

Not just what you say, but how you say it

Recently, I came across this article on ThriveGlobal: “3 Communication Mistakes that Lead to a Toxic-feeling Workplace.” The article addresses interpersonal communications, but I think the first mistake, not paying attention to how your message is being received, applies to all communications. This is what the article says:

Not being mindful of how your words land

A large portion of what we say stems from how we read the present situation, and our sense of self-awareness plays a vital role in our everyday conversations. According to a recent study conducted by a group of psychologists at the University of California, Davis, many people don't realize they're being rude when they're perceived as such, suggesting blind spots in our self-insight that can prompt miscommunications at work. The study's findings highlight the importance of listening to yourself when you're talking to others. If you hear what you're saying and think you might be offended if someone said the same to you, it's worth rephrasing and communicating your point differently.

Because it's not just what you say, but how you say it.

I am sure we all have experienced people saying things to us in an awkward or rude way that made us feel not so great. We may have gotten angry or offended. And I think that what these people say is not the problem so much as how they say it. Yes, it comes down to how you present something.

This applies to all communication

When writing marketing materials, you are concerned with the words you choose, the messages you deliver. But you should also be concerned with tone and presentation. How is your message coming across? What kind of emotions are you engendering?

How is your messaging “landing?”

If you want your message to resonate with your audience, you must assess how you are coming across, and be careful in how you are saying what you are communicating.

4 items to consider before you write your next marketing piece:

1) Humor needs context and sometimes, tone of voice: Avoid inside jokes or weird humor unless you know the audience will absolutely get it. Remember that humor is hard to express in a written format.

2) Mind your sarcasm: Ask yourself if you are being flippant or sarcastic, and remember that tone of voice is not easily conveyed in written materials. Also, some people don't understand sarcasm, and may take it literally.

3) Mind your manners: I heard somewhere that having manners is about putting others at ease. When you follow conventions, people know what to expect. So ask yourself if your communication is being rude or abrupt.

4) Be empathetic: Ask yourself if how and what you are saying could be causing negative emotions (anger, frustration, embarrassment) in your audience. For example, perhaps you are trying to berate your audience for missing a deadline. Most likely, berating your audience will cause embarrassment or even anger.

Thinking carefully about how you say and present your message

will lead to better communications.

How to make your communications more effective

Merriam-Webster defines effective as “producing a decided, decisive or desired effect.” Effective communication, therefore, leads its target audience to a planned or desired outcome. Conversely, ineffective communications do not produce the desired effect, they don’t hit the target.

How do you make sure your communications efforts hit the target?



Not with signs that point the wrong way

This morning I attended a business networking event at a local hotel. I haven't attended any events in this location before, and I have only been in the hotel's lobby once before. I walked in, and asked at the check-in desk where the event was being held. I was told to go around the corner to the elevators and down to G2. When I turned around, *behind* me, was a sign for the event. The sign was facing the check-in desk, not the main entrance, so it would not be seen at all by someone entering the hotel.

This sign was ineffective because it did not address the needs of people entering the lobby from the main entrance. Had the event organizers considered that some people would be entering the hotel through the main entrance, they would have known where to place the sign.

Not with a mismatched presentation and audience

Last week, I attended an event entitled "Communication and Marketing Strategies that Will Grow Your Business." It was held under the auspices of a networking group, in a business accelerator space. Most of the audience members were very small businesses, freelancers or solopreneurs (companies of one). The presenters were from a large, multinational communications firm that services large clients. They decided to give a presentation on how to develop a marketing plan (a four-step process according to them).

It was clear that the presentation was completely mismatched to the audience when the presenters got to the part about generating different tactics. Among the tactics they advised was holding a press conference. In my career in public relations, I saw my clients hold press conferences very rarely. The fact is that press conferences need to be about big news to get any kind of coverage, especially in this age where media attention is so fractured. A small accounting firm owner or a career coach, two people who were in the audience that day, would never hold a press conference.

This presentation was not as advertised, that is, to share marketing strategies to grow your small business. It was geared toward large enterprises rather than the small businesses that were in the audience. The presenters either did not know who they were addressing or were not thinking if the information they were sharing was appropriate to the needs of the audience. In short, the presentation was ineffective.

Effective communication only happens when you consider the audience

Effective communicators consider the needs of the target audience. Without considering what those recipients need to know, or how they need to know it, the communications will fail, or miss its target.

Bottom line:

You will hit the target more often if you consider what your audience needs.

