

You don't know what you don't know

Obvious right? If you don't know something, you don't even know you don't know. But you do know that you don't know everything, which is why you hire experts to help you with stuff like your taxes, your computer network, your health, and so forth. And this is why you hire people to help you with marketing, advertising, public relation, design and web development.

What is tricky about hiring experts to help you with what you don't know, is that often you don't know enough to ask the right questions or even evaluate the outcomes.

Let me give you a specific example. I hired someone (who shall remain nameless) to create my website using WordPress and transfer the contents of my former blog hosted at WordPress.com. Check and check. However, somehow people were still finding my old blog and commenting on stuff over there. The person I hired to develop my site had proven to be unreliable and has never been heard from since, so I couldn't ask how to fix this problem.

I needed to make a few other backend changes and contacted Kim Woodbridge . I asked her how I could get people to stop going to my other blog. She told me that it was simple, all I had to do was pay WordPress.com to redirect people to my website. (Note: it took about two minutes and \$13 to get people redirected.) Once people are no longer going to the other blog, I can bring it down.

I didn't know what I had to do or I would have done it sooner. Since the first WordPress developer failed to do this or advise me to do this, people have been going to my old blog, not realizing it was housed elsewhere.

Working with experts

1. **Remember: you don't know what you don't know.** When hiring experts you are expecting they will have the knowledge you don't. Sometimes they do, and sometimes they don't. You must start with the assumption that nobody knows everything, but they may know more than you do.
2. **Remember: you can question.** If something seems wrong or gives you a funny feeling, question it. This is why we get second opinions from doctors. This is why if your taxes seem unusually high, you may ask your accountant to recalculate or even find another accountant.
3. **Think of it as trial and error** (and hopefully, more trial than error). But remember that you absolutely don't know and the expert knows a bit more than you do.

Blog Workshop on Feb. 28

Want to improve your blogging? If you are located in the DC area, attend my upcoming How to Write Your Blog workshop on Thursday, February 28 in Silver Spring, MD. Details and registration are [here](#).

Invigorate your organization's blog

Is your organization's blog feeling tired? Perhaps it's time to try a few new things like soliciting guest blog posts, or live blogging a conference. Read the five tips to re-invigorate your blog that I share as a guest blogger at Bates Creative Group's *Align* blog.

My thanks to Director of Business Development Heather Shelton and Marketing Specialist Amanda Jennison of Bates Creative Group for including me in their blog!

The power to recognize advertising is not enough

Long-time readers of this blog know that I have written before about Pepco, the Potomac Electric Power Company, which serves nearly 800,000 customers in Maryland and Washington, D.C. My posts have focused on the fact that Pepco's advertising does not match people's experiences with the power company.

Last night, viewers of Super Bowl 47 were surprised to see the lights go out during the game in the Superdome in New Orleans, where the game was being played. In fact, the power was out for about 35 minutes. Entergy, the electricity provider in New Orleans said that the issue was not with them but with the stadium. As of right now, I am not sure what caused the power failure but I do know what people in Maryland and DC thought about it by their postings on Twitter: Pepco must surely be involved.

Pepco's reliability has become a joke. It has a negative perception so deeply ingrained in customers' minds that comments like: "Who knew **Pepco** was the official energy provider for the Super Bowl" by @djrothkopf or "Talked to **Pepco** and they're confident power will be restored to all parts of the stadium by Wednesday" by @timothypmurphy were rampant (and often retweeted) on Twitter on Sunday night.

No amount of advertising will fix a real, on-the-ground problem. Other organizations, such as the Washington Metropolitan Transportation Authority (WMATA), need to learn this lesson too. When you have let your customers down repeatedly, they will no longer trust you. Your advertising and your public relations will not rehabilitate your image.

In order to change people's perceptions of your brand, you need to move beyond just communications. You need to make positive changes and be able to provide proof that you have done so. Once you have made measurable progress and you have something tangible to report, you can move forward with a communications program. Even then, bad experiences are difficult to overcome.

It will take actual reliability and good experiences with Pepco for customers to learn to trust this company. As I have said before, you can tell me in your advertising that you are working on your reliability, but if I am sitting in the dark for days on end (like I was during last summer's Derecho storm), I am going to doubt you are doing very much at all.

