

Knowing the problem is not enough

The other day I had a conversation with a neighbor. She's renovating her house and she mentioned that one of her big problems is mildew. I asked whether she has a dehumidifier. And, you guessed it, she does not. If you have humidity, which leads to mildew, then do something about it.

There are many people out there who know exactly what the problem is, but many of them don't find a solution. I am sure you have experience with this situation. For instance, how many people have you met who complain of having headaches or stomach issues or fatigue (and I mean on an ongoing basis), yet don't go to the doctor?

How many companies or organizations know they have a customer communications problem, yet don't update their website, survey their members, create a new brochure, train front line employees or whatever it takes to remedy the situation?

Awareness is important, but action is the only way to move forward.

Working hard or hardly working? Pepco strikes again

Maryland, Virginia and DC were hit hard last Friday night by a storm called a Derecho. It came straight at us with winds clocked at 70 miles per hour, lightning and rain, all which brought down branches and even whole trees. My house shook,

the lights flickered, and then the power went out. I got out flashlight and immediately called Pepco. The initial message said crews were being assigned and I should have power restored by midnight. When I called the next 15 times, I got the same message each time: Crews would be assigned shortly.

Meanwhile, a million electric customers in the region were also without power, also not getting answers from their utilities. Intersections were dark and tempers were frayed—because not only was there no power, but record-breaking heat and humidity. I decamped to my local Cosi, which thankfully had power, coffee and free Wi-Fi. Pepco's website informed me that the more than 1000 customers in my section did not have an estimated restoration time. By Sunday, after Pepco finished surveying the damage, it announced a "global estimated restoration time" of Friday, July 6 at 11 pm (yes, a whole week later).

Now, Pepco has been running an ad campaign for the past several months. Here's a sample:

Notice the message: Pepco is working hard to improve its reliability.

But is Pepco doing enough? Is it reliable? After this fiasco, the answer seems to be no.

The commercial above makes claims that fly in the face of what happened on the ground. And what's more, taking a week to restore power (during a heat wave), seems to me to indicate that Pepco is not working hard enough (or has enough crews, etc.).

Yesterday, Marc Fisher from the Washington Post called me because he had seen my previous blog posts on Pepco. He asked me what I would recommend that Pepco do, communications-wise. Should they not advertise? I am not sure what the answer is. I do know that a commercial like the one above does not ring true, and I will bet that the ad gets taken off the air.

Perhaps the best course for Pepco is to invest its ad budget into infrastructure, and when it has made REAL, significant improvements, then have a PR campaign to inform its public about what exactly has been done. Just a thought.

Here's Marc Fisher's article, that ran today (I am quoted on the second page): For Pepco customers still without power, patience wears thin.

It seems that Pepco's work still continues, and continues and continues. It is a long way from being what I would consider a reliable company.

The medium and the message

You may remember the famous line by Marshall McLuhan:

The medium is the message.

What does that mean? According to Wikipedia:

meaning that the form of a medium embeds itself in the message, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived.

All that is somewhat esoteric...and when McLuhan was writing his observations in 1964, the new frontier was television.

Television may or may not be on the decline, but we are definitely in a world where the Internet and social media are our mass communication media.

I came across an article by Jeremy Porter, on his blog Journalistics, entitled “Are Blog Posts Better Than Press Releases?” Now, I am a huge fan of blogging and blogs, but I don’t think blogs are “better” than any other form of communication. However, blogs may be *better suited* to some types of communication.

In my opinion, there is no hierarchy among the media (this one is better than that one) but rather there is a “right-er” medium for the message. For instance:

- If your message is short and ephemeral (an observation, a quick update, etc.) use **Twitter**.
- If your message is long and requires complicated explanations, use a **white paper**.
- If your message is newsworthy, and you want to get out to journalists, use a **press release**.

Choosing which media to use is your job as a communicator. If you don’t understand the differences between media, then you are going to have a hard time communicating your message to its target audience.

What are your thoughts? Is there a medium that can be used for all messages? Is there a better medium? Let me know in the comments.

Who should handle your Twitter feed?

Twitter (and any other social network) is a form of public communication. Even individuals who are representing themselves are using it as a platform to reach a broader

audience. Throw in a few hashtags and re-Tweets and suddenly you may be talking to millions of people.

At an organizational level, who should handle your Twitter feed? For many organizations, it falls to the communications/marketing folks (fine) and for some it is interns (not so fine). Some organizations have their top executive tweet (really good, I think).

