

How do your customers feel?

It seems that many businesses, especially the big ones, spend much more money on memorable advertising campaigns and very little on customer service. No matter how great a business is, there will always be customer service to be done (changing addresses, paying bills, correcting billing errors, etc.). Yet, many businesses ignore the basics.

A couple of examples:

Netflix. Netflix does not seem to care much about how its customers feel. The company does not respond to Twitter mentions. It doesn't seem to be concerned about negative postings. How do I know? Well, I have had Salmon Fishing in the Yemen at the top of my Netflix queue for about six weeks or more. At first, there was a "long wait." Now, it's a "short wait." Bottom line is that I have watched several other movies while still waiting for Salmon Fishing. And I have tweeted Netflix. And I have wanted to email them—there is no easy way to do that.

ATT. I have been with ATT for years now. I recently upgraded to a smartphone and was told that I was eligible for the upgrade (which apparently means in ATT language they will CHARGE you for this upgrade). I called to see if they would take this charge off—and my argument was 1) I was not advised of such a charge and 2) I was told I was eligible for an upgrade. The customer service agent said he would give me a "courtesy one-time waiver" of this fee, but proceeded to lecture me that this fee was something all carriers do and that ATT would charge me it with every subsequent upgrade. He was combative and rude, and when I pointed this out to him, he hung up on me. I called back and spoke to supervisor and she told me the same thing about the charge (a bit less rudely). I repeatedly told her that I have been an ATT customer for years, I pay my bills on time, and ATT had given me no special

offers. Bottom line in my experience: ATT does not care.

Netflix and ATT appear to be utterly unconcerned with how their customers feel about them. I am just one more customer.

In contrast, I flew **Delta** last month and was amazed by the airline's interest in my customer experience. After the first flight I was sent a survey to measure what I thought of the boarding process, etc. The return flight was badly delayed due to weather in Washington. Delta sent an apology for the delay (even though it was truly not at fault) and asked how the gate agent and flight attendants acted during the delay.

Customer service and experience should be an integral part of an organization's overall marketing strategy. If your organization does not know anything about how your customers feel, and does not respond to customer issues, you are well on your way to losing those customers.

Marketing should be both about ATTRACTING customers and RETAINING them.

Thoughts?

Fostering creativity and other ideas from Ad Week DC

Yesterday, I attended the first day of Advertising Week DC, a yearly event that is hosted by the Ad Club of Metropolitan Washington. The theme of this year's week is "awe," as in awesome. It quickly became an annoying trope used throughout the day. I think what the organizers were trying to tap into

was creativity—because that is what drives awesome campaigns, ads and/or concepts.

Of the nine presentations I attended yesterday, three stood out in regards to creativity.

Mad Women

The first was a presentation by Jane Maas, who has written a book about women in advertising during the 1960s called *Mad Women*. Ms. Maas started her advertising career as a copywriter in the days when most women in advertising were secretaries. We've seen those days portrayed in *Mad Men*, and apparently, according to Maas, the portrayal is not far from the truth. People in the advertising world back then were busy smoking, drinking and having sex. Of course, people today are busy doing that, just not at the office. Drinking heavily at lunch was de rigeur. She gave the sense that advertising work was freer from constraints back then. There was more loyalty from clients, and ad agencies were willing to experiment. Perhaps the experimentation was fueled by alcohol, regardless, there seemed to be an attempt to push the envelope and see things differently.

A cool office...and CEO

Andrew Graff is the CEO of Boston agency Allen & Gerritsen. Graff spoke about how he has created a pretty cool environment at his agency, which is designed to foster creative thinking. First, he has given his staffers tons of perks, like free breakfast every day and pet health insurance. Second, he has built an office environment where people can work in different locations—cafe, sofa or cubicle. Third, he has implemented a mentorship program where he is being mentored by a 23-year-old. This has allowed Graff to understand how another generation thinks. The main points here are that people should enjoy coming to work and that work should not be structured in a traditional way. Graff says that if you are

someone who needs a lot of structure to work, you won't be happy at Allen & Gerritsen (nor would you likely be hired). **To be creative—to think differently—you have to be able to see beyond structure.**

Cannes award-winning campaigns

The last program (before the kick-off reception) was a reel of the winners of the 2012 Cannes Lions International Advertising Festival. What's great about being able to see these diverse campaigns is that it showcases creative and impactful work from all over the world. A couple campaigns really stood out to me.