The amateur effect

It seems to me that there are fewer experienced professionals working in day-to-day marketing. Instead, we're seeing more and more amateurs, or inexperienced people, "managing" or running things, especially digital marketing efforts. There are consequences to a lack of experience: amateur mistakes.

The amateur effect can be seen in the explosion of typos, missing information, missing links, poorly designed websites, hard-to-understand copy, and a myriad other maladies that makes your marketing look unprofessional at best, and be ineffective at worst.

Did anyone double-check this?

This is part of full-page ad in the *Washington Business Journal*:



Can you spot the issue? It's the extra space in the word finger. How could this happen? Probably because nobody proofread the laid-out copy.

And then there are typos

There are typos galore in newspapers, books, and magazines. This is partially due to cut-backs in editorial staff, but it is also due to having amateurs in charge.

And misused words

Affect and effect do not mean the same thing. Enough said.

And missing information, and missing links

A few weeks ago I got a promotional email from a day spa promoting the spa's outdoor pool opening for the summer. There was a link to click for more information. The link didn't

work. I went to the website because I wanted to find out if you could get a day pass for the pool, and if so, how much it would cost. Well, there was no information about the pool. None. The website was a mess, and if the information was there, it was buried so deep you'd need to hire an archaeologist to find it.

Why all the problems?

Amateurs don't believe in double-checking stuff, because they don't know what they are checking for.

Amateurs don't ask questions, because they don't know what questions to ask or to whom.

The bottom line is that amateurs don't know what they don't know, and they don't know enough to ask.

The solution is experience

There is no substitute for experience. If you don't want your marketing to be rife with mistakes, and just be plain ineffective, you need to hire experienced people to run your programs, and to mentor the less experienced staff. People can learn to be great marketers, but they need guidance.

What do you think? Have you seen or experienced the amateur effect?

You can have too much of a good thing

A visit to a good Indian restaurant goes bad

Last week, a friend and I headed out to a very good, local Indian restaurant to satisfy a craving for some naan and sag paneer. When we arrived, there were barely a couple of other people in the place, and so the hostess told us we had our choice of seats. After we sat down, a male server came by to take our order.

After the meal was served, a female server came by to see whether everything was satisfactory.

And then a different female server came by to see if “everything was OK.”

And then the male server came by to ask how everything was.

And then one of the female servers came by again to see how things were.

And then the other female server came by.

And before we were even done with the meal, one of the female servers asked if we needed a box for our food.

I lost count, but we were asked if everything was OK at least six or seven times by different servers and in fairly short intervals.

After all these unnecessary interruptions, my friend and I were annoyed, and left wondering if they needed the table (although a good half the restaurant was empty).



Photo by Chan Walrus from Pexels

Checking in is good...but doing it too often is not

After ordering, we should all expect two contacts in a restaurant: one to get asked if everything is to our liking, and a second one, closer to the end of the meal, to ask whether we want to have food boxed up, want to order dessert, or need our check.

But this restaurant took follow up and checking in to a level that was beyond annoying. They interrupted us too many times, seemingly without cause. Was it that the servers didn't communicate with each other? Were they bored because they didn't have enough customers? Who knows what motivated these servers, but all that checking in was way too much of a good thing, turning it into a bad thing.

Too much contact or follow up is disruptive, intrusive, annoying, and unnecessary.

What is true about overzealous restaurant servers is the same with email marketing. As I said in my last blog post, your email marketing should aim to be "just right." Just right

means sending not too much, nor too little email, and sending relevant, useful information too. In the Indian restaurant experience above, not only were these serves constantly interrupting, they weren't doing it with any real purpose.

So the next time you want to send one more email to "make sure people got the message," think about your last restaurant meal. Was it enjoyable and peaceful? Or were you annoyed because the servers kept asking you if everything was OK or you wanted another drink before you even finished the one you had in front of you.

Your website is your business' front door

We use Google today just like we used the phone book years ago. In fact, anybody born from the late 1990s on only knows to use Google when looking up stuff (not that we even have phone books anymore).

Search on Google and you find websites!

Google pulls up two sources of information in response to your query—websites and different Google products, including Google My Business listings, and Google Maps. In other words, if you want your business to be found on Google, you need one or both of these (and you can't have a good Google My Business listing without a website).

It follows that if you want your business to succeed, you will

have a findable, **updated**, easy-to-navigate website. If you want to really have success, you will also claim your Google My Business listing, and keep it **up to date**.



The information that absolutely must be current

It's absolutely essential that you keep your website and Google My Business listing current and up to date. If not, you might as well hope people still have that phone book handy so they can find your number.

