

Communications is part of leadership

Let me make a blanket statement: if you can't communicate, you can't lead. Leaders need, above all, to be able to communicate, because without communication, they will have no followers and no impact. This is why we prefer loquacious, friendly people as leaders. They want to communicate and they do it well. Tight-lipped, terse people do not inspire following. In fact, people shy away from this type of person.

Recently, a volunteer-run, non-membership based group here in DC had a crisis in leadership. The president gave birth and is on maternity leave, and her second-in-command is on paternity leave at the same time. There is a vacuum at the top. But what is most disturbing about this is that there has been no communication about this vacuum from this communications group!!! They have a blog, and it has not been updated since June. Impending motherhood is fairly predictable in that you know you will have a baby, and even near which date. If you are a leader of a group, perhaps you can make some plans for your absence and COMMUNICATE them? BTW, to my knowledge, this group does not have a Twitter feed or a Facebook page. They do have a group on LinkedIn.

If you don't communicate with your followers, your followers have no way of knowing what is going on. If they think you are no longer there, they will no longer follow you. It is that simple.

Leadership means being able to communicate, and means being able to plan for the instance when you can't communicate (this may be called crisis communication planning). If an organization's leader (CEO, president, manager, whatever) is no longer able to communicate, the organization must have a plan in place to deal with this. A true leader will have the

foresight to make planning a part of his/her leadership strategy.

Thoughts?



Customer communications is part of marcom

Marketing communications is a large, unwieldy term. It covers a bunch of stuff, from public relations to advertising, to printed materials and trade show displays. Really, marketing communications is any communications that helps to market your product/service/organization. This why you should consider customer communications also part of your marcom effort.

Let me illustrate how a failure to communicate with customers can have a marketing impact:

I ordered a book from one of the Amazon sellers (the individuals or businesses that sell books for cheaper than Amazon does). I have done this many times before, in fact, just the week previous I had received both a book and a DVD I ordered this way. I received confirmation on July 6 that the order was received and on July 7 I got an email telling me that my order had shipped, and I could expect it any time between July 14 and 28.

My experience told me that usually it takes about a week to get your stuff, and I diligently checked with my front desk to see if my package had arrived. By July 21, two weeks after the seller said my stuff was shipped, there was no sign of the

book. I started to suspect that a) they sent ground mail through China or b) that they had never sent it at all. On July 24 I contacted the seller through their website. By Tuesday I had received no answer, so I contacted them through Amazon. The response was this:

Thank you for your inquiry. We appreciate your patronage and interest in our merchandise. Our records indicate that this order was shipped via USPS Bound Printed Matter, which usually arrives within 4-14 business days. This method is not traceable, and we cannot provide a definite date for delivery. We apologize that there was confusion regarding the delivery times you could expect. The listing for each item includes a statement "usually ships in 1-2 business days". Although it does state that the item will be shipped in two business days, delivery may take 4-14 business days. We have noticed that the expectation created by these messages can create confusion and we are working diligently to correct this situation. Please feel free to contact us if you have any additional questions.

Sincerely,
Customer Service
Superbookdeals
AB

Notice how they tell me that Amazon is creating false expectations, and that they don't offer to do ANYTHING for me.

By July 28, officially the last day I could receive the package before filing a claim, I still had not received anything and wrote them again. This is their response.

Thank you for your inquiry. We appreciate your patronage and interest in our merchandise. Our records indicate that this order was shipped via USPS Bound Printed Matter, which usually arrives within 4-14 business days. This method is not traceable, and we cannot provide a definite date for

delivery. We apologize that there was confusion regarding the delivery times you could expect. The listing for each item includes a statement "usually ships in 1-2 business days". Although it does state that the item will be shipped in two business days, delivery may take 4-14 business days. We have noticed that the expectation created by these messages can create confusion and we are working diligently to correct this situation. Please feel free to contact us if you have any additional questions.

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Look familiar? Same response as before. No attempt to resolve the situation, and no information whatsoever.

I got the book on July 29. The order, according to the invoice inside the package, had been processed on July 19 and had not shipped until July 21. The seller sent the package two weeks later than they claimed to Amazon. Basically, they lied. How likely am I to shop with these people ever again? Not very. In fact, I gave them the lowest rating and complained to Amazon about it.

Better customer communications would have nipped this problem in the bud. Say the seller wrote me and said we're sorry, we made a mistake with your order, and we were unable to ship when we promised. Wouldn't I have been more understanding? Of course I would. Instead, they sent me a canned response, taking absolutely no responsibility for the situation and actually blaming Amazon instead. Additionally, there is no good way to reach the seller directly nor a name of a person.

Customer communications are your one-on-one way to promote your company/service/organization. If you can't market one-to-one you should not be marketing on a larger scale.

