

More about reading; and thoughts about the Costa Concordia

The last post here was about why writing skills might be in decline, and my assertion that it is because people are not reading enough. Today, Gini Dietrich writes in her Spin Sucks blog that reading fiction is beneficial to your career because, among other benefits, it helps fine-tune your social skills, especially your empathy.

So, in addition to helping you recognize good writing, expose you to new worlds, teach you new vocabulary and ways of seeing, reading can help you build better connections and be better at work.

Yet, reading alone will not result in a fabulous, well rounded writer/emotionally intelligent being. **You have to practice. You have to interact.** Someone whose nose is always in a book, and who never emerges to deal with the real world is probably not going to be very emotionally intelligent. Also, if you never write and get edited, your writing is never going to improve.

The Costa Concordia, in case you haven't seen the news in the past two days, is a luxury Mediterranean cruise ship that ran aground near Italy, and sank, killing at least six people onboard. Last night, on the CBS News, it was reported that the crew did not initially inform the passengers appropriately about the impending disaster. They downplayed the danger, and that led to chaos. Some passengers took matters into their own hands.

It seems that people's first reaction to bad news is disbelief. They act as if nothing is wrong. Perhaps that's what happened to the Costa Concordia's crew. Unfortunately,

this type of disbelief can lead to tragedy. There is a also desire to minimize problems.

This is why crisis communication training is so important. When crisis happens, reliable information is key. Denial and misinformation will make a bad situation worse.

Any thoughts? Please share in the comments.

Why is writing well a disappearing skill?

Sally Falkow writes today in her blog, The Proactive Report, that good writing should be considered a primary public relations skill. I agree (and I wrote about that in my post Qualities of a PR Pro).

The question is not whether PR people should know how to write well, but why they don't. April Finnen (@AprilFin) , who writes the blog One Person Shop, said in a Twitter exchange with me:

"I think a big part of it is that good writing comes from good thinking, and that's becoming harder to find."

I answered:

Certainly true, but I do think many people just don't do enough reading either (maybe that's related to lack of thinking...)

To which April responded:

“Agree. If you can find a curious PR pro who reads everything, pretty safe bet they’re a good writer.”

In my opinion, writing well is disappearing because people are reading less. Why is this happening? It may be because they are not curious, not interested, not thinking, working too hard, or any number of other reasons.

If it is lack of curiosity or good thinking, as April says, how are these PR “pros” going to come up with strategies to drive a message?

I can’t tell you how many PR people I have met who don’t ever read books for pleasure or even a daily newspaper. How many PR firms offer grammar and writing courses for their associates? How many PR pros today were English majors in college? Fewer and fewer thanks to the devaluing of liberal arts education and the rise of career-focused majors. If all you studied in college was how to create a PR campaign, but you never read a classic novel, how are you going to appreciate the power of language to convey meaning and emotion?

Do you have thoughts on why good writing is on the decline? Please do share!

Testing strategies and the dangers of assumptions

The Metro in Washington, DC is again considering hiking fares (news story in today’s Washington Post). For those of you who don’t live in this area, Metro raised its fares a little over a year ago. Additionally, it made fares even more complex

than they already were (there is no flat fare here in DC: there are regular fares and peak fares and the fare changes depending on the distance you are traveling) by adding a peak-of-the-peak fare. None of these changes were popular in 2010, and I assure a fare hike won't be welcomed in 2012.

Why am I discussing this? Because of this statement by Metro's General Manager Richard Sarles in the Washington Post:

Metro officials, however, are promoting the simplification of fares as a plus. The new fare structure would eliminate the "peak-of-the-peak" rate, in which passengers pay a surcharge for riding the subway during the busiest weekday periods. It was implemented with the last round of fare increase, in 2010, to ease crowding and encourage riders to use trains just outside the peak periods, but the strategy failed, Sarles said.

"We weren't accomplishing our policy objective, and we were just complicating the fare," he said.

Basically, Metro thought that by increasing the fares at rush hour fewer people would use the train and this would reduce crowding. But that shows a basic lack of understanding of rush hour—people leave work at around the same time and that is what causes crowding—not the cost of the fare.

The strategy was based on an assumption, and was not successful as proven by ridership numbers. Metro is wise to discontinue this policy. **Strategies (and tactics) that don't provide intended results need to be ended.** This is an important point for marketing and communications. How many times do you see a company engaging in the same tactic/strategy regardless of whether it is accomplishing its objective?

Testing will help. And questioning assumptions will help too. Many people ASSUME things like: if we advertise, people will

know about us.

