

Things that make me crazy

We all have pet peeves and things that make us go bonkers. Right? Unfortunately, we can't always tell what will make other people feel like they are listening to nails scratching a blackboard, and sometimes our communications misfire because of it.

I wish I could say these are universal peeves and that you should avoid them at all costs (you *should* avoid them with me), instead I am asking you to think of what makes you crazy and what you would like to see avoided. Please be sure to share in the comments.

- Using words that you don't understand or saying something complicated when simple would do (like utile—why can't you say useful?)
- Having really obvious grammatical mistakes (example: using I instead of me or having problems with subject-verb agreement)

(Please read this entry over at OpenForum: 5 Common Word Usage Mistakes that Make You Sound Stupid)

- Capitalizing Everything Instead of Bolding: more and more people are doing this in white papers and other texts. **Capitals are for proper names and the beginning of sentences only.**
- Threatening: If you don't do it this now... For instance, I got an email from the IPRA (a division of the PRSA-NCC) about an event, and then I got another email, and another. Then, I got one that said "final notice." Like if it was an overdue bill and I hadn't paid it. And then I get an email telling me it's my "last chance." Here's a newsflash IPRA: threatening me is not going to make me more interested in seeing Mike McCurry, who sold out

his boss for the chance to sell his book. Nope.

- Saying or claiming things that are obviously not true: I am planning to write a post about this specifically, but what I am referring to are ads or brochures that seem to ignore reality. Like those Cox Communications commercials that claim the company has great customer service, when plenty of people can attest to the opposite. Or American Airlines claiming to be empathetic, telling me they know why I fly.
- Insulting my intelligence: enough said.
- Excessive self-promotion: I see this a lot on Twitter and Facebook. When you feel the need to tell me how great you are all the time, I immediately think you are insecure. I used to follow someone who was very proud of her WeightWatchers progress. And that is fine, but she needed all her followers to pat her on the back too. There is a moving line somewhere between excessive self-promotion (and neediness) and genuine pride and promotion of accomplishments. Figure out where it lies.

What's on your list?



Missing opportunities

Are you truly making the best use of the many marketing opportunities out there? Probably not. This is understandable since there are so many things we can do and only a finite amount of time and staff to do it in. However, there are some opportunities that you SHOULD NOT be missing out on. These

are:

- Responding to your emails
- Tracking your mentions on the Web and social media
- Responding to social media mentions
- Following up when necessary

Let me provide you with one example of a really big missed opportunity. A couple of weeks ago, I wanted to visit a coworking space in Baltimore. I sent an email to see if I could just drop by. It took someone there more than 24 hours to respond (the answer was yes, just come on by). With that in mind, I did just that. I was welcomed and given a spot to sit. I tweeted about it. No one responded, even a week later. No one asked me for my card or information. In fact, no one said much of anything. There was absolutely no follow up. Even though I believe the coworking space offers a great convenience and is a wonderful concept, I think this particular one won't survive. They are missing opportunities to engage with potential customers, and they are doing nothing to market themselves.

If we've learned anything about social media and the Internet, it is that people expect a response (most expect an immediate response). My website host is on Twitter, and if I tweet them, they certainly respond. Why? Because they realize that it is giving them an opportunity to engage with a customer and try to fix any problem that is happening.

When you don't respond to what is being asked of you or being said about you, you are truly missing an opportunity. Social media makes it easy to find out when people are talking about you. Perhaps you can't monitor it all day, but do it once a day and make sure to engage.

If you want to make the most of easy opportunities, track and respond, and do so sooner rather than later. What are you doing to make sure you are responsive?

Grammar rules again

I think I hit a nerve yesterday with my post Grammar rules. I got the second highest number of visitors in one day to my blog in its two plus years of existence. And, several of you commented. First, let me say thanks for checking it out, and second, let me issue a plea to everyone who works with words, spoken or written, pay attention! Make grammar, spelling and proper usage a priority in your communications.

The response made it clear that many people are irritated by the lack of care we are seeing in English usage. Please take a look at the comments to the post to see what different people are experiencing.

What is not so clear is the reason behind the lapse in grammar. Is it laziness? Is it improper/insufficient instruction? Is it sheer ignorance? What do you think?

How do we change this? Mignon Fogarty, "Grammar Girl," gives seminars on grammar across the country. She has also written a couple of books on the subject. But how do we get people to a) realize they need to improve their grammar and b) learn what they are doing wrong?

Please let me know your ideas. I am so frustrated when I see my colleagues and otherwise educated folk use English so poorly.

Grammar rules

Yes, we all make mistakes. But the key is to realize our mistakes and correct them, right? And yet, I see the same grammar mistakes over and over again. And the people who are making said mistakes work in a language-based industry like PR, advertising, social media consulting and so forth.

