

Who is your rep?

Your representative could affect your reputation. And yet, how many times have you seen big firms and/or top tier colleges represented at a job fair or college fair by a young, inexperienced person? When you go to trade shows, who is sitting at the booths? Top brass? Fat chance—most likely, exhibitors at a trade show are represented by someone from the marketing department.

Have you ever gone to a networking event and met someone from a company who does not have any idea of what the company message is?

The other day, I was at a fair here in Bethesda. A very young girl handed me a flyer for a political candidate. The flyer tells me the candidate “has the experience to work for us,” and yet her representative was probably not even out of college. The rep did not back up the message.

I got a phone call the other day from a marketing company. I had been seeing their name pop up on my caller ID for weeks, calling at all hours and on the weekend. When I finally answered it turns out they were representing a charity. I thought it was a telemarketer and I told the young man at the other end of the call to remove me from his list. He launched into the rigamarole about charities are exempt blah blah. And then I said I was irritated that they kept calling me never leaving a message. He then started to tell me how the charity is busy helping people in need (so my concerns are not quite as legitimate). I hung up. He was not a worthwhile representative for the charity.

Who is sitting at your front desk/reception area? Who is out at chamber events representing your company? Do you know? What have you taught your representatives about your key messages? Can they give an elevator speech for your company?

Remember, your representative is you.



It's not what you say you do

It is what you do.

- Do you live up to your commitments?
- Do you deliver the goods?
- Are you reliable? Responsive? Responsible?
- Do you reply to people or just to tweets?

There are a lot of folks out there in the social media stratosphere developing massive followings, writing blogs, sending newsletters, even writing e-books, but **all they are doing is saying what they do. They don't actually do what they say they do. They seem to think talking makes up for acting.**

For instance, if you are in public relations, you need to create a strategy for your client. Tweeting all day is not a strategy—it is a tactic, and if it is not part of a larger, thought-out plan, it is good for nothing.

Although social networks are valuable, the people you know in real life may be more valuable because get this, you actually know them and they know you. If you are blowing off your in-the-flesh connections so that you can develop lots of virtual friends, you will be left with lots of virtual reality and little real reality.

Use social media, but use it to do stuff, not to say you do stuff.

The above is a commentary by the author of this blog. It

represents her views in every possible way.



Don't buy your own PR

In the age of self-publishing and social media, it's easy to put out information about your brand or yourself out there. It's easy to gain "followers." The lack of filters makes it easy to connect directly with people. But that doesn't mean that what you are saying is true. Keep that in mind. Just because you put in on your blog and somebody shared it on Twitter DOES NOT MAKE IT FACTUAL OR TRUE OR EVEN RIGHT. It just means that someone liked what you have to say.

In fact, just yesterday the disheveled leader of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmanidejad, claimed to the United Nations General Assembly that the U.S. was behind the 9-11 attacks and that most of the world believes that. To a rational person, this is hogwash, and yet there are nutcases out there who agree with this maniac. **Let me emphasize again: having followers does not make you right or true.**

Many people and companies are falling prey to the lure of large numbers. They believe that because they have large numbers of followers, they are "all that." They may be, but they should question it. Just today, I read a blog post by a book author, talking about herself and her concentration. It was purported to be about happiness, but it really was all about her. Another popular blog shared this morning what the blog author does as a morning routine, as if this is what we all need to do. What is happening is that because it was easy

to get ideas out there, and to get positive publicity for such ideas, these people believe that everyone cares and everyone agrees with them. But that is just not accurate.

I am not saying that you should not self-publicize or promote yourself or your brand. **I am just saying you should not fall prey to the numbers game. Just because you have supporters does not mean everyone supports you** (go over to the Washington Post and read what happened to Mayor Adrian Fenty if you want a real-life example of buying your own PR at the expense of a reality check).

If I can paraphrase a famous line: publicity corrupts, absolute publicity corrupts absolutely.

(And for some comic relief, read Christopher Elliott's interview with Delta's head of customer service, who thinks Delta has the best customer service. Clearly, she hasn't flown Delta.)

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Don't go knocking traditional media

Last week I wrote that social media is not all that. Even if I do believe in the importance of social media, I don't think everyone HAS to be on it. And now, Pew Research has found that 1 out of 5 Americans do NOT use the Internet. This means if you are still aiming for high coverage you cannot rely on Internet ads/social media marketing alone. Traditional media (I know, it sounds old-fashioned) is still viable when attempting to reach those Americans who won't or can't access

the Web.



Is social media all that?