There's no big mystery about what you need to keep tabs on: anything that impacts your customer's interaction with your business, including:

- Hours
- Location
- Contact information
- Team members/staff/leadership
- Services/products

- Pricing

If any of the above change, you must update your website. It really is that simple. If not, you risk alienating your customers.

Not keeping up with your website is....not good

Just in the past couple of months, I've had two instances where websites were not updated with important information. When I looked up the massage therapist that I'd gone to a couple of years ago, her website appeared the same, as did her pricing. I went ahead and made an appointment, and it was only after I was ready to pay that I learned that her pricing had gone up by 10%. Yesterday, I looked up my hair salon's website to find the number to make an appointment. The website says that the salon is open seven days a week, but when I called yesterday (Monday), I got a recording informing me that the salon is closed on Mondays. Both of these experiences were annoying, but also avoidable had the business owners taken the time to update their websites.

Bottom line:

Keeping your website updated is a best practice for business. Not doing it can alienate customers.

It's not all about you, nor should it be

As I was driving in today's heavy rain, I noticed whether cars had headlights on. Most did, but there were several that didn't. What reasoning would possess anyone to not turn on their headlights in the pouring rain (and I think it may

actually be a driving rule here in Maryland)? Sure, some people forget. But when you look around and everyone else has theirs on, does that not remind you to do it too? I mentioned this to a friend, and she said she believes it's because the drivers think they only need lights on when they themselves can't see. They fail to think about the fact that the lights help others to see them.



Photo by Louis from Pexels

The marketing communications angle here is that whenever you produce any marketing materials, you can't just think about yourself (your company or organization) but about the people

who will be using/reading/accessing those materials. When you fail to think about what they need, like the cars without headlights in the pouring rain, you are making it harder for them to see you.

Events happening sometime during St. Patrick's weekend

Take for example the Facebook event posting from a local Irish pub for its St. Patrick's Day celebration. It listed the following information, verbatim:

Saturday and Sunday Outdoor Festival. Live Music, Pipes & Drums, Irish Dancers, Bouncy Castle Face Painting and so much more!

Do you notice anything missing (other than the comma between castle and face painting)? How about times? Is it all day? When and where is the live music? What bands will be performing? Where does this all take place? In the pub? On the street outside the pub? Is this free? Or is there a fee?

Since I was interested in attending (come on, they had a bouncy castle!), I had to message the pub and ask. They responded telling me they were opening early for brunch at 10 a.m., and that the outdoor activities would also start then, and the live music would go on at 2 p.m. I thanked them and suggested they include that information in their event page, you know, to make it clearer for anyone interested in possibly attending.

The devil really is in the details

Having seen many marketing pieces, whether it be websites, brochures or press releases, with a similar lack of salient detail, I know it is common to forget that your audience does not know everything you do about whatever you are promoting. There are the restaurant websites that fail to list their location or their operating hours. Or the product sales sheet

that doesn't list the size of the product or its cost. And on and on.

In order to produce effective, useful marketing materials, you *must* consider your audience. What details does the audience need to know? What information is relevant and is it included in your marketing piece?

It's all about the Ws

A way to gauge whether you are including the information your audience needs is to follow the journalist's guideline of asking the "5 Ws + H": who, what, where, when, why, and how. If your marketing piece answers those questions, you will have provided the most relevant information. For events, the what, where, and when are crucial. Clearly, the pub's marketing folks do not have a journalistic or events planning background. I will chalk up their poorly thought out event invitation to it being produced by an amateur. One would hope no professional marketing person would fail to include the when and where information on an event listing.

Don't be so centered on your own needs that you forget what your audience needs to know. In other words:

Turn on your headlights so others can see you.

Do you follow best practices?

What are best practices?

Best practices are the ones that are the most effective in providing results you want. And every industry has its own best practices. Additionally, your organization might have its own best practices, which include administrative and

managerial tasks (e.g., how to invoice, how to handle hiring and firing, how to establish budget priorities, etc.). Best practices are guidelines. They serve as a map in getting things done the right way.



If you don't have best practices, you may not have best results

Take an administrative task like invoicing, for example. Do you follow a rule about invoicing? Perhaps you invoice every time a project is completed, or you invoice every two weeks, or once a month. You probably understand that unless you invoice regularly, you may not get paid regularly. I once worked at a communications agency where the invoicing was handled by the very disorganized president (who was a horrible micro-manager and could/would not delegate these types of tasks). She invoiced clients whenever she got around to it.

And guess what? That affected cash flow for the agency, and even angered clients who were getting billed for work done months earlier. This agency president was not following invoicing best practices, and it was making her agency suffer financially.

