

# What do Toyota and snow have in common?

Both Toyota and snow are causing lots of problems for people, that is what these two have in common. But that is where the similarity ends.



Although snow does not have an official representative (although lots of people keep talking about Mother Nature), it has a leg up on Toyota. People who deal with snow (utility companies, county government, forecasters) are all telling us what is going on, almost every second of every day of the storm (s). If you live in the Washington, DC area you have no doubt seen interviews with representatives from various organizations involved in snow removal, such as the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT). You have seen the PEPCO (Potomac Electric Power Company) spokesperson explain why power hasn't been completely restored and so forth. You know what is going on.

Toyota, on the other hand, has not, apparently, been telling us what is going on. As you no doubt know, Toyota is having a "few" problems with many of its most popular models, including the Prius. Problems include sudden acceleration and braking issues. Dangerous stuff. Yet, apparently, Toyota was slow to realize there was a mechanical/electronic problem in the cars'

manufacturing process. At first, they blamed faulty floor rugs. Now, they have recalled hundreds of thousands of vehicles, stopped production at some plants and have finally taken to the airwaves, paid advertising and even op-ed pieces to explain what happened and defend the integrity of the company.

But the damage has been done. Not communicating with your customers, especially when there is a problem, is a recipe for disaster. This is the essence of crisis communication. One has to wonder what type of communications counsel Toyota has received. Clearly, it is of the “too little, too late” variety. Of course, there is the possibility that Toyota management ignored communications counsel, which in addition to their inability to realize the problem, says that management is completely out of touch.

**More communication is always better than no or too little communication. People want to know what is going on, whether how long the snow is going to last or what to do about their faulty Toyota vehicle.**

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## **Improve your email marketing!**

Our inboxes are cluttered with hundreds of email messages—some from friends asking us to join for dinner and most from companies looking to sell us something. We may have signed up for a few newsletters. We may have met some people at networking events. Regardless, our inboxes are overwhelmed with email.

In the past week, my company sent out its newsletter. It got two unsubscribes, one report for spam (the person who did it may have had some sort of personal vendetta, not sure) and a

fairly good open rate. I am going to call it a moderate success. The newsletter did not have a call to action, so it is hard to measure its effectiveness.

In the past couple of day, I got two emails from two sources. Both caught my eye for different reasons. The first was from someone I met a while back who just started a new business venture. The subject line said "Hi Deborah." The body was the following (with identifying info cut out):

*Dear Mr. Sample:*

*Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is XXXX, Director of Media Services for XXXX and XXXX— two truly groundbreaking companies that have recently joined together to become one of Washington's newest and most innovative full-service production resources. If you're in the neighborhood, I hope you'll stop by for a tour of our facility, just off XX here in downtown D.C.*

*Our owner-operators are award-winning media professionals with more than 25 years of experience, and our list of long-term clients include companies like X, Y and Z, together with advertising and public relations agencies, corporations, associations and government agencies, both local and nationwide.*

*We'd like to show you exactly what we can do. By addressing your creatitve and technical needs with our deep expertise in all forms of broadcast and corporate production, creative editorial, 2-D and 3-D graphics, sound design and audio mixing. With our detailed approach to client service, we can easily guide your next project from concept through completion.*

*Feel free to look through our demo reels and check out the bios of our skilled artists, editors and producers. Just go to (website) and (website) to find out more. Or give me a call personally, at 999-999-9999 I'll be happy to answer*

*your questions or set up a convenient time when you can pay us a visit. I look forward to the opportunity to meet you in person.*

*Warm Regards,*

**What is wrong with this email?** First, the personalization is not working. Second, the formatting was off. Third, there are several grammatical mistakes (and at least one typo). The first paragraph is a waste. The sender could have mentioned a reason that I would be interested in this email and new venture. Instead it is an “introduction” to someone I met already. The email was sent out in plain format—and this is a multimedia production company? Why not make it look pretty and professional? There is no signature from the sender. No way of opting out of the email. No permission. I could go on and on.