There's a lot of hand wringing about whether the "C-suite" (fancy jargon term for the higher ups in a corporation) is on social media. Does it matter? Does the CEO have to be on social media for it to be worthwhile? The answer is no. For social media to matter it has to be the conduit to your audience or your supporters.

Say for instance you are the CEO of a kid's cereal manufacturer. You advertise your highly sweetened concoction on children's shows on Saturday morning. Do you also have to watch those shows, or even those TV channels? No! Of course not. Presumably, your marketing department did some research and found that a certain percentage of your target audience watches shows and therefore if you advertise your cereal there, those kids will be begging their parental units to buy it for them.

Social media is not for everyone. But that does not mean it is not effective in reaching some people. It is more effective for certain applications and among certain demographics. This is why social media is part of the arsenal in your marketing mix.

Let me emphasize again: social media is part of the marketing mix. There is more to marketing communications than social media, and if your chief executive is not tweeting or blogging or Facebooking, that is OK.

Social cues

Although I think many people who march to the beat of their own drummer are interesting, some folks are just plain clueless. This past weekend I went on an organized hike. Most hikers were dressed in hiking clothes of one stripe or another, except for someone my friend dubbed “Disco Dan.” “Disco Dan” was attired in short shorts made of corduroy and of a peach hue, to match his multicolored button down shirt. Furthermore, “Disco Dan” was wearing non-hiking shoes. To say the least, “Disco Dan” stood out, and not in a good way.

Although “Disco Dan” was harmless and mildly amusing, it made me think about how people act in a societal context. Most people are adept enough to fit in. Some people, like Dan, either don’t get it or don’t care to get it, and still others are avant-garde, doing today what most of us won’t do for months or years.

How is this a marketing issue? First, responding to social cues is important in personal marketing. If you are trying to get people to buy you, the product, you can’t be out of touch with what is socially acceptable. For instance, if you are interviewing at a law firm and you show up in jeans and a t-shirt, you are saying with your clothing choice that you don’t understand the law firm ethos, or that you are going to do what you are going to do, no matter what.

Secondly, observing and listening to understand what is socially acceptable and what is not, is essential when marketing. I would say that if you have trouble with social

cues you are not going to be able to create great ad copy or be in public relations or in event planning. Say you are tasked with writing copy directed at senior citizens. You use the terms that GenY appreciates but that seniors don't understand. You are being tone-deaf to the needs of your audience. Or a more common occurrence, you go for the intentionally hip or what you think is really funny, but that your audience just doesn't get.

Unfortunately, as more people lose the ability to interact directly with other people due to the over reliance on electronic gadgets like smart phones and gps, the less they are able to pick up on social cues. It is common to see people with headphones on walking around in their own personal bubble, and when they are looking for something, instead of asking a live person nearby they go to Twitter or Facebook and ask there.

The bottom line is that we live together in a society, where some things are more acceptable than others. When you want to be like Disco Dan and wear what you want because you want to, you are only communicating to the world that you don't care or that you don't get it. Either way, it creates a degree of alienation.

What are your thoughts? Have you noticed an increase in people who don't react to social cues?



Even good communications

don't fix bad products

Sometimes a perfectly good product is ruined because of bad communications. But good communications will not fix a bad product. Eventually, people won't buy it, no matter how good your public relations or advertising or marketing is.

This past weekend I traveled to Charleston, South Carolina (which, by the way, is a great place for a vacation: lots to do, lots to see, good shopping and fantastic food). I stayed in a small hotel, which had a great location, close to many restaurants, the waterfront and sightseeing. I received an email from the hotel before my trip telling me they looked forward to my visit, and how to find the place. Nice gesture. After my trip, I received another email from the hotel thanking me for my visit and encouraging me to submit comments and suggestions. Again, nice example of customer communications.

On the communications front, the hotel is doing well. However, on the actual product the hotel offers, there was a lot lacking. The rooms were very small, with no outside windows. You could hear the phone ringing in the reception area. The included breakfast was on par with the Holiday Inn's (that is, nothing special). The place was musty. Some of the front desk attendants had a slight attitude problem and a lack of professionalism. Overall, not my favorite hotel by a long shot.

Bottom line is that if your product has flaws, no amount of communications will fix those flaws. You can have a snazzy website, great PR and excellent customer service, but if your product doesn't work, it won't sell.

When I go back to Charleston, I will look for another hotel. Not because the hotel I stayed at did a poor job communicating with me but because I need a hotel where the rooms have

windows to the outside and offers some privacy.



What are you all about?

When you visit a website, particularly for a company you may want to do business with, do you check out the “about” page? I always do. I want to know who I am dealing with.