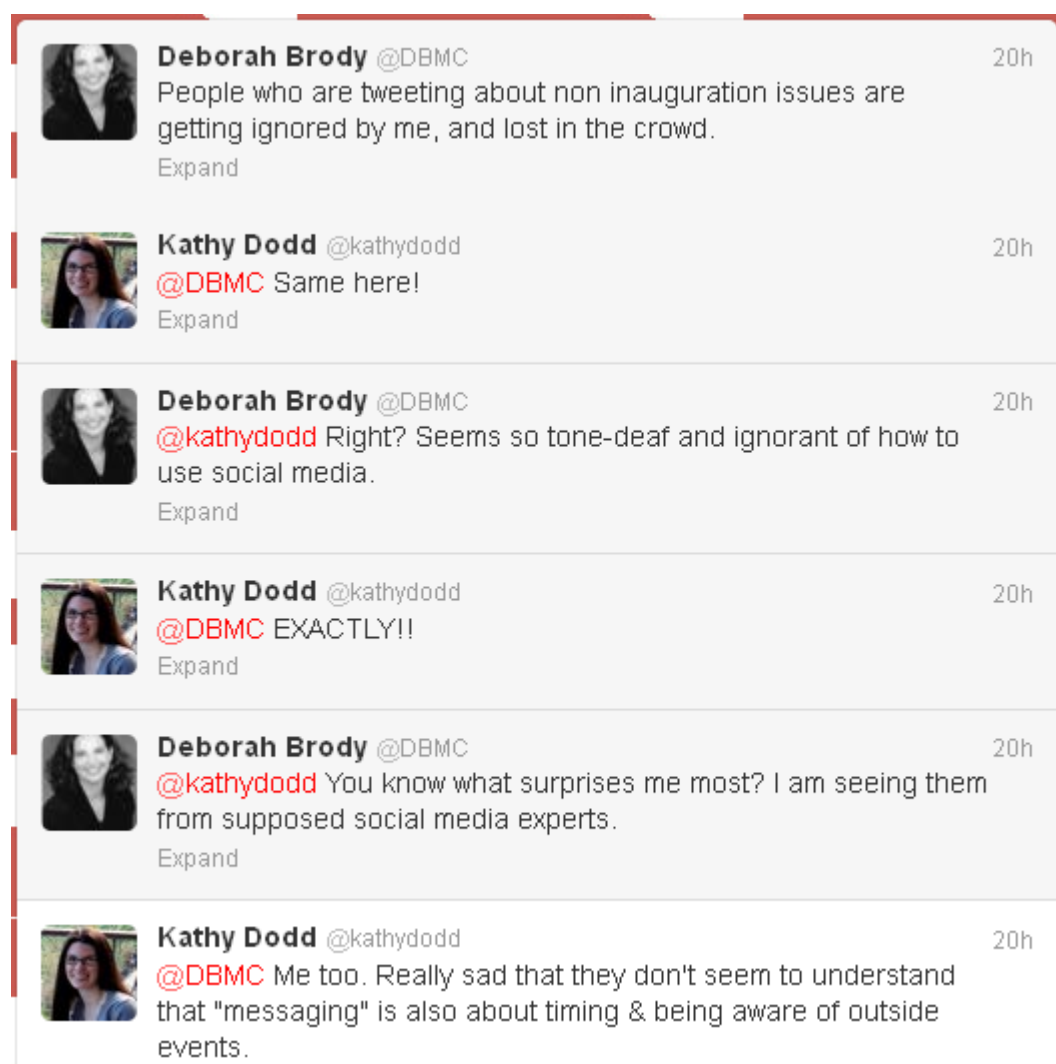
What are your thoughts? If you are in Maryland or DC did you also joke that Pepco was behind the power outage at the Super Bowl?

How to tweet like a marketer

Yesterday, about 1.1 million tweets were posted regarding President Barack Obama's Inauguration ceremony. That's a lot of tweets! People commented on everything from Michelle Obama's coat to Richard Blanco's poem to Beyonce's rendition of the National Anthem.

As I watched the Inauguration ceremonies and followed my Twitter stream (using the second screen), I noticed a social media “expert” tweeting out content management tips. Then I noticed another marketing/social media person promoting a blog post, which had absolutely nothing to do with politics, Martin Luther King or inauguration. It struck me as dissonant.

I tweeted out that I was ignoring anything not Inaugural-related, and I thought anything regarding other topics would most likely get lost. This led to an exchange with Kathy Dodd, a Washington, DC-based marketer. It went like this:



So it wasn't just me. What was happening was that those tweets were not following a main tenet of marketing communications: molding your message to the audience's needs. As Kathy said, **the people putting out these messages were not being aware of**

outside events or of the timing involved.