An effective communications strategy incorporates your industry/organizational best practices.

Say you are building a brand new website. You will need to consult with or engage a website developer. That will ensure you are following best practices for user experience (UX), design, the admin of the website and other website issues. But you will also need to know what should be included from a communications perspective, and may need to consult with someone for that (some website developers have this capacity). And lastly, but certainly not least, you have to understand and incorporate your industry and organizational best practices. Perhaps in your industry it is a best practice to quote firm pricing upfront. Then, you would show prices on your website.

What happens when you don't follow best practices in communications?

There are examples galore of organizations that don't follow communications best practices. There are plenty of restaurants whose websites don't include menus or have menus that need to be downloaded as PDFs (which is a real pain on your smartphone, where most people are looking this stuff up). The best practice is to include menus that are easily accessible and readable on mobile. Another best practice is to make sure to include important information such as hours and location (and yet, many restaurant websites don't). What happens here is that potential diners may not choose to check out your restaurant.

There are many organizations that send email marketing pieces

that are made up of all images and not text (I've written about this before). The industry best practice is to include the important information in a text format. The result of not following the practice is that recipients will not be able to see the information, and your email is a waste.

Experts know and use best practices

Here's the thing: You are an expert at your organization's priorities and inner workings. You know your best practices. You may also know your industry's best practices. But chances are, you are not an expert at writing, design, website development, crisis communication , SEO, public relations or any specialized communications field. That is why hiring and working with experts in those fields makes for a better result.

The bottom line here is that if you want to achieve the best results from your communications efforts you have to follow communications best practices. Experts will know those best practices. Winging it or worse, thinking you know the best way when you don't, will result in poor performance from your communications.

Do you appreciate your customers?

I am sure you appreciate your customers (or supporters), especially when they pay you (or donate) for the goods/services you offer. But do your customers know you appreciate them? How are you communicating appreciation?

If you are trying to establish or maintain a long term relationship with your customers or supporters, you must demonstrate AND COMMUNICATE that you appreciate their business/donations, and that you are not taking the relationship for granted.



How can you do this? There are several ways.

Reward their loyalty

Big box stores, airlines, credit cards and any number of other service/good purveyors provide discounts/points/bonuses for frequent customers. Giving customers a discount or something else of value gives them a reason to continue to work with you, and lets you reward their support.

Thank them

It depends on the size of your business, but thanking customers can be done with a simple hand written card, an email, a pre-printed postcard, or even through a personalized email marketing campaign.

Accommodate them

My kitchen sink was leaking, so I contacted my go-to plumber. I sent him an email explaining the situation and asking when he could come to deal with it. He could only fit me in the following week. I wrote him back and said that I would be looking for someone who could come sooner. His response was this:

Wow, that sucks but ok

Really? It sucks that I have to look for someone else? You know what sucks? Having your kitchen sink leak. Imagine if instead he wrote this:

“Totally understand. You need to get the sink fixed ASAP. If you can’t find anyone, let me know.”

As it turns out, I found someone to come that day! And fix the leak for a lot less than my soon to be ex plumber, who clearly is taking my business for granted.

Notice them

I’ve been going to a yoga studio for the better part of the last year but around Thanksgiving, I went out of town and had

a couple other obligations. Since I had not been in the studio for several weeks, the studio manager sent me an email with the subject line “Just checking in.” It said this:

Has it been a few weeks since you’ve been to yoga? Just remember you carry your yoga practice with you wherever you go. In the meantime, here is a 7 minute practice you can do right now in your chair. Don’t stay away too long. ☐

This included the instructions for the seven minute practice referenced.

It all requires keeping track

All these require you tracking your customers/donors. For the yoga studio, this is probably part of the Mindbody software they use. For smaller organizations it may be as simple as a Excel spreadsheet. For bigger businesses, there are many types of customer management (CRM) software available. For nonprofits, there are specific donor databases.

Make them feel that you appreciate them

We all like to feel appreciated. And organizations of all types need to be sure to communicate their appreciation.

Write fewer press releases and more pitches

For the past several years, there’s been a debate raging in the world of public relations: is the press release dead or

not? Some unequivocally state that it is (or should be), and some still use it and see a value in it.

Press releases may not be dead, but they are not as effective

I think that the press release is not dead, but it is not living like it used to. Press releases no longer generate stories. Instead, press releases have become a way for organizations to write a story and distribute it to an audience, generally via their website. And, press releases put on “wire” services may help with SEO.