I have seen the following grammar mistakes so many times I want to scream:

- Affect versus effect. No one seems to know or recognize the difference.
- Me versus I. So many people refer to themselves as I in the reflexive.
- Assure versus ensure. They mean different things, really.

I am currently reading Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing by Mignon Fogarty. I suggest reading it too. Or check out Mignon's tips online at Grammar Girl.

Like I said, we all make mistakes. But let's learn how to avoid them.

The bottom line is that bad grammar makes you sound ignorant.

What do you think? What grammar mistakes do you see repeated?



Lessons from a networking session

Yesterday, I attended a networking event. It was your typical meet and greet with many real estate salespeople and financial advisors of all stripes. Many of these people believe in numbers, that is, the greater number of business cards they pass out, the better the outcome. I don't like this approach. Why? Because if I get a card with no context, why would I contact that person? Especially for a very personal service like financial planning?

Lesson #1: Do not do a mass pass of your business cards. That is not marketing, it is just a waste of cards.

The event was set up so a sponsor would deliver his talk and be able to provide more information (brochures, etc). The person who did this yesterday did a good job with his 10-minute speech. But his brochure and card were not so good. The brochure was printed on one side, leaving the other side blank. That other side is valuable real estate. There was no website listed on his business cards or his brochure.

Lesson #2 Use your marketing materials to their fullest potential. Be more creative and never leave blank space. Definitely include your website URL!!!!

Everyone in the room stood up and gave a 15-second introduction. Most did well.

Lesson #3 Have a concise 15-second elevator speech ready to go, and be certain to tell people why they should work with you. One reason is sufficient.

The organizer was diligent about reminding people about the low cost of joining this group, but he concentrated more on the numbers than the quality. He talked about all you could

get for the price (lots of lunches and happy hours). He did not say that the group fomented meaningful connections or anything about the type of people who go to his events. And he kept offering add-ons—joining on the spot gave you a gift certificate, for instance. As one attendee said, it was like an infomercial: and if you buy right now, we will also give you...

Lesson #4 The value is not just about money. If there is no real value, people will not respond, no matter how good the money offer is.



Ads are powerful; differentiation is important

This morning's Washington Post is full of interesting media/marketing news. First is the announcement that the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) has enacted tough new rules on cigarette/tobacco advertising as part of the agency's new authority to regulate the industry.

According the Post, tobacco companies will be banned from sponsoring sports and entertainment events and from offering free samples, among other restrictions. The FDA also tried to limit advertising to text only (banning color and graphics) but a judge has ruled in favor of the tobacco companies, which the FDA is appealing.

Tobacco advertising and the federal response to it has always been fascinating. Tobacco is a legal product, sold and taxed in stores like any other product, but when used as directed,

causes wide-ranging health problems (cancer, heart disease) not only to smokers but those exposed to smoke. The Feds have tried to curb the appeal of smoking by restricting advertising and putting warnings on cigarette packs. This has always raised the question of first amendment rights—after all, the companies that manufacture cigarettes are trying to sell a legal product. But the government is concerned that increased sales of tobacco mean increased health risks.

The point here is that advertising and marketing efforts, when done right, are powerful. They can steer consumer behavior. Personally, I abhor smoking and I applaud the FDA for stepping up regulation of tobacco marketing. To me, marketing tobacco is marketing death, yet the issue of free speech remains. The real issue may well be why we allow companies continue to produce and market a product that kills.

Another piece of news that is fascinating is that Christiane Amanpour, the famed CNN war reporter, will move over to ABC, to host This Week. If ever there was a least likely candidate for this position it was Amanpour, who is more comfortable confronting dictators and dodging bullets in war-torn areas. I think David Brinkley would turn over in his grave! Will the round table with George Will, Cokie Roberts and the rest continue? I doubt it. And I doubt that with Amanpour at the helm, This Week will be able to compete with Meet the Press on domestic political coverage. **But that seems to be the point—hiring Amanpour is meant to change This Week into a program with a more international focus. And differentiate it will, but will that also result in increased viewership? That is the question.**

Qualities of a PR Pro

PLEASE READ UPDATES AT THE END OF POST

In the last couple of weeks, I have come across a few blogs where the authors are complaining about inappropriate public relations overtures or of getting mass and untargeted pitches. I have come across a great deal of grammatically incorrect, spelling challenged and generally poorly written PR material.

I also have met several PR people who don't really follow the news or ever read a newspaper (including online). A few months ago I witnessed a gathering of PR professionals who expressed fear of social media, and resistance to change.

