

What we can learn from the budget “negotiations”

Last week, our elected officials took the whole country to the brink. Whether you think it was ideology, intransigence, real economic crisis or plain circus, we all got a painfully clear view of what kind of government we have, and it was not a pretty picture.

But not all is bad. We can derive some lessons from this latest governmental crisis that can be applied to marketing:

- At some point, spin does not compensate for the reality on the ground so stop spinning already!
- Repeating the same phrase over and over becomes meaningless (e.g. “we are fighting for the American people,” “we do not want to shut down the government.”)
- Innuendo and doublespeak are not substitutes for clear communication.
- Say what you want unequivocally. You want cuts to Planned Parenthood—say that. Don’t make it a “rider” so that you can sneak it in under the radar.
- Don’t underestimate your audience...they can see through your antics.
- Be prepared for people to question you, your motives and your goals.
- There is a difference between justifying your actions and explaining your actions.

Politicians, like PR or advertising professionals, are in the business of persuasion. And like PR or ad people, they are beholden to special interests (or as we call them “clients”).

What did you learn about marketing from our government’s game of chicken?

Reputation matters

Several days ago, a blogger on a well-respected site that I frequently read stated that the gender gap on wages was a myth. He said that if women don't earn as much as men it is because they don't work as much (really, he said this). He used all sorts of manipulated information that failed to address the underlying issues, such as women are usually also responsible for child care. I suspect that he was trying to be contentious to receive more traffic. I called out the post on Twitter, and the author attacked me personally saying I was acting like a victim. I am not making any of this up.

A couple days after the Gender Gap is a Myth post, a woman posted a strong rebuttal on the website, which pointed out some inconsistencies and omissions by the male blogger. In my mind, it made the male blogger look even worse. For me, the end result has been that I will not read anything the male blogger writes anymore because a) I have lost any respect for his assertions and b) I think that he writes to get a rise out of his audience rather than to inform. His reputation is ruined for me, and there is very little he can do to change it (if he even cares).

The bottom line here is that what you publish online (on Twitter, Facebook, blogs, etc), how you respond to comments and how you interact with others who disagree with you all influence your reputation. You can create a reputation for being fair, or for being smart, or on the other hand, you could create a reputation for being a raconteur or a complete ass. Your reputation matters. And it will influence what

people think of you, what they say about you and whether they continue to read your stuff/subscribe to your blog and so forth.

Reputation can indeed affect your bottom line.

What is your reputation? What do you think people think about you based on what you put out there? Do you think it matters? And if you don't think it matters, why?



How to leave a bad impression

It seems lots of people and companies out there are trying hard to leave a bad impression. If you want to join their ranks, here are a few tips:

- Don't respond to inquiries. If someone calls or emails, free free to ignore.
- Don't say thank you. If someone buys a product from you or gives you a contact or anything, don't bother saying thank you. That would be nice.
- Keep pounding away with the same message. Send the same offer over and over, a couple of times of day if possible.
- Solicit free advice. Ask around for all the free advice you can. After all, it's just advice, right?
- After you get your free advice, feel free to ignore it. Someone's an expert but that doesn't mean he/she knows what she/he is saying.
- Cancel or change plans at the last minute. Your time is more valuable than anybody else's.
- Use foul language. If you are on Twitter, go ahead, drop

an f-bomb or two.

- Be crass, self-involved, self-promoting. It's all about you.

My question is: how hard are you trying to leave a bad impression?

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How Not to Write a Cover Letter

Being a small business, I don't often get cover letters and resumes, although once I got a perfume-scented resume on blue letterhead that went directly in the trash. Yesterday, I got a cover letter that was truly stunning, and not in a good way. It was stunning because it was such a good example of how NOT to write a letter. I am posting it here, with comments (and with identity removed, of course).

To Whom it May Concern:

No personalization...unforgivable since I am the only person listed on my website.

I would like to be considered for employment with your company, so here is a little background on my education and experiences.

Doesn't mention what type of employment is being sought.

I have a Bachelors of Science in Business Administration from [XXX]University, where I double majored in Marketing and Business Management. I also earned a minor in Professional Communications. I achieved a GPA of 3.49, while also being extremely involved in extra-curricular activities and community service opportunities on campus.