Sadly, this turns me off from the Amazon seller program. It tells me that Amazon is not vetting its sellers enough and that you don't know what you are going to get.

Bottom line is if you want to keep your customers happy, do a good job communicating with them.



Giving a speech?

For some, giving a speech is just part of the job. These people are constantly doing sales pitches or addressing the board. For others, giving a speech is an opportunity to establish their credentials or gain more visibility. In any case, not everyone is a good speaker, and some people have really annoying habits when giving a speech.

I was at a two-day conference last week and I heard A LOT of speeches. Some were good, some were fine and some were just plain annoying. Here is a list of actual behaviors observed last week. If you are giving a speech, please keep your audience in mind and try to avoid any of these!

Talking too loudly: do not yell into a microphone please!

Talking too softly: yeah, the microphone amplifies your voice, but won't help if you are whispering. Besides, to me talking softly means that you are unsure of yourself.

Sounding unsure: mostly this happens when you end each and every sentence with a question mark, so your speech sound like this: Hi? Today I am going to be talking about widgets? Widgets are the fastest growing segment in the market?

Sounding too sure: also known as sounding arrogant or dismissive.

Self promoting: say you are asked to talk about literature in the eighteenth century, but all you talk about is the book you just wrote, inspired by the 18th century.

Being off-topic: you were given a topic, try to address it. No one came to hear your views on extra-terrestrials if the topic was the planetary system.

Hogging the spotlight: if you are speaking on a panel, that means the other people get to speak to. If you are told you have five minutes, we should not still be hearing from you fifteen minutes later.

Not answering questions: this applies to speeches that have an audience Q&A component. If you don't know the answer to a question, it is OK to say that you don't know. It is not OK to go off on a tangent or ignore the content of the question and add more time to your speech.

Do you have any pet peeves about speeches? Any advice? Please share in the comments.



How what you don't say or do can hurt you

Sometimes it's what you don't do or say that hurts you.

This is what I am talking about:

- When you don't say thank you
- When you don't acknowledge a phone call or an email
- When you don't respond
- When you don't say "I'm sorry" when you are in the wrong
- When you don't do what you say you are going to do

These omissions hurt you both personally and professionally. On a personal level, we know these types of non-actions lead to misunderstandings and hurts. They often ruin relationships. On a professional level, they are just as damaging, if not more, since there is a monetary aspect involved.

Let's take a few professional examples. Say you are a charity, and you received a donation (the amount really doesn't matter). You don't acknowledge or thank the donor. What are the chances the donor will **want** to give to you again?

Say you are a consultant, and you promised your client you would have the report by end of the week. The client is waiting on this report to make a big decision. You don't deliver. What happens? You've let down the client, and you have seriously undermined your credibility.

You you get an inquiry about your product or service. You don't respond (excuses don't matter!). You have just lost potential business.

Perhaps you are overworked and overwhelmed. Perhaps the message got lost. Perhaps you just didn't think about it. In the end, no matter what the reason or excuse is, the result is the same. Not saying or doing or not being civil and polite creates a perception about you, about what you value, about how you interact with others.

Perhaps you just don't care how you are perceived. However, if you don't care about perceptions, then you shouldn't be in marketing communications.

MarCom is about creating positive perceptions for the

product/service/organization/cause we are promoting. Being civil, being responsive, showing you care are part and parcel of creating positive perceptions.

What do you think? Have you lost business because you didn't say or do what you should have said or done?

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Some non-connected thoughts

This is not a post about marketing communications per se, but it does have to do with communications. This is also not in any particular order.

Heads in the sand

I wrote a few days ago about my stay in a Rochester hotel that did not live up to its advertising. Like I said then, there was nothing **WRONG** with the hotel, but it wasn't particularly right. Since I made my reservation online, I got the following email from the hotel:

Thank you for staying with us at the XXX. We sincerely hope you enjoyed your visit with us and that we were able to exceed your expectations. We look forward to serving you again when your travel plans bring you back to the XXX area.

They "hope" they exceeded my expectations. Well, they barely met my expectations but are they interested in knowing what my expectations and experiences were? No. I responded to them that if they cared about my expectations they would ask for feedback, and guess what, I have gotten no reply to that.

If you want to stick your head in the sand about your product or service, you are doing so at your own peril. If you are wondering why sales are down or employee morale is low, perhaps you need to FIND OUT instead.

How you present yourself (or, there are other people in the room)

I was at a couple professional development events yesterday. In both cases, there was at least one audience member who, during the Q&A, seemed to forget that there were other people in the audience. In the first case, the questioner went on and on about her business and finally got in a question (if asking a question that applies only to you is asking a question). In the second case, the questioner shared a very personal, and in my opinion, inappropriate, story as a set up to her comment (no real question). Both these people clearly see the world as subordinate to their own personal needs and desires.