Basing strategies on false or untested assumptions will lead to stupid, costly mistakes like Metro's peak-of-the-peak fare.

What assumptions are you operating under? What strategies are you basing on those assumptions? Are these strategies really accomplishing your objectives?

My advice is to question both assumptions and strategies, and correct course if they are not working.

Can two or three words guarantee business success?

The two or three words that may well guarantee business success are any of these options:

Happy holidays, Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, Happy Hanukkah, Happy Kwanzaa, Happy Thanksgiving, Season's Greetings, Best wishes.

not to mention the two most effective words in business:

THANK YOU

Two to three words that work to show other people (customers, clients, vendors, business associates) that we are thinking of them. That we value the relationship. That we do not take them or their business for granted.

This year, I received a season's greetings card from my eye doctor! That was a first for me...I think most doctors take one's business for granted.

Think about whom you received greetings from, and from whom you did not. Any surprises? Also, if you ordered gifts or other merchandise online, did you receive a thank you for your order? If you didn't, would you buy from that retailer again?

If I feel my business is not valued, why would I continue to do business with that vendor/merchant/consultant/individual?

Perhaps sending a greeting or saying thank you is not enough to GUARANTEE success, but it will help prove you think they are important to you. Making sure your customers and clients feel valued will help make it easier to continue to do business with them.

What say you?

Marcomm takeaways from the Iowa Caucus

Last night, FINALLY, the results of the Iowa Caucus gave us a more real sense of where people are headed in the GOP race. You can read about the results in this Karen Tumulty story for the Washington Post.

As you have probably heard *ad nauseum* the results may or may not indicate who the eventual GOP nominee will be. That said, I think we can draw the following three marketing communications lessons from the caucus:

1. **Advertising works.** Furthermore, negative advertising is VERY powerful. Mitt Romney spent the most and won the caucus (OK, Romney's Super PAC spent the most...but that is another discussion).

2. **It's the message AND the messenger.** The message is important, but perhaps not as important as the messenger. People vote for people they like, explaining why Santorum did so well. Santorum comes across as a sincere, committed and caring person. And he rocks a sweater vest (and sweater vests are what grandads and jolly uncles wear, right?). Gingrich, who came in at a distant fourth, comes across as pedantic and angry. Even his post-caucus speech was angry (I didn't watch it, but read commentary like this analysis from Mr. Media Training).

3. **Be present.** Jon Huntsman made the decision to skip Iowa, and the numbers show it. He came in with 0.6% of the vote. People like to see something they want to buy, not just hear about it. Lots of pundits describe the Iowa caucus as true retail politics, where politicians meet and greet (in person) their potential supporters. You have to be the bricks and mortar in the case, and not just the virtual.

What did you think? Any marketing lessons you took away?

Communications wishes for 2012

My main wish for 2012 is that it ends up being a better year than 2011 (although that is not a very high bar). In terms of marketing communications, I offer you my top ten lists of what I wish to see more and less of.

What I wish to see more of:

1. People/companies who know the difference between strategy and tactics and that you can't substitute one

for the other.

2. Easy-to-navigate websites that include REAL contact information and a comprehensive ABOUT page
3. Clever taglines that actually communicate a message (like Red Lobster's "Sea Food Differently")
4. Nonprofits that understand that marketing communications are an important part of their operations
5. People who use effect and affect correctly (AKA better copyediting)
6. Plain English
7. Thinking of social media as a tool (like advertising) and not as a substitute for marketing communications as a whole.
8. Companies and organizations that understand that the quality of their customer service will directly impact their marketing efforts.
9. Personalized LinkedIn invitations
10. Connecting IRL (in real life) with social media friends and followers

What I wish to see **less** of:

1. The search for the ROI of social media/Klout scores
2. Sexist language (using terms like man hours) and sexist advertising (yes, I am looking at you Budweiser and GoDaddy)
3. Grammatical mistakes and typos (perennial wish of mine)
4. Check-ins
5. The words utilize, monetize, incentivize; and clichéd/meaningless terms including low hanging fruit, sweet spot, pivot point.
6. Sending out too many newsletters
7. LinkedIn profiles without a headshot
8. Blatant self promotion and re-tweeting of one's own

tweets/mentions

9. Overpriced and overhyped social media conferences

10. Life lessons and how to live advice from marketing/social media bloggers

What do you wish for in 2012?

