

What does April 1 mean to you?

For many, April 1 is April Fools Day, and they act accordingly foolish. For others, it is Opening Day for Major League Baseball, and they make plans to attend a game. For some, April 1 may simply be the start to a new month or the second quarter of the year.

My point is that just because for you April 1 means pulling stupid pranks on people or going to the ballpark it does not mean other people share your views. As a communicator or marketer, you have to be sure that your target audience will get or share the prism with which you see the world.

Corporations use holidays/special days in their advertising all the time. Maybe it's Easter or Christmas, or Valentine's Day or MLK Day. Those days may or may not resonate with your target audience. It is your job as a communicator to make sure that you are not losing your audience by focusing on the wrong thing.

Last week, a local DC organization (which I will not name because it certainly does not deserve publicity) thought it would get a jump on April Fools, so it pranked its membership. In my mind, it made the organization look juvenile. I am sure to the organization's leadership it was a harmless joke—just having a bit of fun.

However you choose to celebrate April 1, take a moment to check whether your audience understands and embraces that. The Onion is expected to make an April Fools joke, but is CNN?

Are you providing enough information?

You must provide enough information whenever you expect an answer from someone. It seems fairly simple doesn't it? And yet, look at this email I received a couple of days ago:

Deborah,

Hope you're well. We're looking for some freelance technical/medical writers and I thought you might be interested or might know some people. We have some general needs and a very specific need for someone in Boston.

[name]

No email signature with contact information or point of reference here. I do not know the sender—have never met him or even heard of him. Did he find me on LinkedIn, doing a web search or what? No clue.

I looked up the sender based on his email address, and found out he is the president (!!!!) of what looks to be an advertising agency (very confusing website...that is another blog post) with presence in multiple states, not around where I am located.

Would you respond to this person? After looking up, I did. I sent back an email asking for more details. Guess what? He

never responded.

If you are prospecting for clients or consultants or anything else, you need to provide information, like:

- Complete contact information
- How you found or know of the prospect
- What you are looking for specifically
- How to respond

Do you have an email template that you use when prospecting?
What information do you provide?

Should you solicit online reviews?

There's no doubt that online reviews are influential. There are specialized review sites like Trip Advisor and then there's the seemingly all-purpose Yelp. I admit I read reviews and have been swayed about staying at a hotel or eating a restaurant because of what other people say, and that is the point.

As a business, should part of your marketing efforts be to solicit reviews?

Let's start with the fact that reviews will happen whether you solicit them or not. Sadly, because of our passive-aggressive culture, it's become more likely that an unsatisfied customer will take to social media to complain about your service. Which is to say, that if you give bad service, you will most likely get negative reviews.

However, negative reviews are always balanced out by positive reviews. If, as a consumer, you are researching anything, you will read both the good and the bad reviews. Most people will be able to identify disgruntled employees or nit-picky reviewers. If most of the reviews are positive, you will discount the few reviews that are negative. Likewise, if most of the reviews are negative, you will discount the reviews that are positive. The lesson here is that genuine, positive reviews are important.

What generates positive reviews? Good service or product! As a business, you will need to focus most of your energy on providing positive experiences for your customers. If you don't, whether you solicit them or not, you will get negative reviews.

There is a difference between feedback and reviews

I recently had my hair cut at a salon I have gone to for a couple of years. The salon actively pursues online engagement. After my appointment, I got an email from the salon asking to provide feedback. The "feedback" was actually a link to give an online review. I was in a quandary. I had a bad experience this time: the receptionist was unhelpful and confused; I was made to wait 30 minutes; and the water was cool (on a very cold day) when they washed my hair. My stylist tried to make it better by giving me a discount and comping me a bottle of shampoo. But I thought management needed to know that things were not working well. Is the best way for me to give them a one or two-star review? Is that going to communicate to the salon something is wrong?

Businesses should actively solicit feedback AND positive reviews. They are not the same. In the hair salon's case, they are confusing feedback and online reviews.