This last thought leads me to:

Self promotion, arrogance and the cult of celebrity

Although the rise of social media and citizen journalism is, in general, a good thing, there has also been a rise in the amount of people who think they are superior to all the rest of us, and now, because they can harness great followings and share their every thought with the masses, have become ubiquitous and often, quite obnoxious. I wrote recently about people who actually create Wikipedia entries for themselves (talk about arrogant), and yesterday, my friend and colleague, Daria Steigman told me about the hoopla surrounding a “famous” PR person and a comment on a blog. Read the whole thing here and draw your own conclusions.

However, let me add my conclusion, I think Kami Huyse is generally right that people have become arrogant, but what she doesn't realize is that she herself is being arrogant by claiming “I don't have time to Google you.” Why is her time

more important? Now let me be clear—people who think that “Google me” is a response to other people who ask how to contact you or more about you are clearly arrogant. BUT, if I truly want to know more, chances are I WILL Google you.

In the end, it is up to each of us to give attention to the people we respect. If we don't respect someone or we think they are arrogant, then let's NOT follow them or read their blogs or buy their books or attend their parties or whatever. Self-promoting and arrogant people will eventually lose their followings IF enough people realize that just because other people think someone is great does not mean that he or she really is great (after all, lots of people liked Stalin ...).



It's always on the record!

As anyone who has been through media training knows, what you say to a journalist is always on the record, even if you think it's not. When you talk to a journalist, he or she is gathering information, and whether you are quoted directly or not, you have been used as a source.

Recently, there have been two widely publicized media gaffes. The most recent involves comments made by General Stanley McChrystal and his staff to Rolling Stone magazine. Those comments, widely seen as being proof of insubordination, led to McChrystal's resignation from his post as commanding officer of the war in Afghanistan.

It is hard to believe that McChrystal, a former head of Special Ops, would be so candid with a journalist not knowing his comments would make it to print. Anyone who has had as

much exposure to the media would know that a journalist is always pursuing a story. In my opinion, McChrystal knew exactly what he was doing, and had his own motivations for getting on the record with his views of President Obama and the direction of the war in Afghanistan.

The other media gaffe also cost a job. I am talking of Helen Thomas and her anti-Semitic barrage, caught on video by a citizen journalist and blogger. Thomas, when asked on her views on Israel, did not hold back her contempt or her extremist views. Some have asked whether she understood the implications of talking to a non-journalist. In her fifty years plus of experience, Thomas must have come across a hand-held camera before. As a journalist herself, she knows that anything you say in front of other people can be quoted or at least, used as source material. Even if Thomas had not been captured on video, the Rabbi who interviewed her could have publicized her comments.

Because, as we said before, now more than ever, NOTHING is off the record. And all of us are going on the record all the time, on Twitter, Facebook, blogs and wherever else we are interacting. We need to be mindful that what we say can and will be used against (or for) us.

Your thoughts?



Advice you shouldn't ignore!

Last week was Digital Capital Week here in Washington, DC. The event consisted of workshops, meet-ups, parties and other events. It was well attended and well tweeted. As is now the

custom, event attendees tweet out the little nuggets of shareable information followed by a hashtag, thus sharing with their following and publicizing the event.

Here are some that I saw:

“Be authentic.”

“Search your name on YouTube to see if there is any videos of you that you’ve forgotten.”

“Engage with your followers.”

“Blogging is hard work.”

My reaction to these on my Twitter stream: Really? Is that so? I have never heard that before.

On my Google Reader this morning, I came across this piece from HubSpot: “Responding to a Social Media Crisis: #Intuit Outage Takeaways.” Here are its four rules for dealing with such a crisis:

***1. Practice what you preach.** If you tout the importance of transparency, then make sure that you can be transparent during a crisis, too. For example, at HubSpot, we use trust.hubspot.com to show our portals and report on downtimes.*

***2. Respond fast, respond often.** You’re only hurting yourself if you wait too long before releasing information, and when you finally do speak up there isn’t a lot of substance to what you’re saying. Give frequent updates, even if the update is just “no new information”.*

***3. Apologize for the right thing.** Make sure you aren’t alienating your customers further with your apology. They may be more upset if they feel like you are not addressing how the error impacted their livelihood.*

4) **Make amends.** Try to find a way you can make it up to your customers. They are the backbone of your business, so it's in your best interest to keep them happy.

Read

more:

<http://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/6101/Responding-to-a-Social-Media-Crisis-Intuit-Outage-Takeaways.aspx#ixzz0raltVJsj>

All these pieces of advice are fine. They aren't saying anything new, but we are supposed to think that social media somehow needs these rules. Being authentic and credible? Yes, you should be IN ALL ASPECTS of life. Engage with your audiences? Yes, of course you should. And the Hubspot advice to deal with a "social media" crisis? That is just plain crisis communication 101.

