

Is it Happy Holidays or Merry Christmas?

Yesterday, a friend posted this on Facebook:



I could not disagree more. This seems to be part of a growing (and conservative) movement, which claims saying Happy Holidays is taking the Christmas out of Christmas. In my opinion, this is a completely intolerant and ignorant view and understanding of the reality of a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic world. Christmas is celebrated by Christians, but not by Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Zen-Taoists and others.

Wishing happy holidays or season's greetings is a way of acknowledging the various holidays taking place at the end of the year: Christmas, New Year's, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa.

When you wish someone a Merry Christmas, you are saying you wish him or her a happy day of celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ.

One is inclusive, and one is exclusive. One assumes a belief and one doesn't.

As a communicator, you have to be careful not to make members of your audience feel excluded. Clearly, whether you wish

Happy Holidays or Merry Christmas depends on who your target audience is. A church, for example, has a target audience of Christian worshipers and supporters. For a church to wish its audience Merry Christmas would be completely appropriate. For a non-religious institution (like the government or your business) to wish its audience Merry Christmas, would be exclusionary.

With business communications, there's the additional desire to steer clear of hot topics like religion and politics. Merry Christmas is a religious statement. Happy Holidays is not.

What do you think? Do you wish people Happy Holidays, Merry Christmas or something else?

Show and tell!

You learned it way back in kindergarten, remember? Show and tell was when you brought something in and you told your classmates about it. Some people's show and tell was boring and some was really good. I can't remember anything from kindergarten but I know the lesson of showing and telling is a good one for anybody trying to communicate.

You would think something as basic as show and tell would stay with most people. And yet it hasn't.

Today, I am searching for an online task manager. There are many (and I am not really sure which one to use). Some show you screen shots of the software. Some show you video. All of them tell you what they do (but not how exactly). One in particular does not show or tell me anything. It asks me to

sign up. I don't know about you, but I am not signing up for ANYTHING, even if it is free, if I don't know what it is exactly.

Perhaps this company's principals did not attend kindergarten.

Remember, show and tell. People need to see what they are getting and they need to understand it too.

Right?

Quick! Check these potential problems right now

There are a few things that people tend to overlook or to simply not check.

Check the contact information CAREFULLY on your website/marketing materials

You want to make sure it is accurate. Perhaps have someone read it off to you. For example, in my newsletter I found the address had the wrong ZIP code. A graphic designer I know had one digit wrong in her phone number.

And check whether it can be found easily

I just spent a ridiculous amount of time trying to find where an art class was being offered—you know—the actual physical place where it was meeting. The website made you go to the About page where you had to scroll to the “where to find us” page. Why make it so complicated?



By PNASH, Flickr

Check to see if GPS/Google Maps/Mapquest can find your address

If you are any type of location that people drive to (store, restaurant, hotel, attraction), have you checked that the address you give out works on GPS/Google Maps/Mapquest? Sometimes street names have changed or are new and do not show up.

Check how your email and newsletters show up to recipients

Before you send out anything to the world, send yourself a sample. You want to make sure your name is spelled correctly, and how it shows up in the recipient's inbox. For example, someone I know was sending email that was coming from Email box 2 instead of her name. And just today I received an newsletter titled "Sample Newsletter" from a well known institution. These can result in people not knowing who you are and ultimately, not opening your email/newsletter.

Go check these things right now. Fix them if they don't check out. You will be glad you did.

Random thoughts to start November

Work for your treats!

Last night was Halloween, and I had a bowlful of good (chocolate) candy. There seemed fewer trick-or-treaters this year than last, and a lot fewer cute costumes. I am not sure what that was about. But what really bugged me was the teenager who showed up with her backpack open, wearing no costume, just ready to grab some candy. Really? She made no effort at all and perhaps she felt a sense of entitlement. I shut the door after that and decided to keep the rest of the candy for myself.

(Also, why is it that the littlest kids grabbed one piece of candy each, but the teenagers grabbed a handful?)

The takeaway here is that looking the part helps with buy-in. I am not inclined to give you candy if you don't look like a trick-or-treater, right?

How am I supposed to get home?

Last week I called a couple of dealerships about a malfunctioning knob in my car. Both dealerships were able to figure out approximately how much it would cost to fix but only one dealership offered a shuttle to take me home and pick me up. Where do you think I made a service appointment?

When your car is in the shop, and it is going to take all day to fix, what are you supposed to do? You can't drive yourself, obviously, but you do have options: 1) you could sit at the dealership all day (and be bored and unproductive); 2) you could get a friend or family member to pick you up and take you back (if you have a favor that needs returning); 3) you could take a cab (could cost you lots of money); or 4) you

could take public transportation to where you need to go (if it is even available).

The marketing lesson here is that offering a useful service like a courtesy shuttle will set you apart and bring you business, often more than advertising will.

Complain but with a purpose

Blogs are great for so many reasons, not the least of which is that it gives you a place to air your concerns. If you have a personal blog, complaining about something that happened to you at your local fast food shop or a blow up with a neighbor is appropriate. However, if you are writing for a small business or organizational blog, complaining just to blow off steam is not only useless, it may be detrimental. What is the reason that you are sharing the complaint? How is it helping your blog's readers? How is it getting your blog more readers of the kind you want?