Would have put this down further...or talked about what subjects I learned about, more specifically.

I've gained experience relevant to the business industry through two internships, one with[xxx]- a marketing firm, and the other with[xxx}. These internships allowed me to utilize the information I had been learning at[the University] and have allowed for me to gain experience in the marketing field.

No specificity: the writer could have given examples of specific tasks or information learned.

Before you ask, I'll go ahead and answer the big questions in your mind. Yes, I am currently in [other state] No, I do not plan to work from here; I'm ready and willing to relocate. And finally, No, I understand that I'm entry-level and do not expect to receive relocation funds.

Geez. Now you are a mind-reader. Don't assume anything.

I have enclosed my resume for your review. Also, my LinkedIn profile can be viewed at[LinkedIn], if that better fits your viewing preferences.

This is nit-picky but you have attached not enclosed your resume, since this is an email.

I would be happy to aid you and your company in future endeavors, if you will please contact me at [telephone and

email] I would welcome the chance to discuss openings.

Notice that nearly every paragraph and sentence starts with I. It's all about the writer and nothing about my company.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

I wrote the author of this email back and told her there were no opportunities. I also gave her a couple of tips. She didn't reply. I am pretty positive this letter will get her nowhere.

Here are my top three tips on how to write an effective cover letter:

1. **Personalize:** Have a name (or at the very least a department or title). Mention the name of the company you are applying to, and why you are interested in working at that company.
2. **Summarize your background, but in relation to the potential job:** In college, you probably took arts classes and sociology, etc. but perhaps you took a really great writing class that would help you be a copywriter, right?
3. **Talk about what you can do for the company:** Can you bring in business, deal with clients, sweep the floor really well? What do you bring to the table?

What are your tips? What are the biggest mistakes you see when you get cover letters?

What makes stories work?

Last week, I attended a Washington Women In PR (WWPR) panel on “The Art of Storytelling.” WWPR’s Past President Debbie Friez has a great recap on the BurellesLuce blog.

While I agree with the concept that creating a story will help your organization to connect with its target audience, one thing was not answered. What makes the story work?

Danny Harris of People’s District said that stories help “show the texture,” which I take to mean give life and detail to otherwise dry and boring concepts. For instance, if I tell you I saw a homeless person on a street corner, that means nothing. But if I tell you that I stopped to talk to the homeless person, and he was able to tell me that because of a health issue he lost his job, and then his house, now you understand the situation. The story fills in the details.

Stories should be memorable, ideally. But then again, not every story, and certainly not corporate stories, is memorable. Stories should aim to create recognition and let you find commonality with them through the details they impart. Yet what details will resonate with your audience?

One thing not one person on the panel said and which I think is absolutely critical for storytelling is this: authenticity.

Although it is a much-vaunted word (especially on social media), authenticity is a concept that is often lacking in marketing communications. When something doesn’t ring true it is because it is not authentic. Case in point: my criticism of Pepco’s ads about customers being first. Those ads were simply not authentic. Why? Because anyone who has had to deal with Pepco knows that customers are NOT first. Same goes for

Comcast (Here is a total aside, I went to Comcast to return equipment and saw a sign that said “Customers are our first priority.” Of course, the customer service office was a small cramped affair where a dozen people were waiting in line for one or two surly customer service reps. Yes, I am sure Comcast puts customers first.)

If you are going to use stories to relay your marketing message you have to be sure they are authentic. People see through the BS. And people who see through it will now have a really bad impression about your organization.

What do you think makes stories work?



Web and social media irritants

There are things that I see happening on social media and on the web that are irritating. They happen way too often. Here are my top peeves (and least of this week).

One of my top ten peeves of all time, and which I have discussed before, is the **impersonal invitation to connect on LinkedIn**. In the past few weeks, I have received at least four or five invitations from people I don't know and who haven't made the slightest attempt to personalize the LinkedIn generated note “I'd like to add you to my professional network.” I got one this morning, and I fired back a note telling the person in question that we hadn't ever met, and that a tip for her would be to personalize the note. She wrote back this really clueless note:

Please accept my sincere apologies. I must have mistaken you for someone else. I thought I had met you at a XXXX function. I never send blind invitations. I am currently writing for a couple of online magazines and am building local pr connections. So sorry to be an annoyance.