The other email I got was announcing a group trip. But guess what? No dates were listed for the trip on the email, forcing me to go to the website. Maybe this was on purpose, to get a click-through to the website. In my opinion, when you don't give people some basic information, you lose them at hello.

### **Lessons about email marketing:**

- Have a call to action.
- Mind your ps and qs—details like grammar are important.
- Include relevant information: dates, locations, contact information, pricing (don't make me work so hard to figure it out).
- If possible, personalize.
- Make it look nice (there are many newsletter/email marketing companies out there at various price points).
- Be careful with SPAM laws. Give people a way to opt-out. Explain why they are receiving your email.

What drives you crazy when you get an email?

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# Was 2009 a good year for marketing communications?

As the last year in the first decade of 21st century, 2009 was certainly a year of flux. We saw lots of changes in media. Many magazines were shuttered, and some newspapers became online only. The Internet, in the Web 2.0 format was king. Twitter flourished, as did Facebook. Blogs continued to pop up everywhere. All the mainstream newscasts routinely place more information, video, interviews online. The divide between haves and have-nots is certainly growing.

Some trends that I personally disliked:

- The rise of personal branding to the level of ridiculous self-promotion.
- The failure of old guard public relations/advertising practitioners to embrace new media
- The idea that new media/social networks are THE solution (they are not)
- Social media “experts” (having a Twitter account and a blog does not make anyone an expert)
- Endless self-promotion on multiple platforms of social media
- Linking every Tweet to Facebook and LinkedIn and everything in between
- Feeling the need to tweet everything, have hashtags for everything and “follow Friday”
- Rise in sexist images in advertising
- Decline in thoughtful public relations campaigns
- Decline in traditional media, especially print journalism
- Endless hype/hysteria about the supposed big story of

the minute (Tiger Woods, Octomom, Balloon Boy, etc.)

But on the bright side

- Social media has presented great opportunities for small businesses
- The new PBS NewsHour
- Increased desire for measurement and return on investment
- Twitter, in spite of the above problems, has allowed for new relationships and allegiances, not to mention new parlance (tweetup, tweetsgiving, etc)
- Acceptance of blogs as legitimate journalistic outlets
- Citizen journalism and subsequent empowerment

What are your best/worst for the year?

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## Taking things for granted

When you are surrounded by something, you assume everyone else is as well. You are taking for granted that everyone has the same experience. But, this is simply not so. And taking things for granted results in bad communication, for sure.

How many times have you tried to talk to a real tech-y person? Chances are you ended up nodding your head because it was easier than asking what each word meant or gadget or program did. This happens whenever you try to communicate with someone who is immersed in a world, and does not realize you aren't.

On Saturday, I was at a talk about research on the Internet. Some terms came up like "delicious" or "brand reputation," which did not strike a chord amongst the attendees. You have to know who your audience is and adjust your explanations accordingly. If you are tweeting on Twitter, you don't have

to explain what a tweet up is. If you are in a room where people feel very cutting edge because they finally put up a picture of their dog on Facebook, you will have to explain, and it will not be as obvious as you think.

A rule for good communication is not to take things for granted. Explain what you mean using common terms. Avoid jargon. Jargon is the ultimate insider language, and it takes for granted that you understand it. Remember, just because it is obvious to you does not mean it is obvious to everyone else.

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## **Lack of communication may cost you a sale**

### **Prescriptives: One Customer's Quest for Makeup**

Today, I went to the mall in search of a replacement for my dwindling bottle of Prescriptives foundation, which I love. First I went to Nordstrom, where I originally found it. The Prescriptives counter was very small, and a salesperson from a different counter "helped" me. She was not very familiar with the brand and she said they were out of what I needed. Next stop, Bloomingdales. I looked everywhere and no Prescriptives counter. I asked someone who answered me with a look as if I had just asked for Cover Girl, that Prescriptives does not have a counter at Bloomingdale's. I walked out.