Today I came across this excellent and cautionary article, *Almost Everyone Gets PR Wrong* by Nick Morgan in Forbes, about public relations and public perception, and how PR folk just don't seem to know how to shape the narrative. Morgan writes the following:

Executives everywhere take note: Beware the power of the narrative. Stop keeping score, and instead look at your organization from the outside. What is your basic job, as far as the world is concerned? And what is the story that has developed over the years? That's where your PR efforts should be focused. That narrative has to be simple, consistent and all about your functional role in the world. You've only got one story. Make it a good one.

All this made me think about what makes a good public relations person (no matter if he/she specializes in media relations, crisis communications or strategic communication).

Following a list of qualities a PR pro should have, in my opinion:

- Ability to use the language correctly (grammar, spelling, word usage), both written and spoken
- Common sense: being able to see what is important and what won't make a difference
- Interest in the news and the news business
- People skills and emotional intelligence (e.g. being able to pick up cues)
- Understanding what public relations attempts to accomplish (getting the big picture)
- Ability to network (meeting people and being able to connect with them is a learned and important skill)
- Eager to learn new skills and communication trends
- Seeing the possibilities and being creative ("thinking outside the box")

UPDATE: As per the two comments below:

- **Listening skills (not as easy as it sounds!)**

In short, a PR pro should be a great communicator and should be able to understand how communications works to shape perception.

UPDATE: Just read this great post about the 14 attributes for new PR practitioners. Matches up quite nicely.

What makes a PR pro in your opinion?



Timing is everything

Timing is everything. You've heard it when you walk up to a fast food counter, and breakfast is no longer being served. So perhaps it's more accurate to say good timing is everything. So many times it seems that had you shown up five minutes earlier, called two days later, or whenever was the "right" time, your outcome may have been different.

Of course, the right timing is also key in communications. For instance, if you are promoting an event, you want to send out calendar listings and email blasts with plenty of lead time, but not too much lead time so that the event gets buried. If you have an enewsletter or a printed newsletter, you also want to make sure that any highlighted events don't happen before the newsletter gets to its audience. I know this seems like plain common sense, and yet how many times have you gotten an invitation that is not timed right?

Another aspect is when to send things out. In media relations, if you want to bury some news, you release the news on Friday. Same goes for a press conference. Often, you don't reach out to broadcast venues during busy times in the broadcast day cycle (right before the evening news for example).

Good timing is about finding the right time to reach your audience, or when your audience will be most receptive. I would never send out an enewsletter on Monday. Why? Because Mondays are catch up days, and people are busy getting back into the groove of the work week.

Consider your audience and what works best in order to figure out the right time to communicate.



It's National Grammar Day!

Today, March 4th, is officially designated here in the United States as National Grammar Day. How will you celebrate?

If I may offer some suggestions:

- Read a grammar book or my favorite book about punctuation: *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* by Lynne Truss
- Mind your apostrophes (here's a hint: apostrophes do not make a word plural)
- Practice gender neutrality, but don't use "they" to signify ONE person.
- Read a well written book, any book.
- Try to effect change by not using big words you don't understand (it affects how people perceive your writing and speaking)

What would you like to see on National Grammar Day?



What language are you speaking?

Are you by chance speaking in jargon? Why are you doing that?

As a writer and a consultant, I often ask my clients what their "keywords" are. It is helpful, and sometimes crucial, to use the right terminology for any given industry. Especially

when you are working in a business to business environment, you need to know how these businesses look for the services/products that they need. But when an outsider lands on one of these B-to-B web pages or marketing materials, he or she will most likely end up not understanding a word. For instance, a client of mine uses the terms “professional services.” For general marketing purposes, this is the emptiest phrase out there, but in the client’s world, it carries a specific meaning.

Setting aside the need for industry-specific terminology, and recognizing the importance of specific terminology in a B-to-B setting, what is going on with language today? Why are so many people talking in gobbledy-gook? Lately, I have heard the following phrases/terms on TV, in conversation and seemingly, everywhere else:

- Drilling down (apparently, this means getting to the heart of the issue or talking specifically)
- Sweet spot (as in where the perfect opportunity lies)
- Being out of pocket (never got this one although it means being unreachable)
- Getting your ducks all in a row (oldie but goodie, means be prepared)
- Leveraging an opportunity (making the most of something)
- Staying ahead of the curve (presumably, leveraging opportunities to get to your sweet spot)

In a sense, these universally used phrases serve as a crutch. Use them and other people will understand what you mean, even when the meaning isn’t entirely clear. Sometimes, using touch phrases makes someone look like an insider, someone who is in the know.

In the end, jargon and catch phrases muck up your meaning. It’s one thing to use these in conversation where I can stop and ask you what you mean. It’s another to use them in writing. When things are written (especially printed) there

is no easy or quick way to ask the writer what he or she means.

Catch my drift?