Why is this clueless? Because, a) she did send a blind invitation. She could have written something like, "We met at a XXX event last week, and I would like to connect with you here." And b) she is telling me she is using LinkedIn to build connections, which I interpret as using this forum to send out countless queries and newsletters , etc. So, she is not seeking to build a connection with ME, she is seeking to build her network to profit her work.

Other irritants are:

Blog posts that are not shareable on social media. And ironically, this post, from the All things WOM, from the Word of Mouth Association, IS NOT SHAREABLE. Has no share buttons. Really. How stupid is this.

Web redesigns that are not useful to the reader. The Washington Post redesigned their website and recently re-launched it. As far as I can tell, readers were not consulted. In a note to readers, sent THREE days after the re-launch the Post says:

The Washington Post is now even more essential and more in tune with the way you interact with news.

- *Follow stories as they develop and share your ideas as they evolve*
- *Watch events unfold with new video programs*
- *Know what's getting the most buzz and what's really happening in D.C.*
- *Get straight to your favorite coverage with destination*

I guess what they mean by “more essential” is less stuff to read. Now I have to dig through the site to get to local news. And where are the blogs? Oh, and by screwing around with the site, lots of the Post’s blog RSS feeds were messed up. Nice going.

Using swear words on Twitter. I have written about this before, and I will again in light of this article in the New York Times. I swear all the time, just not on Twitter. Because Twitter is a broadcast medium that is also archived. What you say here is on the record for ALL to see. It shows a lack of thought to use your words carelessly.

Promoting yourself endlessly or worse, showing off on Twitter. There is one particular person, whom I just unfollowed today, who felt it necessary to be a braggart at every turn. It was things like this: “aren’t you jealous of my fabulous view?” with an attached picture. Why do I want to read this? Why do I care? Again, Twitter is a broadcast medium. What you say can be seen by 1000s of people.

Sending too many (or useless) email marketing messages. The AMA-DC was sending me four emails A WEEK. I told them it was too much. They unsubscribed me for criticizing them. And here is Entrepreneur’s take on why people stop following you. Read it and see that too many emails or too many posts irritate people. (And get this, I keep getting Comcast’s marketing missives, even though they CANCELLED my account.)

Any of these get your goat too?

Plan B...do you have one?

Last week, I found out my accountant is in the hospital. His partner cannot take on new work and the only remedy I was offered was to file an extension. When I asked for a referral to another accountant, the partner was not able (or willing) to give me a name. In short, my accountant apparently had no plan B, no contingency plan in case of emergency.

Most of us do not plan for contingencies. We have our plan A, and we rarely think about what could happen if things do not go as expected. In cases of emergency, in communications having a plan B is also known as crisis communication planning or management. Well-managed organizations will have some sort of crisis plan.

Many people do not like to think about the what if. It makes them nervous. When consulting with a nonprofit recently, it turned out that the organization had absolutely no crisis plan. And, by the way, a crisis does not necessarily have to be your fault or an emergency, or something horrible.

Contingency planning in general has to do with having alternative plans. Say that the Internet goes out, are there other ways people can find information about you? If so, where? You cannot plan for every situation but you can have a general sense of what scenarios are most likely to happen, and what the procedures and communications are for each of those top situations. For instance, if you have a spokesperson, you may want to plan for the day the spokesperson is out with the flu (as I mentioned before, it doesn't have to be a dire situation). Who is the alternate spokesperson?

In short, because life will not go as planned, you should always plan for that fact.

(Note to the accountants: you could set up a list of trusted accountants you refer to or you could hire temporary help for tax season.)

How do you create contingency plans?

Is social media the right venue for you?

Sometimes it seems like everywhere you turn someone is telling you to be on Twitter, Facebook and so forth. Lots of companies are now advertising that you should follow them.

Let me say there is a huge benefit to being on social media. Some companies will find most if not all of their target audience on social networks. But, and there always is that but, if you are not prepared to be on social media, don't be on it. It can hurt more than help.