A better way to get BOTH is to say something like:

We are committed to providing the best possible service. If

we did not meet your expectations, please contact (manager).
We want to know how to improve our service!

If you enjoyed the service today, we'd love if you reviewed us here (link to the site).

Thanks for your patronage.

The answer then is yes, you should solicit positive reviews, but don't think of that as feedback. You need to be aware of what is wrong so that you can fix it.

What are your thoughts about online reviews? Is it part of your marketing to solicit them?

Lost in communication: the sad story of the Lost Boys of Sudan

Last night I watched the 2003 documentary The Lost Boys of Sudan. The Lost Boys are a group of young men who managed to escape a brutal massacre of their people in Sudan and walked across the dessert to end up in a refugee camp in Kenya. Many of the boys lost both parents or entire families and some have no idea what happened to their families. Some Lost Boys were repatriated to the United States, and this documentary focuses on two of them.

The documentary deals with the difficulty these boys have adapting to the United States. Nobody seems to tell them what to expect or how to navigate anything. Santino, one of the boys featured in the film, drives a car without a license or insurance and ends up hitting another car. He ends up in court

where the judge tells him that it doesn't matter that he is in the process of getting a license, he is still responsible for not having one and driving anyway. His confusion and upset are palpable. He is earning \$7 an hour, and now he has more than \$500 in fines. Nobody explained it to him and he had no way of knowing.

Can you imagine being transported from a refugee camp in Africa to Houston, Texas? It must have been an extreme culture shock for these young men. And yet, they are greeted by two YMCA workers that speak to them in colloquial and fast English, even though the boys speak limited English, and it is not their primary language by far. And that is just the language gap. The film doesn't say much about these YMCA people, but it seems that they are clueless about the vast differences between someone from Sudan (who has survived trauma and has been living in a refugee camp) and someone who has been living in the U.S. all his or her life.

In the film, the boys are taken to an apartment, told that their rent will be paid for four months "while they get on their feet," and seemingly, expected to fend for themselves without much guidance at all.

The documentary is a study in the contrasts between Americans and the Africans. Americans exhibit a very sheltered and ignorant view of the world. The Africans quickly learn that they are different—not only from the white Americans but from the black Americans too. Their skin is darker, their culture is different.

As well-meaning as the YMCA and the others involved in the resettlement project were, they failed (miserably in my opinion) to consider how to properly communicate with the Lost Boys. Good communication bridges differences. Bad communication forms barriers.

Tainted with cultural blindness, the Americans did not so much

as consider how hard it would be to adjust to American society, or really, what it takes to navigate day-to-day interactions. The boys had never had jobs or earned money or paid rent or dealt with car insurance. And yet, they were left to deal with everything by themselves.

What is worse is that the boys came to America expecting to get an education. In the film, it seems their sponsors thought they should be grateful to get low skilled, low paying jobs.

Because expectations were not properly communicated and because the Americans did not take into consideration the needs of the Lost Boys, the film documents a story of struggle and disaffection rather than of triumph and happiness. As hard as their lives were in Africa, it is not easier for them in the United States.

To me, this documentary illustrates perfectly how communication will fail if you don't consider your audience and its needs. Even the first decision of what language to use to communicate is a poor one. Communicating in English to people who barely speak the language is a recipe for failure.

Are you considering your audience when you communicate? Or are you so focused on your message you are not checking to see if it is being received?

Greater than the sum of its

parts

Did you watch the 2011 movie New Year's Eve? If you spent money on it either in the theater or renting it, I am sorry for your loss. I only watched the beginning as it was playing on one of my cable movie channels. After 20 minutes of unbelievable situations and bad lines, I went back to reading the side of the cereal box.

You would be forgiven for thinking that this movie was worth watching. After all, it has a cast of well known (and very attractive) actors (including Michelle Pfeiffer, Hillary Swank, Robert DeNiro, Halle Berry, Ashton Kutcher, Sarah Jessica Parker and even Jon Bon Jovi, to name a few). It is directed by Gary Marshall, who brought us bastions of sitcom TV such as Happy Days and Laverne and Shirley.