One was to save a library in Troy, OH. The people who were in favor of closing the library were saying that it was a tax issue. To counter that narrative the save-the-library folks came up with a social media campaign saying that they would be burning all the book once the library was closed. Folks were outraged at that suggestion. Then the save-the-library people said that closing the library was equivalent to burning books—effectively shutting down the taxes argument.

The other campaign that I thought was very creative was to encourage employers to hire workers with Down Syndrome. The campaign showed well known advertising (this was in Italy) but replaced the people in the ads with people who have Down's. It was designed to make people see Down Syndrome in a more positive light.

What are you doing to foster creativity?

Lately, I have noticed the lack of creativity in commercials. It seems as though the same ideas are cycled over and over. Chances are that ad agencies are not fostering creativity as much as they are kowtowing to clients who are unwilling to take risks. There is no creativity without some degree of risk.

Why doctors shouldn't handle patient communications

Thank goodness we all have something we are good at, and I hope we are doing whatever that is. After an incident this week, I hope doctors have the good sense to hire somebody who can handle communications for them (but maybe good sense is exactly what was lacking).

The letter

Here's the scenario: I received a letter from an ophthalmology practice I have been going to for the last two and half years. The letter introduces a doctor who is joining the practice. It goes on, in glowing terms, to describe the many qualifications this doctor has (apparently, with the exception that the new doctor roots for a basketball team the lead doctor does not).

The last paragraph is all about self-congratulation—let me quote:

I am proud that at X Ophthalmology, our dedication and skill has (sic) been recognized in Washingtonian's Top Doctors, The Washington Post Super Doctors, Consumer Checkbook's Top Doctors, and on Angie's List. Together, we will continue to provide the highest level of medical care in a warm and supportive environment. We look forward to assisting you and your family with all of your eye care needs.

The website

Now, let me add that my doctor is neither the letter's author or the new doctor. So, I went to the practice's website, which still reflected her name and not the new doctor's. I called and asked if my doctor was still at the practice. The answer was no. I asked why the website wasn't updated. The answer was that it had happened very quickly (by the way, not so quickly that they did not have new letterhead printed on which the letter was sent). I asked whether they thought it might have been a good idea to inform my doctor's patients that she had left the practice and how to best contact her. I didn't get a satisfactory response. Clearly, this practice was just going to wait for patients to call and then tell them, which is not very thoughtful.

The letter and the website don't match.

In my opinion, this shows a classically inept way of handling communications because it fails to think about the target audience's needs. The lead doctor obviously thinks that patients will naturally want to stay with him and his new doctor, who after all, is the recipient of prizes and and all sorts of post graduate degrees from prestigious universities. It does not take into consideration that people form personal relationships with their doctors and that a doctor-patient relationship is based on trust. I have already developed trust with my doctor, and I like her.

A better way: provide the information that your audience needs

The appropriate way to handle communications in this case would have been to introduce the new doctor while saying that my doctor had chosen to go to another practice. It would have also been good to update the website at the same time the letter was sent, making sure the new information was available by the time people got the letter. Additionally, the fact that this practice thinks it is more important to send a letter than to update a website shows a minimal understanding of how people get their information these days.

Perhaps for people who understand communications my comments seem fairly straightforward. Apparently, this doctor has no clue, and why he should probably stick to making medical decisions.

What do you think? Have you had similar experiences?

3 Rs: Who to avoid on social media

My Google reader has more than 100 subscriptions. On Twitter, I follow more than 1000 folks. I also have connections on LinkedIn and pages I have liked on Facebook. All in all that is a lot of content to which I am exposed each day.

