has not done a good job of choosing or preparing the speakers. This is particularly common in volunteer-run organizations. However, if you are charging for your event, and you are associating your organization's name to it, it is imperative that you take the time to make sure the speaker is given the best shot at success.

What would you add to the list above? Does your organization have a list of speaker guidelines? If so, what does it include?

Things on my mind

For some reason, I have had a hard time getting a post done this week. I wrote two lengthy posts, but ended up saving them as drafts. They may appear later on. Some of my ability to focus this week has to do with having too much on my mind. I thought I would share some of what has been bugging me (and sadly, this is but the tip of the iceberg).

Courtesy is waning

It seems to me that we are seeing a huge drop in courteous behavior. In the last few weeks alone, I have seen it both personally and professionally. On the personal side, I have left messages for friends that have gone unreturned. I have been cut off in the middle of a sensitive conversation. On the professional side, I have sent proposals that potential clients don't even acknowledge.

Angie's List won't leave me alone (or, is trying too hard and being annoying)

When I moved into my house a couple of years ago, I joined Angie's List. It was helpful when I needed to find different contractors (plumber, fence installer, etc.). After getting most issues fixed in my house, I found I was using Angie's List quite infrequently. And then, one of the contractors I found on it (and who had decent recommendations) turned out to be one of the worst experiences I have ever had with any service provider. So I let my membership lapse. This was in

December of last year. Since then, without fail, I have received offers EVERY week (and sometimes every day) from Angie's List for discount membership...ranging from 20% to 40% off. I have stop reading the emails and just delete them. At some point, Angie and every other vendor, needs to realize it is not about the offer. You could give me Angie's List for free, and at this point, I am not signing up. Oh, and I see their constant advertising every night on the CBS Evening News, which leads me to believe that Angie is lying when she says that nobody pays to be on Angie's List. She cannot be making the type of money she is from yearly membership dues alone. And, vendors have told me that in order to show up higher in the rankings, they are asked to pay.

Customer service is marketing

A few weeks ago I had problems with my web host, Host Gator. In three separate instances, my website and email went down for a total of a few hours. I asked them for a credit (after not getting any information from them on restoration of service). They ignored it. Even after I told them in their survey that they would not be getting any referrals from me, they didn't seem to care.

Another service provider who has been very slow in her service has had the nerve to blame me, in writing, for her delays. Apparently she doesn't realize that even if it is the client's fault (and in this case it isn't) you don't blame the client. By shifting the responsibility and accusing me (the client) all she is doing is making sure I will not use her services ever again, nor refer her any business. How you treat your customer is marketing, as Lisa Gerber points out in this blog post.

On the other hand...

I have been impressed with the responsiveness and interest I receive for this blog from some great folks that I have only

met on Twitter. Thank you!

Why Uber is successful

Have you heard about Uber? Basically, it's an on-demand a car service that you "hail" via app, web or text message. The service is available in major cities in the US, including San Francisco, Boston, New York and Washington, DC, some European capitals and a few cities in Asia, including Singapore.

I started hearing about Uber on Twitter, but had never experienced it personally until recently. My friend Barb Jump had invited me to join her at the Kennedy Center. After the performance, *in the elevator*, Barb said she would get a car service to pick us up.

Barb texted Uber, Uber sent back a confirmation, and nine minutes later, Kareem (the driver) was pulling up to pick up in a town car, complete with bottled water, tissues and mints. Apparently nine minutes is a long wait time, because Barb says they are usually there in about four minutes, which if you live in Washington, means it is much quicker than waiting for the Metro.

What turned Barb on to Uber were two basic issues: she doesn't carry cash and she doesn't feel safe hailing a cab at night as a woman alone in the city. Uber solves these two issues. Since you must set up an account beforehand, the payment is charged to your credit card on file, thus there is no need for cash (or figuring out the tip, since there is no tipping).

And, since you are directly ordering a car from Uber, you are not getting some random cabby. Uber also sends you the name of the driver and his/her picture so you know who to expect.

Fill a need and differentiate from the competition

Uber is successful because it found some very specific needs that were not being met by traditional taxis or car services. As its website says quite succinctly, these three needs are: request from anywhere, ride with style and convenience, and hassle-free payment. These could also be called DIFFERENTIATORS. As a plus, for Barb (and for other women), these also translate to added safety.

The bottom line is that for a business to succeed it has to meet a need that is not being adequately met by others in the marketplace. And to be uber-successful (jeez, aren't I clever?) it has to meet those needs while differentiating itself from any competition.

Fulfill your brand promise

Everybody knows that saying something and doing it are two different things. If you do what you say you do, you are, in effect, fulfilling your brand promise. Uber's tagline is Everyone's Private Driver. I think Uber certainly lives up to that tagline's promise—anyone can set up account, "hail" an Uber from their smartphone (anywhere they may be) and get a driver whom they will recognize because Uber provides this information beforehand.

Have you experienced Uber or other companies that are succeeding by differentiating well and living up to their promise?

Wait—why you can't rely on spell-check

Yesterday, while working out at the gym, I nearly fell off the treadmill when I spotted the following ad from Sephora in InStyle magazine:

Sephora ad

At first, I thought perhaps Sephora was engaging in a not-so-clever play on words, since the wait could be over for a weight-less product. But I see no evidence in the copy that Sephora is highlighting any weightlessness in this product. In fact, the sub-headline says: "Finally, smoother, softer, satiny style in half the time." Clearly, the concept is about time, so the appropriate word would have been wait, not weight.