In those tweets, there was nothing wrong with the message, but the message failed to have an impact. They came off as extraneous and irrelevant.

Twitter has often been described as one big cocktail party. Can you imagine if you were at a party where everyone was talking about the how much fun they were having at this event, and somebody crashed the party and announced that bananas were on sale across town. Everyone would shake their heads and continue talking about the party, *no matter how much they liked bananas* because it was a message that wasn't suited to the occasion.

Perhaps the non-Inaugural tweets from yesterday were previously scheduled, we can't really know. But what we do know is that they failed to achieve their goal (selling bananas if they were the party-crashers above) for one simple reason: the people tweeting were not thinking like marketers. **Marketers want to make sure their messages get to the right people at the right time.**

Here are some tips to tweet like a marketer:

- Be aware of major events (some are scheduled and some are not) that will hold a majority of your target audience's attention.
- Time your tweets for when they are most likely to be well received. For example, if you are promoting your lunch specials, don't do it at dinner time.
- Be human, not an automaton. Remember it is *social* media.
- Don't talk at people; have a conversation with them.

What are your thoughts? Agree or disagree?

Why fact checking is a crucial skill

Yesterday, I was watching local news coverage of the Inaugural events, and a reporter stated that Barack Obama took the oath of office using Lincoln's bible. Except he didn't. He used Michele Obama's family bible. Then, one of the anchors on this newscast said it was symbolic that the Inauguration taking place today (Monday, January 21) on Martin Luther King's birthday. Except that today is the day we OBSERVE MLK's birthday. His actual date of birth was January 15th.

These may seem like small mix-ups, but it points to a much larger problem. Journalists are not checking their facts, but rather parroting what they hear or repeating something they think they know. And then viewers repeat this information, and thus, misinformation is spread.

Most people think that what they hear on TV or read in a newspaper is vetted, and therefore true. And yet, I have seen countless examples beyond those above, of news outlets simply failing to fact-check. Add to this the increasingly sloppy use of grammar and spelling and you have a news media that is less trustworthy and less accurate than ever.

Bloggers, Tweeters and journalists need to be very careful with what they present as fact. It is pretty simple to fact check when MLK's birthday was (just Google it!). It is good to double-check information. If you can't find another source, then perhaps you should wait before you publish anything (and by publish, I mean making anything public).

Thoughts? Good examples? Share please!

Getting a reality check

Last night I attended an event where the sole purpose was to get feedback on a new website from community attendees. It was fairly informal—the creators of the website asked for opinions and reactions to the website, which you did on a one-to-one basis.

I found this exercise incredibly interesting because it can be so useful. But I wonder how often it is done. My sense is that it isn't done often enough! The examples abound: websites that are hard to navigate, brochures that are pointless, ads that fail to entice, and on and on.

Get a reality check!

As a marketer or communications person, you should seek outside opinions. This is why in-house communications often employs consultants or agencies. This is why market research exists. But even (perhaps especially) if you are an entrepreneur, you should find someone to discuss your marketing, positioning or other business-related issues. Everybody needs a reality check!

There are structured ways to get a reality check. As mentioned above, you could hire a consultant (for personal marketing, perhaps this consultant is a life coach or therapist).

- Big businesses could hire a market research firm.
- Nonprofits can tap into their board of directors or their volunteers.
- Entrepreneurs or solopreneurs may consider joining a peer group or create an ad-hoc advisory council of trusted people.
- Smaller businesses can conduct informal focus groups

like the one I attended.

You most definitely need to conduct a reality check BEFORE you launch—an idea, a product, a marketing piece or a website. Many businesses seem to be afraid of hearing that their idea/ad campaign/marketing materials may be missing the mark.

However scary or uncomfortable it may be, getting a reality check will be immensely valuable. It's easier to fix something before it is out there in the public eye.

Do you get reality checks? If so, from whom or how? Please share in the comments.

Are your volunteers on message?

Nonprofits are notorious for having difficulty with communications. Many times, it has to do with lack of funds (and thus, insufficient support). What many nonprofits tend to have in spades, however, is volunteers. Volunteers are great for nonprofit organizations. They can staff an event, or help serve lunch, or provide input, or, maybe most important, help spread the word about the nonprofit.

And yet, some nonprofits don't seem to appreciate the role that volunteers play in communications. Let me give you two examples.