When I write an “about” page for a client, I always concentrate on facts. In a sense, I am doing the journalism 101 treatment: who, what, where, when, why and how. In my book, that is what an “about” page should answer for website visitors. If you go to my website, my about page has my bio (the who, why, when, where) and my business philosophy (the how).

Another thing to remember when you are writing an about page: people do business with people. People don’t do business with concepts or grand ideas. People choose you based on your qualifications (and maybe your likability, who you know, what you know).

Recently, I came across a business and checked out their about page. I wanted to know who was behind this company. And this is part of what I found:

XXX provides business integration solutions, our focus is on helping organizations capitalize on information management by designing programs that sustain business goals and objectives. With expertise in Business Process Management, Enterprise Architecture and Knowledge Management; XXX are passionate about helping organizations increase customer

satisfaction, providing solid frameworks for continuous improvement and aligning technology catalog with core business objectives. XXX merges the right technology solutions with sound information management practices to provide customers with smart customized, future-forward, business integration solutions.

I blocked out the company name of course, but does this description tell you anything? I have no idea what these people do or who they are, but I do know they love jargon. What the heck is a “smart customized, future-forward, business integration solution?”

As they say on Twitter, this is a FAIL!

The Caffeinated take-away:

To have a truly useful “about” page, go back to basics. Who are you? What do you do? Where are you located? When did you start doing what you are doing? How do you do what you do? Why do you do it? Answer those questions and get yourself a good description. It may actually help your business.



What does your Twitter stream communicate

Lots of communications people –journalists, PR folks, ad people—are on Twitter. I am too, and I follow many communications types. You can get a lot of good information,

and interesting facts from your Twitter stream. But you can also learn a lot about the people you follow.

What you tweet about: Obviously, what you tweet about shows what you are interested in, and what you are more knowledgeable about. If you are in health care, you may tweet about the latest health research. If you are constantly tweeting about personal stuff, you are communicating that your business is not as important to you as your personal life. If you never tweet about personal stuff, you are saying that you view Twitter as only business.

When you tweet: Do you tweet during the day? Chances are that you incorporate Twitter into your work life. Do you only tweet on the weekend? Timing shows how much you understand how Twitter works. Although we have the ability to look at a person's stream history, Twitter tends to be about immediacy. If you are tweeting in the middle of the night, you are saying you don't care whether people see your tweets, you just want to share.

How much you re-tweet: If you re-tweet stuff, it shows you are really reading what the people you follow share, and also, that you find it useful. You also are saying you are willing to share credit. If you never re-tweet, well, maybe you haven't found anything worth sharing.

Your Twitter stream really communicates a lot to those who follow you. Twitter is about building your network, and it is about sharing. I would argue that Twitter is also about branding. If you haven't locked your tweets, anyone can see what you are putting out there, and can form an opinion about who you are and what you do.

What does your Twitter stream say about you?



Editorial: The Obamas need better communications advice

Editorial

From the start of the Obama presidency, I have been surprised at the lack of good communications advice given (or maybe it is received) by the president. Last year, the president irritated DC residents by saying they weren't tough enough about winter. Robert Gibbs, the current press secretary, has gotten himself in many a bad situation, most recently calling left wing critics of the president "crazy."

And then there are two more troubling, recent missteps. First, Michelle Obama chose to take a mother-daughter trip to Spain, and did so at considerable expense. The trip was roundly criticized as being in poor taste as many Americans are in dire financial straits. Kathleen Parker in today's Washington Post calls the trip "tone deaf." It's like Michelle Obama had no reality check, no perception check before embarking on her trip. I am sure that she could have found a great place to vacation, with her entourage in tow, in the United States. In my opinion, Obama's Spain trip is the result of a lack of communications counseling. Someone at the White House is not thinking in terms of public perceptions.

The other recurring and ongoing communications issue is President Obama's apparent obsession with blaming George Bush. Instead of referring to the current GOP power base, Obama keeps blaming Bush's policies for the economic slump. After nearly two years in office, this economic mess is Obama's, not Bush's. Also, as Frank Rich pointed out in the excellent New York Times opinion piece, "How to Lose an Election Without

Really Trying,” many ideas that Obama is saying are Bush’s are not. Again, this is a lack of communications advice. People are looking for reasons to vote for the Democrats, not reasons to vote against the Republicans. Most people have lost track of George Bush and are more interested in knowing what OBAMA is going to do.

What the White House needs is better communications advice. And stat. As midterm elections approach, people are going to be deciding to vote for Republicans or Democrats, and if the Republicans gain momentum, they may kick out Obama out of office in 2012.