But the actors and the director have to follow a screenplay, which in this case was written by Katherine Fugate. Fugate's credits include the TV series Xena: Warrior Princess. Fugate also wrote Valentine's Day, another movie that revolves around an over-hyped holiday and which features lots of well known actors (some of the very same ones that appear in New Year's Eve).

Apparently, Gary Marshall saw potential in a holiday movie franchise. Perhaps we should prepare for St. Patrick's Day: The Movie, in which a group of well known actors would be anxiously wondering how their romantic lives will survive the drinking of green beer.

Movies are the result of all of the parts working together: acting, directing and writing. You could also throw in cinematography, editing, costume design and sound. As New Year's Eve painfully underscores, even dozens of well-known actors and a funny-guy director do not make a poorly plotted and written screenplay shine. In other words, a good movie is

greater than the sum of its parts.

Communications is much the same way. You have to have more than just pretty, shiny parts that you throw together. To make the movie analogy work here, **your communications efforts need good direction (communications strategy), believable acting (execution or tactics) and a well-written screenplay (your communications plan).**

Look at your communications efforts right now. Are you getting led by pretty tactics (Let's go on Pinterest! Let's get a blog!) or are you thinking about how everything works together to achieve your goals?

Why you should blog even if you don't have the time

I was reading a transcript of an online discussion regarding the benefits of blogging for business. One of the people in the discussion declared that she did not have time to blog since she was way too busy doing client work. Her blog was basically abandoned, and she was OK with that. I wasn't in on the conversation, but if I had been, I would have told her she is making a big mistake.

It's very simple. If you don't do any marketing because you are busy, you will inevitably have to work twice as hard to market yourself when you aren't busy. And yes, blogging is a marketing effort: It boosts your visibility. It keeps your website current. It helps with SEO.

Not blogging because you are too busy is like not networking because you already have a job. If you lose your job (which

unfortunately can happen from one day to the next) you will soon realize you don't have relationships in place to help you in a job search. You must keep networking and building relationships, whether you "need" them now or not, because you never know what will happen in the future.

Whether you are busy or not, blogging should be a part of your business marketing routine. To neglect your blog now because you are busy working on your client's behalf is a rookie mistake. Those of us who have been in the business world for a while know that clients come and go. Clients can face budget shortfalls and cut you from one day to the next.

Put energy into your own business, not just your client's business. This applies to you whether you have your own business, or you work for someone else, and even if you are concerned with developing your career. If you are a worker bee, why not have a personal blog? If you work for an organization, you should insist that the organizational should be kept up to date. And it goes without saying that if you own your own business, you are solely responsible for keeping you presence out there.

Don't wait! Write a blog post today!

Why you should know who won at the Oscars

In case you missed it, last night was the movie awards ceremony formerly known as The Academy Awards, now known simply as the Oscars. Not sure what the TV broadcast viewership was, but it was large (very large). The Oscars are one of the most viewed, most commented and most followed

awards. The #oscars2013 hashtag certainly lit up my Twitter stream last night, proving that most major televised events are having the “second-screen” effect.

Do you know who won for Best Picture? Or for Best Director? You should, but in case you are a person who doesn't watch TV or movies or read a newspaper or the Yahoo! home page, it was Argo and Ang Lee for Life of Pi, respectively.

If you want to be successful in marketing communications, you need to be conversant in pop culture. You just do. Pop culture is the currency that allows you to participate in the world. It is the fodder of small talk at happy hours and cocktail receptions and what brings people together around the proverbial water cooler (even if your water cooler is Twitter). If you don't know Ben Affleck from Quentin Tarantino, Adele from Lady Gaga, you are out of touch with what many people share in society.

I know people that refuse to watch movies or TV shows because nothing compares to whatever they feel was the golden age of entertainment. Some people never tune in to the top 40 station on their radios. Others don't read current bestsellers claiming nothing worthwhile is being written today. That's fine. **No one should have to watch, listen or read anything they find distasteful. But they should know what it is they are not watching, listening or reading.** In other words, you should know who won the Oscars last night even if you didn't watch the show or see any of the movies nominated.