A chaotic, disorganized volunteer experience

Around Christmas, I volunteered to do some gift-wrapping with

a DC-based nonprofit. The sign-up form indicated I was to work from 10 am to 3 pm. I arrived at 10 am, only to find a bit of chaos. The volunteer director told me to go one place, where I was promptly told to go back to where I started. The volunteer manager had limited ability to organize, and ended up wasting a lot of time. Two other volunteers were grouching along with me on how disorganized the event was. We didn't start wrapping (in a very chaotic and inefficient manner—also lacking tape, wrapping paper, etc.) until about 11 am. One full hour was wasted. No water or snacks were offered. No guidance as to how long we were expected to stay. When I left around 12:30 pm, no one even noticed or thanked me. In fact, I never got a thank you at all. I will not be volunteering with this organization ever again.

There are two different issues at play here. One is the negative impact of disorganization on people who volunteer. People (like me) who have a bad experience volunteering won't volunteer with your organization again, and worse, will tell others of their bad experience. The second issue is that volunteer leaders are not being given the tools to make sure they provide both a message and a positive experience, quite possibly because the volunteering role is not valued.

Volunteers who don't have the right (or any) information

Just this week, someone in my network invited me to attend a business networking event run by a large nonprofit. The invitation said the price of the event itself was \$75, but attendees were required to donate a minimum of \$500 to the nonprofit during the calendar year. I pointed out that the real cost of attending this event would be \$575 to the person who invited me. He called and emailed me to tell me that the \$500 was "only if I wanted to donate" and that the event fee was "totally separate." However, the invitation clearly stated that the annual contribution was required.

Volunteers need to know the facts...all of them. But more

importantly, they need to know the reason for the information they are sharing. The nonprofit above SHOULD have informed my contact about the requirements for the event, but moreover, should have told him WHY this event has a minimum contribution, why it is necessary, what the contribution is for (what are the impacts etc.).

Imagine if this guy had come back to me and said this instead: Yes, you are right. You will be required to donate \$500 during the year, which by the way, you can give in several installments, not all at once. That money will be used to fund our X initiative, which helps X number of people. Also, you will be assured of meeting some awesome business leaders at the event, and we will be having other events during the year.

I suspect that this volunteer was only told to recruit people to come to the event. He didn't get any additional information or a script or any other tools that would help him not only recruit attendees, but spread the message about the work the nonprofit is doing and will do with additional funds.

Volunteers can help with a nonprofit's tasks. And volunteers help communicate the nonprofit's message. Are your volunteers on message?

Why would you highlight that?

It's great to highlight your USP (Unique Selling Proposition). In fact, you should. You should communicate to your target audience what makes you special or different than others,

especially if you are in a crowded marketplace. A couple of days ago, I came across this ad in the newspaper:

**Free Pickup
& Delivery**
Includes Moving
Furniture, Rolling
and Relaying
Your Rugs!

Hadeed

ORIENTAL RUG CLEANING
& IN-HOME/OFFICE SERVICES

*If You Stand
On It,
Joe Hadeed
Stands Behind It!*

GRAND OPENING! of our RUG SALES SHOWROOM!

Every Size Available! 2x3 All
The Way to Embassy Size!

Incredible Selection with a
3 Million Dollar Inventory!

**RUGS
30%-50%
OFF!**



Scan This
to See Our
Entire
Inventory!

839 W Maple Ave. Vienna, VA 703-962-6384

25% Off
First Cleaning
OR
50% Off
Initial
Cleaning
With a 6-time
service package
**Maid
Service**

*Expires 1/19/13.
Not valid w/any
other offers.

Any 3 Areas (400 sf)
\$99*
4 to 7 Areas (600 sf)
\$169*
8-10 Areas (1000 sf)
\$269*

**Wall to Wall
Steam
Cleaning**

*Expires 1/19/13.
Not valid w/any other
offers. Basic steam
clean

**10%
Off**

**In-Plant
Rug
Cleaning**

*Expires 1/19/13.
Not valid w/any
other offers.

**5%
Off**

**In-Plant Rug
Restoration
& Repair**

*Expires 1/19/13.
Not valid w/any
other offers.

\$80
Each Bathroom
Floor
Coloring & Sealing
Available Upon
Request
\$99 minimum order.

**Tile and
Grout
Cleaning**

*Ceramic & Porcelain
only. Expires 1/19/13.
Not valid w/any other
offers. Residential only.

\$85 Off
Whole House
Air Duct
Cleaning
(Per System)

**Dryer Vent
Cleaning only**

\$95

*Expires 1/19/13.
Not valid w/any
other offers.