For example, a couple of years ago, I wrote a complaint post about a certain cosmetics company. I did try to give it a communications spin, but the people that find my blog because of that particular post are other angry customers who are in no way interested in my thoughts on marketing communications, but rather in complaining about the cosmetics company. It gets me readers, but not readers in my target audience.

Before you start a complaint blog post or rant, think about how it fits with your blog's purpose and target audience.

Happy November!

Scary things communicators do

Yes, I know, it is somewhat formulaic to have a scary things post at Halloween, but why not? Following, in no particular order, are the scary (wrong) things communicators do:

- Not know their effect from their affect
- Declare that social media isn't necessary
- On the other hand, think that all they need to do is Tweet something out
- Think a USP is something like a USB
- Overlook the basics: not checking the address is correct, for example
- Network all the time or not at all
- Steer clear of professional development events because "there's nothing new to learn"
- Use corporate-speak phrases just to achieve buy-in or ramp up their core competency
- Fail to adapt to changing conditions ("We will send out the press release, I don't care that Hurricane Sandy just devastated New York.")

I know you have a few good ones to add—so please, please add them in the comments!

Have a happy Halloween! Hope you get more treats than tricks.



Pumpkins just in time for
Halloween

Communicating when disaster strikes

If you are anywhere on the Eastern Seaboard you are feeling the effects of Hurricane Sandy (or at least, you are hearing about the effects of Sandy on the nonstop news coverage). You are probably hunkered down at home since few people ventured out to work today. If your job is to communicate, you are faced with a tough situation: you cannot compete for attention! What should you do?

If you already have a **print campaign** running, there is nothing you can or should do. People realize that your ad or press release went out way before the storm.

If you have **TV ad campaign** running, realize that your spots probably won't run. Too much air space will be devoted to hurricane coverage. The issue you will have to face is whether you can continue to use those spots after the storm. Are they still relevant? More importantly, if people are dealing with after-disaster effects, how much impact will your ads have?

If you had scheduled a **press conference**, you should cancel it. Nobody wants to hear about product launches when they are worried about a tree crashing down on their house.

If you handle **communications for a business or organization**—especially a retail operation—you should update your website and social media feeds regarding your status (are you open or closed, do you have power or not, will you honor late payments etc.) You should also record a phone message for your location. Not everyone will have access to the Internet. You may also consider sending emails/SMS messages to customers who may need to reschedule appointments etc.

If you have a **press release** going out this week, you may want to reschedule it. Your news will have to compete with disaster information.

If you have a **social media campaign** running, first realize that many people may not have Internet access. You may want to postpone your campaign, and certainly, revisit and reconsider any scheduled Tweets, Facebook updates or blog posts. Mary Fletcher Jones of Fletcher Jones has written a very useful blog post: [6 Tips: How Communicators Can Prepare for Hurricane Sandy](#) where she deals with special considerations for social media.

What are you doing to communicate during and after the storm? Please share any insights here.

Are your events drawing fewer

people?

Last week, I attended an event and the complaint from the organizers is that fewer and fewer people are attending. Now part of this particular group's situation has to do with poor publicity. In fact, their attendance has dwindled to such an extent that they have had to change venues. Today I attended another event (different group), same problem: fewer people.

If you are organizing an event that has been losing audience, you may want to ask yourself these questions:

Is your publicity reaching new/bigger audiences?

Obviously, if few people know you are having an event, few people will attend. As a communicator, you have to evaluate where you are publicizing your event, and whether you are attracting enough people. Moreover, if you are trying to expand the amount of people at your events, you are going to have to experiment with new ways of publicizing the event. If you can only count on your core group, you don't have a recipe for growth.

Is your program good?

There are just so many times I can go to a social media event. I have heard lots of it before. Nothing new there. **Programming content counts.** Doing a boring event or having the same speakers is not going to draw a new or bigger crowd.

What else is going on that day?

This is about the importance of timing. If you are having an event, and there is a presidential debate going on that evening, you are forcing people to choose, and you may lose. Also, what time of day is your event? Have you experimented with other times?

How good was your last event?

You know the saying, *you are only as good as your last success*. How successful was your last event? Were people interested, motivated, energized? Or did you receive complaints? Was the speaker entertaining or boring? Unfortunately, you do not have too much control over circumstances (speaker was grumpy, people were late due to mass transit problems, etc.), but it matters anyhow. If you had a crappy event, people aren't going to want to attend another event that you put on.

Do you know who your audience is? Do you know why they attend your events?

You don't survey you attendees? Big mistake! If you don't even know why the people who are there attended, how are you going to figure out why people aren't attending? YOU MUST SURVEY...even informally. As an organizer, ask people on the way in how they found out about the event and on their way out whether they enjoyed the event. Have forms people can fill out. Send out an electronic survey. Do what it takes to find out more about your audience.

What are you up against and how are you fixing it? Let me know in the comments.

Are you afraid of being yourself?