I have come to realize there are three types of content providers that I just don't have time for. They are the raconteurs, the recyclers and the reprobates. They seem to be everywhere and I just want to avoid them!

Raconteurs

Raconteurs like to make a fuss. They are there to criticize anything and anybody just to get a rise out of their readers. There is one writer in particular who is such an extreme example of this that I recognize him from his blog titles alone (things like "Are we really better off today?" or "The Gender Gap is a Myth") which are designed to perk your interest because they AIM to be controversial. The sad thing is many raconteurs are seeking controversy not to enlighten but to rile up.

Recyclers

These are not your environmentally-friendly folks, looking to reduce, reuse and recycle cans, bottles and paper. Instead, these are idea recyclers. They are so devoid of original thought that they recycle ideas posted by other folks and pass them off as their own. A couple of weeks ago, the big rage on Twitter was an article from Fast Company on how to be more productive. Now, there is nothing wrong with re-posting or retweeting that information (heck, we all want to get more out of days it seems). What is bad is taking the content but changing the title, taking only the main points, or whatever and passing it off as your own post. There's a blogger, often featured on a blog I read regularly, who is a mistress of this format. If it was all over Twitter yesterday, she is posting about it today.

Reprobates

Reprobates are people who just post nasty stuff—either because they think it is amusing or because they are seeking to shock. Mostly, they love to use obscenity in their tweets and their posts. The more f-bombs they can cram into a paragraph the better. Reprobates also make inappropriate remarks about serious or sensitive topics— like the CNN guy who called the Democratic National Convention “The Vagina Monologues.”

Do you have some of these in your content stream? Do you have types of bloggers/Tweeters that you avoid? Let me know in the comments.

How to make it out of Turkish prison (or avoid going there in the first place)

I finally watched Midnight Express last week. I know—EVERYBODY has seen it already (it came out in 1978, so I am merely 34 years behind the times). However, I am very glad I didn't see it before my trip to Turkey back in 2000, or I would have had more than a second thought or two.

In case you are like me, one of the last two people who haven't seen this movie, let me give you a basic plot summary. Billy Hayes is visiting Istanbul in 1970 with his girlfriend Susan, and right before leaving decides to smuggle some hash out of the country. He gets caught and then gets thrown in a Turkish jail. Jail is no picnic and Billy is desperate to get out but not his parents' money or the US consul can really help him. Turkey wants to make an example of him (if not of their prison system). He goes through hell (torture, hunger, madness, losing friends, losing hope, even ending up in a ward with demented people), until he is finally able to find a way out.

While I was watching, I kept thinking that Midnight Express is really a movie about communications, and how when communications fail, stuff goes very wrong. It is also a movie about how cultures clash. If Billy had been just a bit more culturally sensitive, he may have avoided being put in jail in the first place. It's clear that Billy is the typical "ugly American," thinking that he can behave in another country as if he's in the United States. He is also ignorant or very naive about the Turkish legal system. Smuggling hash through the airport makes him nervous, but when he is discovered, he almost treats it as a joke. He doesn't know Turkey considers this almost a capital crime.

By the way, Midnight Express is based on a true story. This really did happen.

To make it out of a Turkish prison (or deal with a communications problem), you, like Billy Hayes, could do well to:

Learn the lingo: Midnight express is a jail term for escaping jail. Billy doesn't seem to quite grasp this concept.

Speak the language: If Billy had bothered to learn some Turkish, he may have understood what was being said.

Understand that your culture is not the predominant one: Billy feels entitled. People should understand English, and they should treat him better just because he is American. But the opposite happens—he is singled out for brutal treatment.

Know when to speak and when to be silent: Billy could have spared himself a lot of trouble if he kept his mouth shut. Instead, he rages against the prison guard and gets badly tortured.

Did you see Midnight Express? Do you agree that Billy could have saved himself a lot of trouble or was he doomed just by doing what he did?

Sometimes, you need help

Asking for help is supposed to be one of the hardest things people do. I think it is probably harder for people to recognize when they need help.



Photo: Shark by StormyDog, from Flickr.