Make your own list

It is inevitable that at the end of the year blogs, newscasts, newspapers and everybody else creates lists for their readers/viewers: best posts of the year, what's in and what's out, resolutions for 2012, trends, and so on. While some of these are interesting and even though-provoking, I challenge you to make your own list.

To make your own list, you will have to sit and reflect a bit. Here are some guiding questions:

- What worked the best for you in terms of marketing communications? (What got the most response, donors, etc.)
- What worked the least for you? (Where did you spend time/money with little or no return?)
- Did you create any partnerships? What worked best/least?
- Did you sponsor anything/anybody? What worked?
- Did you read any business/marketing books? Which provided the best/most actionable advice?
- What ads/commercials were memorable to you? Why?
- What peeved you the most?
- What did your competition do this year that you admired? That you thought was not so good?

- What people/organizations brought you the most value? (Perhaps your graphic designer or your printer...)
- What one marketing communications task that you accomplished this year was the most worthwhile (something like creating a brochure, redesigning a website, launching a blog, etc.)

In the Escape from Cubicle Nation blog, Pam Slim urges you to ask yourself four questions:

1. What did I learn?
2. What am I grateful for?
3. What will I stop doing?
4. What will I start doing?

Although Ms. Slim is looking at personal growth, I think these questions are valid to determine what your marcomm efforts will be in the new year. Looking through your lists will help you move forward in 2012. The last two questions are especially key. If you found that something you have been doing provides no return on investment, STOP doing it. Start doing something different!

Please share your responses or any questions that you ask yourself at year's end.

Is threatening your customers ever a good idea?

Today, in my inbox, I had an email from an online bookseller with this subject line:

“Last day for FREE shipping in time for Christmas.”

I also had an email from an online drugstore, with this subject line:

“NOW OR NEVER: get \$5 dollars off your order and free shipping.”

Although both emails have virtually the same message, the former is URGENT, the latter is THREATENING.

Threatening is telling me that unless I do something there will be consequences (in the drugstore's case, no more free shipping or something). Urgent is telling me that I should act now because time is running out.

It is more effective to **show your customers why they should act now** instead of telling them that if they fail to act, they will suffer consequences. Don't you agree?

Blurred lines between advertising and editorial

If you have ever worked with large newspapers, you know there is a strong editorial stance against pay for play, meaning that no matter how much advertising a company provides the newspaper, the journalists/editors will not let that influence their reporting. This line is much more blurred in smaller, local newspapers, where sometimes, a good editorial piece will follow advertising or vice versa.

It is important to keep the line of separation between advertising and editorial so that readers can trust the newspaper is not being bought. Imagine that if in a political

campaign a certain candidate bought a lot more advertising than the other, and then the editors endorsed said candidate. Wouldn't that be questionable?

Which brings me to something I couldn't quite believe that I saw today in the Washington Post. Thomas Heath wrote his Value Added column praising Total Wine, the Potomac, MD based mega liquor store. Heath writes that one of the ways Total Wine has grown is because of how one of the company's founders studied law, so that he could use the knowledge to help change laws regarding liquor in states into which the company was trying to expand. On the opposite page to the column was a junior page ad for—you guessed it—Total Wine. Seriously. (People who read the paper electronically would never see this...but that is another discussion.)

What is going on here? Heath or his editor tells the Total Wine people he is writing a positive piece about Total Wine, and Total Wine says, in that case we want to advertise, and can you place the ad right next to the column please? And the Post says sure-not a problem? Clearly, there was communication if not straight on hand shaking across advertising and editorial on this one, blurring the lines at the Washington Post. How do we know that Heath was not encouraged to write a positive column on the promise of Total Wine advertising? We don't.

What do you think? Did the Post act appropriately? Would it have mattered if the ad was placed anywhere else in the paper?

Being more effective

If you are the type to make New Year's resolutions, make one to be more effective in your marketing communications efforts. Being effective—that is, actually successful in producing your intended result—should be the goal of all marketing communications.

How can you be more effective? There are several ways to make sure your communications meet their mark, but it probably starts with the basics:

- Do you know and understand your **TARGET AUDIENCE**?
- Do you know what your **KEY MESSAGE** is? Are you expressing it clearly and unambiguously?
- Are you properly **TIMING** your communications efforts?
- Do you know your **USP** (unique selling proposition)?
- Are you aware of who your **COMPETITION** and what they are doing?
- Have you gotten **FEEDBACK** from outside sources on your creative? Is it conveying the attributes you are trying to convey?
- Are you following a **STRATEGY** or are you just engaging in **TACTICS**?

What are your suggestions for being more effective? Please share in the comments.