Next stop was Macy's. A young sales guy informs me that Prescriptives is being discontinued. This is news to me. I ask whether I can purchase the foundation online. He tells me no, but that he can custom blend some foundation from me at exactly double the price. I asked if I could find a similar

foundation with the parent company, Estee Lauder. He says probably, and walks me over to the Estee Lauder counter, where he explains what I need to a saleswoman who then proceeds to ignore me. No joke. I walk out.

Finally, I get to Lord & Taylor. I find their Prescriptives counter and the salesperson tells me they are sold out of that particular foundation. She shows me a couple of others, which I don't like. She assures me I can find something similar at Estee Lauder. We go over there, and the Estee Lauder looks up in her sales book and yes, she finds the "equivalent" to my foundation in the Estee Lauder lineup. OK. She is a good salesperson. She is nice and helpful and I buy the Estee Lauder offering.

I get home. I check on the Internet and guess what? I can buy my exact foundation online. I do it.

What is the moral of this makeup quest? A company must communicate with its associates and the public just a wee bit better.

- First, I did not know Prescriptives was being phased out. It is probably buried in some news somewhere but a large ad would have made that clear to me.
- Second, the counter people did not know enough to say the following: Prescriptives is being phased out. You can still purchase our existence here or check online until X date. One of these sales people even had the wrong information. Not helpful.
- Third, the physical displays/counters at the stores did not have any of the above information.

Prescriptives is part of Estee Lauder. It is in EL's best interest to make sure that Prescriptives customers migrate to one of their brands, and be happy about it. In order to do this, the company needs to communicate better. Period. End of story.



Have you ever had to deal with a brand that was being discontinued? What did you do?

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## We still need editors

Perhaps we have been lulled into thinking that our writing is OK because we have spell-check on our word-processing programs. Or perhaps we just think that we make no mistakes. But we do make mistakes, and some are just awful.

Here's a paragraph from a story posted on the WJLA website, today, about Virginia's smoking ban:

*For the first time, patrons will walk through the doors without smelling smoke for the first time in 15 years at Ireland's Four Courts in Arlington. Friday morning, work started before dawn.*

How many mistakes can one short paragraph have? Apparently, WJLA does not believe in copyediting or editing of any sort. I have seen more mistakes on this one website than on any other major news website I visit. You know what it does? It makes me think that they don't check ANY aspect of the stories they post. How can you trust what they say if they can't even say it right?

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# Your minimum social media presence

If you are in marketing communications – advertising, public relations, direct marketing, design or anything else involving promotion, you should be conversant in social media. You should know what it is and you should be using some social media tools yourself. How will you be able to recommend “new media” to clients if you are not on any social networks yourself?

I am not covering any new ground here, I know. However, I am continually shocked when I meet people who are in the marketing biz and who are completely out of the loop in terms of social media. Or, what I think is worse, is people in marketing who have dipped their tippy toes into social media only to have Twitter accounts they never use, or incomplete LinkedIn profiles with 10 connections or a blog that was last updated in 2007. Do you know these people? Are you one of these people? Don't be!

OK. If you buy in to the paragraphs above let's proceed.

## LinkedIn–your professional social networking site

- Set up your profile, and include a photograph of yourself. You can most likely use the same photograph on other networks as well. Make sure you have a robust description of what you do now, and an informative headline. If you have older profiles, get rid of them. Make it easy for people who know you to find you.
- If you own your company, set up a profile for your company. Include your company logo and website.
- Link your blog to your profile.
- Grow your network! When you meet people you'd like to do business with, see if you can add them to your network.

- Answer questions. LinkedIn has an “answers” section...see if you can contribute to it.

### **Blog already!**

- If you have a website, that is fine. But keep in mind that websites are static and don't invite interaction. If you can add a blog to your website you will keep it fresher.

### **Twitter**

- Set up a twitter account. If it is personal, use your name. If it is business, use your business name. Getting long and complex doesn't pay off. Remember, your name is part of any re-tweeting, so don't take away precious characters from the 140 you are given.
- Your Twitter profile should have either a photograph of you or your company logo. Do not use the Twitter bird. Be sure to write up a bio and include your website or blog URL.
- Follow people. Make lists (the newest Twitter feature)
- Tweet! Have something to say.