I am not trying to get all new age and self-helpy with you. Instead, I am trying to find out whether you are presenting your "real self" to the world in your communications. In business lingo, this would translate into "are you being authentic?"

With social media, there is a blurring of lines between personal and professional. My Twitter feed, for example, features lots of political commentary. Some may not agree with my political viewpoint, but it is what it is. If you choose to not work with me because you disagree with me, so be it.

It turns out that people like authenticity. They like knowing who they are dealing with. And really, don't you want to work with people who want to work with you, when they know your foibles, viewpoints, etc.?

I was inspired by the article "Best Social Media Tactic: Always be Authentic" in Inc. Magazine. Here, writer Christina DesMarais interviews J. C. Kendall, CEO of TekPersona. Kendall is known as being brutally honest in his customer/social media exchanges. He feels that it is part of his branding strategy. He says the following:

*You simply cannot avoid offending some people. **No brand should waste undue time trying to appeal to everyone.** When you are developing and supporting your brand, you are creating an expectation of what will occur through a transaction with your company. Your messaging has to focus on your target customer.*

Emphasis above is mine. I think that too many organizations and individuals work too hard to be "nice," to appeal to everyone. They are AFRAID of being disliked. But the truth is that not everybody will like you and that is OK. You don't want everybody to listen to what you have to say—just your target audience. Your target WANTS what you have to offer.

So, if you are afraid of being yourself, stop. Be who you are and forget about being nice to everyone. I am not saying be mean or nasty. Just be authentic.

Are you afraid of being yourself? Why or why not?

Mrs. Maxwell was on the right track, sort of

I finally watched Salmon Fishing in the Yemen last night (Netflix had me wait for this movie for about two months, but that is another story). If you haven't seen it yet, this is the basic plot: Yemeni sheik likes to fish salmon and wants to be able to do so in his country. He hires a British firm to find someone to bring his plans to fruition. British firm reaches out to Dr. Alfred Jones, of the UK Fishing and Hunting Department. Dr. Jones laughs at the idea, but Mrs. Patricia Maxwell, press secretary for the British Prime Minister insists that the project must go on, as a publicity ploy to counteract some bad news. And so Dr. Jones embarks on feasibility studies, etc.

To me, Salmon Fishing in the Yemen is a movie about the power of ~~faith~~ PR. Great public relations takes skill and passion. It is not for the faint of heart, especially when embodied by Mrs. Maxwell, who is played brilliantly, and with comic flair by Kristin Scott Thomas. She is a spot-on caricature of a PR person (always working, smartphone in hand 24-7, running from meeting to meeting). In my opinion, she alone makes the movie worth watching.

Mrs. Maxwell is very adept at PR. Here's what she does well:

- Understands the value of positive publicity ("we need a good news story from the Middle East")

- Is always thinking of what story to tell
- Recognizes opportunities (when she hears there are 2 million fishermen in the UK, she sees voters)
- Knows that every audience has its news source
- Thinks visually (does the Prime Minister fish? No, well send the Foreign Minister instead)

But Mrs. Maxwell is not perfect. Here's where she may have gone a bit wrong:

- Fails to have a plan B (expects plan she has to work regardless)
- Doesn't understand the constituency (salmon fishermen are pretty passionate about their fish and will not go down easily)
- Is too focused on the end result (goes too far in general)
- Treats people like pawns

What do you think? Do PR people go too far in real life? Do you know a Mrs. Maxwell? Do we need more PR people like her or fewer? And if you haven't seen this movie, try to get it on your Netflix queue now. It may be a while.

Looks matter (or, invest in good graphic design)

Have you ever visited a website that looked as if a teenager built it by trying out every single font and programming code out there? Or have you picked up a brochure that looked like your dad's secretary typed it out back in 1962? If so, you

know instinctively that looks matter.

Years ago I had a client who ran a tutoring service. He knew how to write and had written a fairly good brochure (although he was not highlighting why you should hire his company...and that is where I came in). He had also “designed” this brochure, and it looked like it. Because his brochure was “home-made” he looked small time. It wouldn’t appeal to the diplomats that were his target audience. I convinced him to spend some money on professional design. He was very pleased with the end result and agreed that with a properly designed brochure, his business LOOKED professional, and seemed “big time.”

Looks matter.

Would you go to a hospital that looks dirty? Would you trust your tax returns to an accountant who seems shady? Would you hire a personal trainer that you met while eating at McDonald’s? No, no, and no. Your impressions of each of these would be negative in relation to the image you are looking for. Your image of an ideal hospital is one of white walls and the strong smell of disinfectant, right?

Dan Kohan, a graphic designer and owner of the Washington-based graphic design firm Sensical Design, says this:

*Graphic design communicates nonverbal information, the same way our facial expressions or clothing communicate when we’re having a conversation. When people are presented with a magazine, say, or a website, they respond first to how it communicates visually—whether it looks attractive and professional or amateurish and cheap, whether it’s easy to read, whether it draws your attention to what’s important—and only then do they read the content. **So, effective and appropriate design is crucial if you want your message to be heard.***

Not only does design help make you LOOK professional, but it actually is part of your message.

Looks matter. Are you paying enough attention?