Will something evil befall you if you don't know? No, of course not. You will just be out of step with what most people follow. If you see a reference to Jennifer Lawrence or Anne Hathaway, you won't understand why they are being talked about. And you may also be missing out on relationship-building conversations. The beauty of pop culture is that it is out there, available to everyone. You don't have to be an insider or well-connected.

So, do you know who won at the Oscars last night?

Want to improve your blogging?

If you want to improve your blogging or even get your blog off the ground, and you are in the Washington, DC metro area, check out my blogging workshop [this Thursday](http://howtowriteyourblog3.eventbrite.com/#). You must pre-register. More details and registration: <http://howtowriteyourblog3.eventbrite.com/#>

The one thing that will kill your marketing efforts

You may have a great offering, beautiful marketing collateral, an interactive website, a robust presence on social media and yet, you are not achieving your marketing objectives. There could be many causes for this, like a poor economy or poor pricing or too much competition, but it could also be that you are **being too aggressive**. You are turning people off.



Bullhorn by spDuchamp
from Flickr

Telemarketers are especially bad at understanding that aggressiveness does not build customer trust. Quite the opposite. It builds distrust and worse, dislike. Calling repeatedly at all times of day and night does not make a potential customer or donor enamored of your product or cause.

Perhaps this is the divide between marketing and sales. In marketing, you are trying to build interest in your product and service by using tools such as the “Four Ps” (pricing, promotion, product, placement), whereas in sales you are trying to achieve quotas, generally measured in revenue.

Say you are shopping for a new car. The marketing function will get you to consider the new XYZ hybrid sedan from the big car manufacturer. You are intrigued by the miles per gallon or the comfort or whatever other attribute. You walk into a showroom and immediately a sales representative is there, trying to get you to buy. If he or she is too aggressive, chances are good you will walk out without making a purchase. The marketing worked but the sales pitch didn't.

Brad Phillips of Phillips Media Relations had such a thing happen to him with a PR service. He discussed it yesterday on his Mr. Media Training blog, and received a lot of support (read the comments). He signed up for a service that is marketed to people like him, but then was assaulted by a too-aggressive sales person trying to sell him other products and services. The problem was not the offering as much as the aggression.

Are you being too aggressive in your pitch? Here are some instances of marketing (and sales) aggressiveness:

- Calling too much/ too often
- Sending too many emails (including newsletters)
- Invading privacy (such as asking Google or Facebook to scan private messages for keywords)
- In traditional advertising, opting for frequency over reach (have you ever watched a TV program where the same ad is shown multiple times?)
- Send newsletters out without prior opt-in, and without an easy opt-out.
- Loud (literally) advertising (even though it has been regulated, I am still hearing ads that have a higher

- volume than the programming)
- Bait-and-switch tactics

What results from these tactics is that people feel attacked or overwhelmed or frustrated. They can't lower the volume and they resent it. They feel that your sales pitch is invading their private space.

Can you think of other aggressive behavior? How do you react to aggressive marketing? Do you think the results justify the means?

Blogging workshop next week!

There's still time to register for my How to Blog Workshop, which takes place next Thursday, February 28 in Silver Spring, MD. Visit howtowriteyourblog3.eventbrite.com for more details and registration.

Is it time for a makeover?

Have you ever looked at someone and wanted to make him/her over? Yesterday I saw a woman with frizzy, long and shapeless hair wearing an equally long and shapeless prairie-type dress of a circa 1982 vintage. Perhaps vintage wines are good but dresses fade and look, well, dated. I wondered if she was aware of how she appeared: as someone who did not care about her appearance and/or hadn't been shopping in 30 years and/or didn't have a good friend to tell her she needed to update.