And then there is Sweden, yes the country of Sweden (or rather its tourism board). You see, Sweden has embarked on an experiment to allow citizens to handle the @sweden Twitter feed. There are some rules on the ground—apparently, citizens should not discuss political views.

Someone forgot to tell the latest citizen to handle @sweden, a 27-year old “holy mother of two” Sonja Abrahamsson, that racism should also not be displayed. Sonja apparently is a huge fan of Adolf Hitler, and seems to be just a tad anti-Semitic. You can read all about it in this story on The Atlantic Wire and this story on AdWeek.

How is having Sonja do some stupid (racist) jokes helping to communicate anything positive about Sweden to any readers of the Twitter feed?

The person in charge of your Twitter feed is representing you (your organization, business or country) to the world. He or she is in effect, your public spokesperson. As such, this person should have the following characteristics:

- Be very knowledgeable about your organization (or country)
- Understand how Twitter works and that it can be quoted and used as a news source
- Be familiar with all key messages, press releases and other public information
- Be prepared to answer questions and comments professionally and not emotionally

- Be enthusiastic about your organization (or country)
- Keep personal opinions to him/herself

What do you think? Who handles your Twitter feed? Would you ever let someone like Sonja take over your feed? Thoughts and comments welcome!

Did that commercial just go boom?

Have you ever noticed how certain words or phrases seem to become ubiquitous? Sometimes it is because of a movie (“dude” became very very popular after Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure). Sometimes it is because of a TV show. Sometimes, I am just not sure.

I heard a commercial on the radio the other day for a cell phone company, where one of the guys was saying “Boom!” and the other other guy replies: “Stop saying that!” And the other guy goes on “Boom, and there it was.” I can’t remember the words verbatim, but it was all about boom.

And then I started to see/hear boom everywhere, including this commercial for Miracle-Gro Potting Soil:

Notice the last word in the commercial.

Boom!

I bet you start noticing boom all over the place. If you find a good one, share it here in the comments.

Root your messages in reality not ideology

Every organization (business, nonprofit, political, association) should have a list of key messages. These key messages should be updated frequently (no less than once a year). If yours doesn't, it's time to start creating a list of key messages. Key messages form the basis of your speeches, press releases and other communications materials.

Key messages should include facts about the organization, the organization's mission and philosophy, organizational goals, how the organization operates and other important information you want your audience to know.

Your key messages should be genuine, and stand up to scrutiny. Some organizations end up with key messages that are not reflective of reality, but rather are ideological. This is especially true with political organizations.

I came across a great example key messages that don't accurately reflect reality in yesterday's Washington Post. In a story written by Dan Eggen on page A7, entitled "McDonnell says stimulus aided Va. —but only in the short run," the first paragraph says:

Virginia Gov. Robert F. McDonnell (R) wandered off script somewhat Sunday as a surrogate for the Mitt Romney presidential campaign, conceding that President Obama's stimulus measures had helped his state weather the economic crisis.

Of course, the Romney campaign has been arguing that Obama's

stimulus hurt the economy, and did not create jobs—*because stimulus goes against Republican economic ideology*. Governor McDonnell was reflecting the reality on the ground in his remarks—that indeed the stimulus has helped Virginia. He “went off message” because instead of being ideological, he was being factual, rooting his comments in the reality of his state.

A similar situation occurred last week when Cory Booker said that he was sickened by the attacks on Bain Capital. The Obama campaign’s key messages about Romney’s tenure at Bain were more ideological than factual. Booker was simply reflecting facts that private equity firms are not the way they were being portrayed by the campaign. Booker was roundly criticized for “going off message.”

When key messages IGNORE reality and facts, and simply reflect ideology and beliefs, they are open to attack and leave spokespeople with the opportunity of “wandering off script” or “going off message.”

Most people have a hard time lying when asked a direct question. If your key messages are ideologically but not factually correct, they will not stand up to scrutiny. You don’t want to ask spokespeople to lie, so inject some honesty into your messaging!

How much information are you

requiring?

Yesterday on Twitter, someone posted about an event that sounded intriguing. I went to check out the link provided for details, thinking I would find time, place and cost, but instead I found a sign-up form. The form asked for: name, gender, date of birth, time zone, location, religious views, email and a password. I kid you not. Or, you could sign up using your Facebook login.

How much of this information are you requiring? **The information you require can be construed as a barrier to entry.** You put up figurative barriers, at differing “heights” to reduce the amount of people that can access your offering.