There's this guy—I call him the shark—who desperately needs help. Except he doesn't seem to recognize that he does. The shark is a guy who hasn't quite mastered what we call "social skills." More to the point, he doesn't know how to start or maintain a conversation. He doesn't have much to say even though he is dying to connect. This guy has been attending social events for the last twenty years and instead of making friends, he scares people away (thus why I call him the shark: he circles around making you feel he is going to injure you). He comes up to women, whether or not they seem open to conversation, and stands there, expecting the woman to converse with him. What's worse is he has nothing to say. He's awkward and seems desperate. The bottom line is he needs help.

Sadly, the shark has been using the same "strategy" for twenty years: go to an event, and hope that someone will talk to him. What he should do is try a different strategy. One in which he recognizes that what he is doing doesn't work, and then get some help figuring out what does work -either from a therapist

or a dating coach.

But before you think this is about people needing therapy, plenty of businesses and organizations also have communications problems. Nobody understands what they do. Nobody “gets” their message, if they even have one. These organizations need help.

As I said before, recognizing you need help is the hardest part. Here are some clues that your organization may need communications help:

1. You’ve been doing the same thing over and over, and getting no results.
2. You can’t explain in two or three sentences what you do.
3. You are not “engaging” with your audiences—nobody “likes” your Facebook page for example.
4. Your sales/donations are down.

You need help. Don’t be like the shark, scaring your potential customers and donors away because you just don’t know how to communicate!

But why are you doing it?

Yesterday, none other than the Social Media Club DC (SMCDC) put out a tweet asking people to “show some love” to their Facebook page, because unlike their Twitter feed, it had “only” 3,000 supporters. I responded: “Twitter and FB are

totally different platforms and thus have different audiences. Where are you giving/getting more value?" To which SMCDC responded: "It's hard to compare since they are so different, but just in case people want to be exposed to our content in a different form..."

First of all, social media is not JUST a numbers game. Having more followers/supporters/likers doesn't mean anything if you haven't decided what you want from those people. Are you trying to show increased interest in your product? Then the metrics may help with that.

You have to ask yourself WHY you are doing what you are doing. What are you trying to accomplish? Are you advocating for a cause? Trying to sell product? Raising your profile? In SMCDC's case, is the content on Facebook different than Twitter? Is it more appealing to a certain demographic to see it on Facebook? What are the advantages of having more Facebook followers?

Young people who understand the tools of social media and can adapt at warp speed to the newest and greatest (in other words, they get the what), generally do not have enough business experience to really understand the why.

This morning I came across this article on Inc. Magazine: 11 Reasons a 23-Year-Old Shouldn't Run Your Social Media by Hollis Thomases. Most of Thomases' reasons have to do with the knowledge that experience delivers. You become a better communicator with time, for example. She writes:

Social media is not the be-all and end-all. It's a marketing tool—part of an ever-growing arsenal of ways to bring your company to your prospective customers' attention.

I would also add that young hires/interns/recent college graduates don't understand STRATEGY. Tools are to be used tactically, as part of a larger strategy. If you just look at the tool (we need more followers on Twitter), without thinking

about WHY, then you are just using the tool for no purpose at all.

Thoughts? Please share in the comments.

Is your personality getting in the way of your communications efforts?

In its most basic form, communications happens when there is a dialogue between two people. Yet, how often do we see miscommunication instead of communication? Or one person shouting down the other? Or one person getting offended? Often, personality is behind miscommunication.

Over the weekend, I watched part of a panel presentation regarding civility in politics on CSPAN. One of the panelists said that civil communication only occurs when one person speaks and the other listens (and vice versa). It seems pretty straightforward, but in most communications efforts I see every day, it isn't happening. In many cases, it comes down to personality traits that impede true communication. These are:

- Arrogance
- Self-involvement
- Narcissism
- Insecurity

Your personality can make or break your communications efforts. Arrogant people will dismiss or debase your concerns,

questions and input. Self-involved or narcissistic people will only focus on their own concerns. Insecure people will exaggerate their own accomplishments and/or put down yours or seek a way to make you look stupid.