Social media may be new media, but the communications "rules" and advice that apply to older media apply here too. Perhaps because so many people are coming into media/communications because of social media, that so-called experts can recycle this advice and call it social media expertise.

My conclusion is that people are very eager to learn, but they are being snookered by the "social media experts" who seem to recycle advice and bring very little value to the conversation. So my advice, and this you should definitely not ignore, is to question any advice social media experts give.

P.S. If you need someone to tell you that being authentic and credible is important, then I really don't want to do business with you.

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It's when you do it

Sometimes we are all about the how and why, and we forget about the when. When is just as important.

Timing can really make a difference in what you do. Yesterday, I watched a salesman be turned away by a restaurant manager because as she said “we are in the middle of lunch service.” If your beat is restaurants, shouldn’t you be aware of when is a good time to visit said restaurants? It seems logical that a restaurant will be busy during lunch and dinner. If you do nightclubs, you would not go after 9 p.m. Right?

The same idea applies to events. Plan your event for a time when people are able to attend. If you are trying to get busy professionals, perhaps daytime is not a good time. In busy places like Washington DC you can never really find a day that doesn’t have an event already planned. You can’t avoid all events, but you should avoid planning events too close to other similar events. For instance, a local medical organization may want to avoid planning an event on the same day as a local surgeon’s meeting. There may be too much crossover.

Timing will affect how your message is received and whether its effective. If you invite people to an event with one day’s notice, you are going to lose a lot of possible attendees. Similarly, publicizing an event too far in advance will guarantee people will forget about it.

Putting out a press release on a Friday is a good way to bury it, and in my opinion, doing it on Monday achieves the same result.

So next time you are busy planning a communication strategy or an event, go beyond the what, where, how and why and think about the when.



What to do when there's too much competition

Unless you are in a highly specialized field, you are facing increased competition. Bricks-and-mortar stores are facing competition from Internet retailers. And goodness, if you have an Internet-only storefront, you are facing more competition than ever.

There are two big reasons for the increase in competition:

1. The economy. Because many people have been laid off/lost their jobs, many are becoming entrepreneurs.
2. The Internet. It is easy and relatively inexpensive to set yourself up with a website/blog and to promote said website/blog.

What do you do?

First let me tell you what NOT to do: nothing. Doing nothing ensures that you will remain less visible. Nothing also refers to not pursuing opportunities or answering inquiries. There is more competition out there, and if prospects don't sign up with you, it is easy for them to find someone else.

Here are a few things to do:

1. **Research your competition.** What are they doing that you are not doing? What are you doing that they are not?
2. Based on your research, **figure out what you offer that is different than your competition:** do you have better turn-around times, better prices, more experience?
3. **Figure out who your real target audience** is. Are you wasting time and energy by targeting the wrong people?
4. **Assess your materials:** website, brochure, business cards, blog, Twitter stream. Does anything need tweaking? Are you really transmitting your message?

5. **Network.** I know this is not new advice, but people you know are more likely to give you work/buy your product or refer you.

I'd like to thank Michele Lerner for the idea for this post—we were discussing the freelance writing market this morning. And if you are looking to buy a home, check out Michele's book: *Homebuying: Tough Times, First Time, Anytime*.

What are you doing to deal with competition?

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Communicating better by design

Have you heard of Milton Glaser? Perhaps you haven't heard of him by name, but you certainly have seen his work. Glaser was the originator of the I (heart) NY concept, the co-founder of New York Magazine, and designer behind Ms. Magazine and countless other publications.

Last night I watched MILTON GLASER: TO INFORM AND DELIGHT. What a revelation. Every communicator should watch this documentary to learn both how good design can transform, and the importance of communicating simply and directly.

Glaser rightly believes that design can transform the world, that better design leads to better communication. One campaign that gave him great pleasure was working on supermarket design—from the layout to the signage and the logo. He made it easy for people to find what they were looking for. We take things like this for granted, and we really shouldn't. How

many times do we have trouble finding something because signage is lacking?

Glaser attended New York City's famed (and in fact on which the movie Fame! was based) La Guardia High School of Art&Music and Performing Arts. The high school approached him about redesigning its logo, and first he suggested changing the high school's name to LaGuardia Arts, as being simpler. And then he did a fabulous logo that he says can be sung. See it here.

I have seen people take short cuts with design—trying to save a few bucks or thinking it is no big deal. But design is a big deal. Good design will make communication easier. For those of you who have clients who think this way, show them MILTON GLASER: TO INFORM AND DELIGHT.