Let me give you an example of how being on social media when you are not ready can actually cause more damage than any benefit. Last week, I bought a mattress from Sleepy's, "the mattress professionals." The mattress was supposed to be delivered on Tuesday, between 3 pm and 7 pm (and, no, this is not the cable company although Sleepy's gives them a run for their money). By 6 pm, it was obvious the delivery was going to be delayed. I tweeted to @sleepys several times. No answer. Mattress finally got delivered at nearly 9 pm. I did not receive a tweet back from Sleepy's until nearly 5 pm the next day, asking me to email my concern. The next day, they

tweeted to email my concern (which I already had done.). By Friday, I had an email from them asking me to test the email address!!!! And, someone from customer service finally called me Friday afternoon.

Although there are many things wrong with Sleepy's (and if you are interested in my opinion of this company just drop me a line), **it adds insult to injury for them to be on social media and not to respond to social media.**

Social media for companies, whether it be for customer service or for image, requires a sizeable time investment. It requires monitoring for mentions. It requires responsiveness.

Is social media the right venue for you? Here's a checklist to determine the answer:

- **I have the time and/or the staff to manage social media.**
- **I have the understanding of how social media works.**
- **I will respond to customer complaints on social media like I do on traditional outlets.**
- **I will monitor for mentions consistently/constantly.**

If you can't commit to this checklist, social media may not be the right venue for you.

If your company does not have the staff/time to deal with social media, do yourself a favor, and do not get it to the game. You will make matters worse. By saying you have social media outlets, you are encouraging your customers to contact you there. If you are not there, then your customers will become even more frustrated. Frustration can lead to anger and upset. And because of the power of amplification, the problem will get transmitted to more and more people.

Your thoughts?

How to become irrelevant

How many blogs have you stopped reading? How many products have you stopped buying? How many ads do you ignore?

If you answered just one to any of these questions, the reason is because whatever the blog/ad/product/service has become irrelevant.

Some irrelevancy is by attrition—meaning that you will stop buying a product because you no longer need it (like baby diapers when your child is potty trained). Other irrelevancy is because you just don't care anymore or the information does not ring true.

How do you become irrelevant?

If you are a blogger:

- You write about things that people don't care about or are not interested in.
- You write about the same things over and over.
- You write about you, you and more about you.
- You never update your blog.

If you are an advertisement:

- You advertise the same offer, over and over
- You advertise an offer with tons of small print
- You advertise things that are just not true (we beat any price, for instance).
- What you advertise does not match reality.

If you are a product:

- You don't work as promised.

- You don't fill a need.
- You are not well priced.

If you are a website:

- You have outdated information.
- You look like you were designed in 1999.
- Your visitors can't find the information they need to make a purchase/visit your location/etc.

Basically, you become irrelevant when you forget what your audience needs or wants.

What makes you tune out marketing? Let me know what makes blogs/ads/websites/brochures irrelevant.

One move to guarantee social media success

If you do just one thing, I can almost guarantee you will improve your social media success:

Post a good (perhaps even professional) picture of yourself on your social media profiles.

First a caveat: I said a GOOD picture of yourself. Not some quirky, smirky mugshot *a la* Jared Lee Loughner (that is guaranteed to drive people away). I know that good is subjective, but aim for some of these adjectives: professional, pleasant, smiling, poised, polished, approachable.

The reason is simple: people do business (and connect) with people.

A few days ago, an acquaintance of mine who is notoriously shy and quiet, posted her company logo as her LinkedIn profile picture. What a bad move (and I told her so). After all, are people seeking to connect with her company (where she is an employee and not an owner) or with her?

For some people, putting up a picture seems like an invasion of privacy. For some, there is fear of being judged by looks or the worry that they don't look good enough. I have heard of women who want to lose weight before posting a picture. Unfortunately, these excuses don't fly. Social media is social, and social means people. People are not icons or images or logos. They are themselves, and generally a photo captures this.

According to this blog post by Todd Taskey on Small Business Trends, a PROFESSIONAL photo will increase your chances of having business opportunities find you on LinkedIn. More reason to go out and get a professional portrait done. It truly is a worthwhile investment.