It is hard to believe that Sephora's ad people would have let this one go to print. Back when I was a print buyer in the 90s, we sent actual film to our magazines. A mistake in the film would be a major problem, and fixing it would involve high cost. Today, ad agencies send over PDF's, which are way easier to fix and re-send.

So next time you think you proofread your document and used spell-check to do so, I suggest you wait, and read it again.

Do you think the headline is right? Let me know why.

Do you know what your customer's experience is really like?

It's painfully obvious that in many companies, marketing is completely separate from customer service and on another planet from company operations. This is why we often see marketing communications that have nothing in common with the actual experience of using a product or service.

I have written about this several times before, but **as long as marketing is divorced from customer experience, companies will cultivate poor relationships with their customers.**

Recently, I stayed at a Holiday Inn Express. You know, where the marketing says that you will be smarter just by staying there. In reality, the walls were paper thin, making sleeping a challenge; the bathroom was cramped, making getting ready a challenge; and to top it off, I could smell breakfast cooking in my room, half-way down the hall on the second floor at 6:30 in the morning. Oh, and if this weren't enough, when I tried to work out in the fitness closet, I was greeted by an overheated room, with no temperature controls, and outdated, hard-to-use equipment. It didn't help that the front desk seem disinterested, and not once greeted me when I walked in the door.

I did not feel smarter by staying at the Holiday Inn. In fact, I felt taken. Their pricing for this location is on par with a hotel, not the motel they truly are.

While I was staying at this hotel I kept thinking that the hotel manager and the front desk people had never spent a

night at their own motel. Or perhaps they had, which is why they were rarely to be seen and seemed so unenthusiastic about their jobs. What I know for certain is that whoever does the marketing for Holiday Inn Express wants you to believe that this place is tops. But, you will only believe it if you have a positive customer experience. **If you, like me, have a negative customer experience, not only will you scoff at the marketing, but you will likely become a vampire instead of brand ambassador. That is, you will take away customers rather than bring business.**

If you want to have marketing communications that work LONG TERM, then you must learn about your customer's experiences with your product or service. You want to know the unvarnished truth. **If the experience is consistently bad, you have to fix the experience, not the marketing.**

Ultimately, the most amazing communications/marketing campaign can't sell a bad product or service.

5 keys to successful content marketing

Yesterday, the PRSA-National Capital Chapter hosted a panel on content marketing and public relations. The panelists—Michael Laxineta (Custom Briefings), Bruce Namerow (Interactive Strategies) and Anne Holtz (Home Innovation Research Labs)—did a great job of explaining what content marketing is, how it works and how to make it work better.

Michael Laxineta said he believes that the “PR profession is the original content marketer.” He says that 91% of business-to-business marketers are using content marketing, and that

the biggest challenge is providing engaging content. Bruce Namerow said that content drives anything, and that brands now are their own publishers.

Content marketing has many benefits, including brand awareness, nurturing leads and building relationships. Anne Holtz said that prior to embarking on a content marketing strategy, Home Innovation Research Labs was doing great stuff, but people did not know about it. Having a strategy in place has helped get traffic to its website.

In order to develop a successful content marketing program, you should consider these five key steps:

- 1. Make sure that your content marketing is in line with both your business and communications goals.**
- 2. Understand exactly who your audience is and what information they need.**
- 3. Do keyword research so that you are using the terms and keywords people actually search.**
- 4. Personalize the content to your audience needs. It is not about reaching everyone but about reaching your niche with the information they need.**
- 5. Make sure your content is mobile-ready.**

Perhaps content marketing is just a fancy new term for what we used to call integrated marketing communications, as my friend Karen Addis from Environics Communications said. Whatever we call it now, it is still smart to reach your audience with the information they require to build a relationship with your organization or to buy from your business.

Too much info or too little?

Yesterday, I got two emails from two completely different organizations. Both had too little information but one was paragraphs long and the other not even a sentence.

Let me discuss the longer one first. It was an email from an organization that is folding. Their email was an invitation to a farewell dinner. It included all the necessary event information (date, place, time) but left out one crucial piece of information: why the event was necessary in the first place. Why are they closing shop? Mystery has its place, but not in this type of email. Just come out and say it! I am not sure if the group is finished because of poor attendance, lack of leadership or orders from above.

The second email was even more of a head-scratcher. It came from an organization I was not familiar with, and had the following subject line: "Focus on your business-not your database." In the body of the email there was nothing but the organization's email signature (not even a website address!). Nothing at all. Attached, is a brochure with what I presume is more information. There are at least three things wrong with this:

1. The **subject line** makes assumptions: it assumes that it is bad to focus on your database or that I am focusing on it instead of my business (huh?).
2. There is **no context** for the contact. Read my post "How to write a contact email."
3. In this day, **smart people only open attachments from trusted sources**. Since this source did not even bother to write a couple lines identifying itself and its business and its reason for contacting me, why should I

bother opening the attachment?

You can provide too little information. In something like the first case I talk about, this may lead to a follow up from your contact. I know who the organization is but am lacking some information I am interested in knowing. In the second case, the lack of information makes me distrust the sender and want to delete the email.

The key is to provide ENOUGH INFORMATION for a person receiving your message to make a decision.

Your thoughts?