I see examples of these personalities every single day on Twitter (people who never engage with other people are self-involved or those who don't credit others may be insecure). And corporations are not immune, since corporations are run by people (although they aren't people in spite of what Mitt Romney may think).

WTOP conducted a poll which found that Pepco's customers were more dissatisfied than those of other utilities. In my opinion, this has to do with Pepco's arrogant communications efforts (generated by a company led/managed by arrogant people).

Do you agree? Are there other personality traits that affect communications? Please let me know in the comments.

Making blogging easier

The reason I created the How to Write Your Blog workshop—which I just presented on Tuesday at the Silver Spring Civic Center—is because I have spoken to many people who think blogging is hard or that it takes too much time. I have found blogging to be fun, and wanted to teach people that it doesn't have to be overwhelming.

The workshop leads you through reasons to blog to writing a blog post. We discuss keywords, categories, tags and

headlines. We discuss what you should and should not do on a blog. And what most participants find helpful is the part on generating blog post ideas.

Out of the three hours allotted to the workshop, we spend 20 minutes writing a blog post. The idea is that when you realize you can write a whole post in 20 minutes, it seems doable and perhaps even easy.

One of the participants said that breaking up the process into its parts makes it seem less stressful, and that is exactly the point.

My colleague Lisa Newman took photographs of the workshop and created this montage:



If you missed the workshop this time around, you may want to sign up for my newsletter so that you can find out when it's being offered again.

Pepco really really wants you

to believe a story

Well, faithful blog readers, I thought I was done writing about Pepco's advertising efforts, but then I saw this nearly-full page ad in yesterday's (Sunday, July 29) *Washington Post* (again, I had to scan it in two parts):

In case you can't read the ad above, let me provide the content:

It's popular right now, even convenient, to beat up on Pepco. And because the facts have been misrepresented, that's easy to do.

But there's another side of the story. Some of our customers too the time to tell it. We thought we'd share.

If I understand this correctly, Pepco is saying that government officials like Rep. Chris Van Hollen, the Montgomery County Council, DC Mayor Gray, the media, and customers who are complaining about Pepco's dismal service are "beating up" on Pepco because the "facts have been misrepresented." What facts is the ad alluding to? We know (we lived) the facts: 780,000 of Pepco's customers lost power, and of those, most received power by July 4, five days after the storm. Other customers weren't restored until July 6. Those are the facts on the ground and they have not been misrepresented.

Pepco is attempting to convince you that you are wrong if you believe the narrative that Pepco did not do enough to restore power during the derecho (which was exactly one month ago from the date of the ad). Instead, Pepco parades 17 customer testimonials that are praising Pepco's performance (out of the 780,000 affected by the outage—that is an extremely meager 0.00217%).

The ad continues:

We know this isn't the way everyone feels-that many of our customers were frustrated. We want them to know that though our work is far from over, we are committed to continuing to improve. And despite what they may hear, our response to the derecho was swift, aggressive and in line with our neighboring utilities. That is an inconvenient truth that doesn't fit the storyline.

Thanks to the customers who took the time to shed some light on the real story.

So, Pepco is saying that it knows “some” customers are frustrated, but in essence, they have no right to feel that way because it doesn't fit the Pepco storyline. The Pepco storyline (and that is exactly what it is, a story that Pepco tells itself) is that Pepco works hard and that people have no right to expect anything more from it. The 17 customers that they quote in the ad understand this “real story.”

Honestly, in my nearly 20-year marketing career, I have never seen something like this. It truly is a waste of advertising dollars (which Pepco customers are footing the bill for). To run an ad in the newspaper of record to tell customers that they are wrong to feel frustrated because they are being misguided by “misrepresented facts” is truly an outrage.

Again, Pepco's communications department seems to be tone-deaf, and really really bad at advertising. Rule number one of advertising is that you don't insult your customers.

Pepco management is desperate to improve its public perception. However, through these misguided and mismanaged advertising efforts, it is only hurting itself further.