Now, some people have absolutely no problem handing over any information that is asked of them. I used to know a woman who would even give out her social security number and her mother’s maiden name just to be on an email list. And then there are people like me, who guard their personal information zealously and will only give up the minimum for a good reason. For example, if the doctor’s office wants to know if I have had a surgery or take any medication. But why would I give an organization putting together an EVENT my birth date and religious affiliation?

This problem extends to the growing number of websites that require you to sign up with your Facebook account. Again, some people consider their Facebook profile public. And some—like me—don’t. Facebook has already compiled a good amount of personal information about you: where you live, where you are from, who your friends are, what your likes and dislikes are, your age and if you provided them with this info: where you went to school, your religion, your marital status and on and on.

You should consider exactly what information you require, and

furthermore, you should tell people what you plan to do with that information. What exactly are you going to do to safeguard the privacy of that information?

Again, some people are pretty lax about privacy. But there is a continuum, and if your goal is to get more people (not fewer) to sign up, then you will have to consider that some people are not so comfortable handing over this information.

What are your thoughts? On a personal level, do you give any information requested, or do you fudge it? Do you sign in using your Facebook?

On an organizational level, how much information are you requiring and is all of it necessary?

Should you do all your marketing on social media?

Social media has lots of pluses when it comes to marketing. Among them are:

- Low cost (especially compared to the cost of advertising on television)
- Word-of-mouth value for trust and amplification
- Speed and ease in execution

Social media is a VALUABLE part of a marketing communications plan, but, it should not be the only part. If you put ALL your effort/dollars into social media, there is little doubt that you will be failing to reach all of your target audience.

Let me tell you about two companies that make their business solely on online traffic, but are advertising in other media:

Constant Contact and Reputation.com

In case you have never received an enewsletter, you should know that Constant Contact is an established email marketing business. Many organizations and businesses use Constant Contact to send out email campaigns. Constant Contact advertises its services on the radio. Yes. On the radio.

Reputation.com works on making sure that you preserve a good reputation online. It is useful for people/organizations that have received negative reviews or are associated with negative news/information. Reputation.com advertises in print (I saw a print ad this morning in the Washington Post). It also advertises on television.

If these two companies—which do business online—have to take their advertising off line, that should tell you that you cannot rely on social media (or online media) alone. You have to mix it up. You have to reach potential customers where they are, and they may not be on social or online.

Do you do all your marketing on social media? If so, tell me why. If not, also tell me why.

Me, We and You

At the women's conference I referenced on Monday's post, the organizer was also the emcee. She introduced the keynote speaker like this:

I met [speaker] at a conference, and I think she's so great. I

learned a lot from her. I was really impacted by what she said. I learned that...

This is not a verbatim quote but do you notice anything about this "introduction?" It is all about the organizer and not about who she is introducing. It's a "me" speech. Not a "we" speech and certainly not a "you" speech.

I asked Brad Phillips (@mrmediatraining on Twitter), president of Phillips Media Relations, a media training organization, what he thought of a speech that focused on "I." His response was:

Depends on the humility of the speaker, I suppose. Can range from humble self-experience to (more often) grating and ego-filled.

In other words, an "I speech" can seem self-aggrandizing and can potentially turn the audience off, especially if the speaker shows no humility.

It seems to me that emcees at an event should focus more on the we and you than on the me. The event after all, is not about the emcee, it is about the collective audience. It is not about the emcee's ego.

In this case, I think this particular emcee was very self-focused. She was neither humble nor overly egotistical but seemingly clueless as to how she was coming across. She did not seem to care that she should have given the speaker a proper introduction (Ms. so and so is a writer focused on x, and she has been working in this field since x, etc.) and she also did not seem to be able to connect the dots on how this particular speaker would help us, the audience, why this speaker had been invited to speak.

In marketing communication, the focus should be on the you or the we, and not the me. If you ever go to a website or read a brochure that goes on about me, me, me and does not address

how we work together or how this benefits you, you know you are dealing with someone who has not a single clue about audience (or its needs).

Who is your audience?

Perhaps the most basic question you have to ask yourself before creating any marketing/communications materials is:

Who is my target audience?

The more you know who they are, where they are and what they need, the better your materials will be.

And yet. A couple of days ago, I was driving down Massachusetts Avenue in Northwest D.C. and saw a sign outside of a church that made me wonder.

The sign said:

*English Classes Available. Please Call [telephone number] to
Enroll.*

Now, if you need to learn English, can you read English? Nope. Is the audience for this sign people who know people who need to learn English? Perhaps. I would think this sign would be more effective if it were written in the language of the people you are trying to target, don't you think?