Call or visit
our website
For Details!

Hurry Enroll in the

100% BUCKS!

Rewards Program

All Loyalty Cards Come
Preloaded with \$50-\$3000!

A Trusted Resource Since 1955
for Cleaning, Repair, and
Restoration of the Region's
Finest Carpets & Rugs.

USHII

All Hadeed Employees Go Through
a Rigorous Background Check by
**UNITED STATES HOMELAND
INVESTIGATIONS INC.**

Have Peace of Mind Knowing That All of Our
Employees Are Professional & Courteous with
No Criminal Background! Drug Free &
Authorized to work in the U.S.

You Must
Check Out Our
New Website!

206 Duke St. Alexandria, VA 1-703-466-9704 1-801-637-1163

Find a complete listing of all our
convenient drop-off locations at... **HadeedCarpet.com**

above has numerous claims for your attention: special pricing, free pick up, new showroom, new website AND that they have vetted their employees. In short, there's too much. They sell rugs but they also clean rugs.

Besides having too much information, the fact this company is making sure you know that all their employees are checked out—that they have no criminal background, are drug-free and authorized to work in the US—is problematic.

The problem is that this company is bringing up a question that perhaps was not even on their customers' minds. Sure, it's good to say employees are carefully vetted, but to highlight that they have been submitted to a "rigorous background check" makes me wonder if a) they have had a problem with dishonest/criminal employees before; 2) whether this particular industry has a problem with criminals (and if so, why?) or 3) is this the most important thing I need to know about this company?

What do most customers want to know before they contract with a carpet cleaning company? That's the key question. This ad does not answer that. It tells me price is important as is location. I should be enticed by free pick up and delivery, and that I should rest assured that none of the employees I deal with are "illegal immigrants" or druggies or have a criminal background.

What you choose to highlight in your marketing communications pieces should be relevant to your audience's needs.

Your thoughts?

6 marketing and communications lessons from 2012

1. Understand the basics (who you are and what you do) before doing anything else. I worked with one client this year who had launched a website, hired a marketing person and even commissioned a video without ever having examined what the company's main message was, defined a target audience or main competitors and certainly hadn't thought out its USP.

2. You don't have to market everywhere, just where you are likely to find your target audience. There's no need to spread your marketing message far and wide. You can have success by focusing your efforts where you are likely to find your audience.

3. There is only one content strategy (getting your target audience to read your content). Everything else is a TACTIC. I have read many articles about content marketing, all claiming to have new “strategies.” In most, if not all, cases, these strategies were really tactics.



4. Acknowledge the reality on the ground. This year we have seen several advertisers (and a politician or two) who just did not get it. Like Pepco, who continued patting itself on its back about “reliability” when hundreds of thousands of customers were without power during extreme heat for several days.

5. Depending on Facebook (or any free, third-party service) as a marketing platform will cost you. Sure, you can have a Facebook page for free, but figuring out its ever changing policies will cost you in time and effort.

6. Stop scheduling your tweets! Tweeting about your fun weekend ahead while people are mourning 20 dead children is tacky and preventable. Twitter is about immediacy, engagement and responsiveness. Scheduled tweets are just the opposite.

What lessons did you draw from the year that was? Anything jump out at you? If so, please share in the comments.

Depending on outside vendors: it's risky

Today, I can't use Outlook. Why? My ISP, Verizon, is not working. A colleague can't access her email. Why? Her web host is having server issues. So we sit and wait and pressure these service providers to fix these things because it affects our business.

Although we can't control everything, on some communications-related issues, we have more control than others. I can pressure my ISP to fix my email issues, but I can't do a thing about Facebook and its ever changing rules and features. (Facebook has changed EdgeRank, affecting brand pages) I don't have any control over Twitter and its decision not to play nice with Instagram (Twitter will no longer display Instagram photos on its site).

I also can't do much about Google, Gmail or any number of Internet-based applications and software that we are becoming increasingly dependent on.

Marketers who enthusiastically recommend having a Facebook page, or an Instagram account, or signing up for Pinterest **MUST** take into consideration that these are services and that as a brand, you are putting yourself at the mercy of their decisions, which do affect you, often without your input or control.

Many of the most problematic outside vendors (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) are free to use. As users, we have no leverage. We are getting what we pay for.

A few years ago, a local website decided to get rid of its URL and use Facebook exclusively. Guess what, that website did not survive.

Be aware that by using the cloud, or using third-party services, you are agreeing to give up control. You may want more of that control than you realize.

Thoughts?