Little Claire on the Prairie by
Chris_Ford_UK on Flickr

What does this 80s refugee have to do with marketing and communications? Simple, they too can benefit from an update and a makeover. When was the last time you really examined your website? Does the design indicate that we are in 2013 or is it the same look you had when you launched your website back in 1996? When was the last time you posted something on your blog or changed your about us page? How about your logo? Still using fonts that were popular in the 1970s?

But updates don't only refer to outward appearance. You must also look at the back end. Is your software up to date? Have you looked at your mission statement lately? Or your target audience description? Perhaps your messaging needs an update too.

Make it one your goals for 2013 to determine what needs to be updated and then get it done! Here is a list to help you:

- Logo

- Tagline
- Website (including blog)
- Brochure (even if it's a PDF/online version)
- Business stationery (including letterhead and business cards)
- Annual report
- Press release boilerplate
- Organizational mission/vision
- Target audience description
- Organizational description in various formats and lengths
- Services/products list (and pricing if appropriate)
- Social media avatars/biographies/descriptions
- Software/hardware

A makeover is a chance to refresh and renew. With people, makeovers tend to make them look younger and more attractive. With organizations, makeovers make them look in touch, modern and more attractive (to potential customers/clients/donors/supporters).

What are you going to change this year?

Improve your blog/blogging process!

If you are in the Washington, DC metro area and would like to improve your blog or blogging process, sign up for my How to Write your Blog workshop today! The workshop takes place on Thursday, February 28 at the Silver Spring Civic Building. For more details and to register, visit the Eventbrite page.

Not everything is as it seems

Yesterday, I wrote about the need to work with experts. Nobody knows everything and many times it is imperative to hire an expert to help in the areas where you are lacking in specialized skills or knowledge.



Twisted reflection in the fun house mirror by Little Koshka on Flickr

Keep in mind that not every expert has the same level of expertise. Let's take accounting. If you are someone that has few investments and a W2, you may be perfectly fine doing it yourself, using tax software or going to one of the big box tax advisers that we often see advertised around this time. However, if you are in a special situation (small business, self-employed freelancer, artist, etc.) you will NEED to find someone who understands the tax implications of your situation, and can work with you on filing the proper forms. This is an area where expertise (or lack thereof) can have tremendous financial consequences.

How do you figure out if someone has the expertise you require?

First, figure out the exact problem you are trying to solve. If you are having a slump in sales, is it fulfillment, customer service or your marketing/communications?

Second, start searching through your network first. Say you need someone to help you with a public relations issue, ask your network whom they recommend. Alternatively, use LinkedIn to search and see if you have connections in common. Ask your connections if they can give you some idea about the professional.

Third, interview the expert. Be prepared to ask a lot of questions such as "have you worked with this type of situation before?"

Fourth, see if the expert asks you questions. A real expert needs to get a handle on a situation. He or she should be asking you a lot of questions, including "why do you need an expert?" or "why have you contacted me?"

Fifth, be wary of pat answers or 100% assurances. Nobody, but nobody can solve any problem with 100% certainty.

Sixth, check with your gut. Do you like this person? Does this person seem genuine?

Unfortunately, there are great many people out there who are very good at talking themselves up. And as I said in my post yesterday, you don't know what you don't know so you are unable at times to ask the right questions.

For example, I had a client who was desperate to increase his share of the market. He had hired a "marketing expert" to help. The client knew next to nothing about marketing and neither did the "expert." By the time I came in and asked questions like "who is your target?" and "who is your main competition?" they had already set out a marketing destination that was not aligned with BASIC MARKETING PRINCIPLES. These questions had never been asked before because the so-called expert was not a strategic thinker but was really selling a package of tactics (put up a website, use a QR code, print a postcard, make a video) without a unifying message or idea of how success would be measured.

Could the client have avoided the situation above? Maybe yes or maybe no. He didn't know what he didn't know, but he also didn't bother to ask questions and study up on the topic.

My takeaway here is the old Ronald Reagan line: trust but verify. You should do your due diligence when hiring an expert because not everything is as it seems.

Thoughts?