### **Facebook**

- In my book, Facebook is personal. However, you can and should set up a fan page for your business. It is a no-cost way of promoting your business.

To succeed in social media, you must invest some time, be consistent and be persistent.

To recap, get on one or more social networks already!!!!

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# Plainly speaking, it is better

What is better is to speak and write plainly, a lesson that is being forced on the U.S. Government according to the Federal Diary column by Joe Davidson in the Washington Post. To make that happen (I could have written: In order to facilitate the transition), there will be a symposium on plain language this afternoon at the National Press Club, held by the Center for Plain Language.

There is no doubt that the government (and many in the legal community) loves to make things complicated. The more obtuse, the better. The more wordy the better. Passive voice? They love it. Big words when smaller words would do, check.

But, more disturbing in my opinion (since I already expect government/legal communications to be convoluted), is that marketing folk are jumping on the complicated bandwagon. This blog post, from the Branding Strategy Insider, claims that “Complex Language Weakens Brands.” As the post says:

*A serious impediment to communications is this constant upgrading of the language. No aspect of life is left untouched by the upgrade police. Not only does a term have to be politically correct, it has to be as long and as complicated as possible.*

A great example from the post is that UPS went from being in the parcel delivery business to being a logistics company. How many people on the street instinctively understand what logistics is???? Not many, my friends. The only people who understand logistics are in logistics.

In any case, if you want to be clear, speak and write plainly. Using big words when small ones would do does NOT make you

look more intelligent (if anything, it makes you look less so). From the Center for Plain Language website:

*A communication is in plain language if the people who are the audience for that communication can quickly and easily*

- *find what they need*
- *understand what they find*
- *act appropriately on that understanding*

I think the bullet points above are the point of ANY communications.

And you thought plain vanilla was the boring choice.

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## Propaganda

Last night, I was fortunate to visit a magnificent exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, entitled State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda.

As the curator explained, propaganda is inherently linked with advertising and public relations. In the beginning of modern advertising and PR, propaganda people were running the show. Edward Bernays, the “father of modern PR” was a propagandist. But propaganda is not inherently negative. Propaganda is simply the propagation of an idea, using various means.

Unfortunately, as with Hitler and the Nazis, propaganda has been used to propagate evil and incite violence and murder. It is a testament to the power of propaganda that the Holocaust was as widespread and supported as it was.

The Nazis understood the power of mass media, and they

understood the power of symbolism and word choice. They understood that you had to dehumanize your enemy. They used words that had emotional appeal to the Germans of the day, like “freedom.”

The Nazis made radios cheaper and widely available, and then proceeded to use radio as a way to send out their propaganda within music shows. It became illegal in Nazi Germany to listen to foreign radio broadcasts, punishable by long imprisonment. So the way propaganda worked within Nazi Germany was to use all media possible and by the suppression of all opposing viewpoints.

In any case, the lesson to learn is that words are powerful. We that work in the promotion business, be it advertising, PR or marketing have the power to persuade and that is not something to be taken lightly.

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## **Revenue is good, but not at the expense of profit**

I came across an item in Reuters today that says that Verizon Communications had an increase in revenue (i.e more subscribers) but a decrease in profit in the third quarter of 2009. What this means is that the company's expenses are rising. Expenses could be anything from salaries to office supplies to marketing. One area where I believe Verizon is probably bleeding expenses is in marketing. I wrote before that I have received nearly five pounds of direct mail from the company during the past year. Multiply five pounds by millions and you will get a sense of the amount of paper Verizon has generated just to market one product: FIOS. In my

opinion, this is wasteful and useless.

If Verizon spent as much on customer service as on their repetitious direct mail campaign, they might have a more satisfied customer base. That would strengthen their revenue and profit streams.

This is just my opinion. I do not work for Verizon or any Verizon affiliated business or with any of Verizon's competitors. My only affiliation with Verizon is as a customer.