Move beyond press releases

If, however, you intend to generate publicity and coverage for an organization, you have to move beyond the press release. In fact, you need to work on your pitching skills, and on your data gathering and analysis. Why? Because the world of journalism and PR has changed dramatically in the past decade. News organizations have consolidated. Small/community/local newspapers are struggling, or are gone altogether. Most news is national news, and most national news is political news around very few issues that generate a high degree of controversy. And then social media has disrupted how people get news, and how they interact with news organizations.

Newspapers are still delivered?

(Aside: The community where I live was going to be repairing our street, and closing it to traffic for 48 hours. I expressed concern to the community manager that our newspapers would not be able to be delivered. She asked if these items were delivered every day, and whether I paid for this delivery. In short, she did not have *any* concept or understanding of what it means to have a daily, print newspaper delivered to your door.)

There are new issues for communicators to deal with

A couple of weeks ago, I attended the National Press Club's Communicator's Summit, where the following four issues were addressed:

1) **Artificial intelligence in news production/news gathering.** The main take-away for PR from this presentation is that for news that is data-based (quarterly earnings reports, for example), newsrooms are creating templates and then using AI to fill out the data.

2) **Generational differences and how they affect communication.** There are big differences in how Gen X, Gen Y and Baby Boomers deal with hierarchy and how they prefer to communicate. Millennials do not see hierarchy the same way as older generations, and will communicate directly with superiors. They also want to be kept more updated and want feedback. There's also a marked shift from voice communications to text-based communications.

3) **How media organizations are distributing content.** Media organizations are using more content platforms (social media, etc) and formats (video, etc.) to distribute content.

4) **Today's challenges and opportunities in getting news out.** Frank Sesno gave the luncheon talk, and he discussed many issues ranging from journalists who have forgotten how to provide objectivity, to the constant connection and "breaking news," which make it harder for communicators to get their message through.

All of the above led me to conclude that we are indeed wasting our time writing press releases in order to generate publicity (earned media). In fact, a couple of the panelists (both were journalists and/or news editors) said we should be providing thoughtful, short pitches and raw data. They said they do not read press releases, and often delete those emails.

We are overwhelmed with email and news

We've heard it before, but in our accelerated world, people have even less time to slog through countless emails (and definitely not attachments). Few people listen to voice mail. Communicators may have to find a way to communicate with journalists that does not involve email or phone calls. Some people have had success communicating on social media.

In conclusion

A thoughtful, well-written press release can still play a role in a communicator's toolkit. But if communicators are seeking publicity, the best bet is to create solid, short, informative pitches backed up with data (when warranted).

Your thoughts are appreciated. Tell me what you think in the comments.

What writers, journalists, and PR/Comms people need to watch

Over the weekend, I finally got to see *Obit*. This documentary should be required viewing for anybody who writes for a living, and for anybody who work with or within the news media. It's also for anybody who is thinking about what makes a life matter.

With print newspapers on the decline, it's likely many people don't even read the obituary section. I don't have access to the statistics, but I'd bet there's huge spike in readership of *online* versions of celebrity obituaries. Just in the few weeks, we've seen tremendous interest in the deaths of Senator

John McCain and Aretha Franklin, and a likely increase in online reading of their obituaries.

Perhaps most people don't think a lot about what goes into writing an obituary, but it takes a special skill. Writing about someone who has died takes sensitivity and a sense for what is newsworthy. A good obituary is informative and interesting, while giving you an overview of the person's life and achievements. Generally, long-form obituaries are only written for politicians, artists, inventors, celebrities and other notable people. Just yesterday, I read an obituary in the *Washington Post* for Mel Elfin, who was the long time Washington editor for Newsweek Magazine. Elfin was not a celebrity *per se*, but his decades of in Washington political and news circles probably touched lots of DC insiders (which is why this obituary appeared in the *Washington Post* and not the *New York Times*).

Among the many questions and issues that the featured obituary writers in *Obit* deal with are these

- What and how much detail to include
- What the lede (first paragraph of the article that includes the most important facts) should be
- What questions to ask to the relatives, and how much to fact-check what they say
- Importance of verifying facts
- How to follow the arc of a life that has fits and starts
- Importance of graphics, and of finding the best image to illustrate a life

There's a lot in the documentary about the news process: editorial meetings, pitching, finding images, fact-checking, and working on deadline. This is why this should be required viewing for public relations practitioners, who need to understand news judgement, and how things make it into the news cycle.

Finally, what writing (and reading) obituaries does is make people think about mortality and how they want to live their lives. You think about what you will be remembered for, what you've done here that is "newsworthy." So do yourself a favor—watch *Obit*. It's available streaming on demand, and on Kanopy.