Closed, or just changing names?

Today, on my way to the Metro, I walked past where a Mediterranean cafe has been located for the past five years. It was closed, and in the window was a sign saying that "Amai Japanese Crepe" was coming soon.

By the way, anybody know what the hell a Japanese crepe is?

When I got back to my office, I checked on the web to see if I could figure out what happened. I first went to the cafe's website. It's still there. Same address. No update on the situation. Then I went to Yelp, and I noticed it said the place was "temporarily" closed but a five-star review had just been posted yesterday. Hmm. Stranger and stranger. I went back to the cafe's website, and clicked on their Twitter feed. Last post there was from 2015. Not useful at all. Then I went to the Facebook page. I clicked on "posts," and found one from September 22, which says this:

> *Thank you everyone for your loyalty and support these past 5 years. We opened in Feburary 2012 and strived to bring a little taste of Isreal and classic Italian espresso to our customers. Now, it's time to look to the future. XXX will be closed as of September 22 for renovations. We will be closed for two weeks to improve and update the cafe. We look foward to showing the improved us when we reopen.*

Errors above appeared in the original post. I just x'ed out the name of the restaurant. There was also a picture of the sign about the Japanese crepes. That's it. No more information. But now we know the restaurant is changing name and changing focus. What we don't know is when this will happen, or what the hell a Japanese crepe is supposed to be.

To me, this is a classic and stupid communications failure. Why a failure? Here are the mistakes I see:

1. Failure to use their website to provide updated information.

2. Failure to provide complete information on the actual site (something like: XX cafe is transforming. We aim to re-open on [date]).

3. Failure to use social media appropriately. The Twitter feed should be deleted, and they could provide updates about the renovation, some information about what they will become. Not to mention that Facebook post was from a month ago, where they claim they would re-open in two weeks.

4. Failure to consider what customers need to know. Maybe this is the biggest problem. Nowhere do you really know what is going on.

It's hard to say what will happen here. People who came to this place looking for Israeli food are not necessarily going to feel good about a Japanese crepe (whatever that may be). Passersby will think that the old place is gone, and will not necessarily think the new place is associated with the old.

As with any change, clear and precise communication is necessary. It seems that to this restaurant, communication with customers is an afterthought.

Always aim for clarity

Have you ever read something that left you shaking your head, where you wondered what exactly the writer was trying to say? That's what happens when the writer of what you are reading lacks the ability to communicate clearly.

It's important for your communications to be clear, to be easily understood, and not to confuse your audience. How do you achieve this type of clarity? Following are four suggestions:

1. Know what you are trying to say before you start writing. Remember in high school when you were taught about a thesis and its supporting points? That lesson should be ingrained in any writer's head. Always have a thesis (your premise or argument) and why you support it. It's helpful to jot down your thesis (for this piece—clarity is essential to communication) and then your top reasons for supporting it (for this piece I jotted down too many words, not knowing what you really want to say).

2. Balance your assumptions. Don't assume your audience knows too little or too much—find the middle ground that works for your specific audience. To be able to find the middle ground, you must know who is in your audience. Are they insiders? Are they the general public? How much do they know? Have you ever watched *Washington Week* on PBS? I watch it practically every Friday. One quirk they have is that they insist on spelling out every reference. If a journalist on the panel simply says "McConnell," the host quickly adds: Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. This assumes the audience won't understand the reference to McConnell and yet most people who watch *Washington Week* are fairly informed and interested in all

things political.

3. Write simply. Often, clarity is compromised by wordiness or jargon or big words when smaller words would do just fine. It's tempting to stuff articles and blog posts with fancy words, and office speak, but what you end up doing is alienating the audience who may not be conversant in your world. So work to eliminate extra words and jargon, and use plain language instead (e.g., if you see the word "utilize" substitute "use").

4. Reread and edit everything before you make it public. Sometimes we write something and then look it over quickly before we hit "publish." It may make sense to us at that moment, but does it make sense to others? Taking the time to read something slowly, copy edit it, and make sure it says what you want it to say will go a long way in making sure it is clear to *others.* If possible, get another person to read your copy (a copy editor and/or proofreader)*.*

Always aim for clarity. If your audience doesn't get what you are trying to say, then you haven't communicated at all.

Does PBS get the support of viewers like you?

We need your support and we will interrupt your viewing until you give us money!

This seems to be the PBS mission during its pledge drive

Currently, it's the upteenth day during the upteenth time this year that my local PBS station, WETA, is looking for support

from viewers. It may not be endless, but it sure feels like it.

Pledge month (?) is the time when the station starts playing "specials" that have been played dozens of times before, and interrupting them every fifteen minutes to ask for your support. In return, you will get any number of mugs/bags/videos/books based on the size of your contribution. Also, every other show seems to get interrupted—the Newshour, Washington Week, and most egregiously, the finale of the Great British Baking Show.

Enough!

Viewers like me do not like to watch tired, old "specials." Viewers like me hate having shows interrupted multiple times by the same talking heads giving repetitious pitches on why to give to the station. Viewers like me do not want mugs or tote bags. Viewers like me click off PBS the instant this pledge madness starts.

How can this model work today?

Here's a newsflash for PBS: Times have changed.

Hundreds of viewing options

All TV channels are under intense competition—both for viewers and for advertising dollars. This is because viewers have many more options for entertainment than ever before: There are hundreds of cable and streaming channels, and also an internet chock-full of stuff to watch, read, react to and interact with.

It's an on-demand world

With DVRs and/or access to content on demand, people can watch shows on whatever schedule they choose. They can ignore advertising (and pledge drives).

There's a streaming channel for that

It used to be that you could only watch British shows like Downton Abbey or Inspector Morse on PBS. Now, you can stream them on specialized British TV/movies channels, and even watch them on Netflix.

Watch TV wherever you are, whenever you want

Smartphones and tablets can access the internet anywhere and everywhere. And users of these devices can buy/rent/download all sorts of entertainment to watch even when there is no internet access.

Interrupting viewer with a push-message is really old school

These days, inbound marketing is in favor. That's when potential customers/supporters come to you because you are providing great content/reasons for them to interact and buy/support from you. Forcing yourself on viewers, like the pledge drive on PBS does, is the complete opposite. It assumes a static audience that does not have any option but to sit there and listen to a sales pitch. It assumes that pushing a message is the best way to get action. It's the old way of doing things. And it may help PBS shed viewers, not gain them.

Is annoying viewers for a $60 donation the best way to keep PBS afloat?

When you are aiming for lots of small donations, you have to do a lot more work. In this case, it means interrupting viewing more times, more often. It gets annoying. It's a turn-off. And I don't believe it's effective. I think it would be far more effective to concentrate on getting and retaining big, corporate or foundation sponsorships.

I understand PBS wants community support too. Perhaps instead of asking viewers to donate, PBS could emphasize obtaining a yearly membership with (real) special benefits (currently this

is not clear on the PBS website). Instead of having pledge drives, PBS could include a 15-second ad/message for membership before popular shows.

What do you think? Do you watch PBS? Do you support PBS? Why or why not?

Check for accuracy STAT

The other night, I heard a loud, scratching noise in my chimney. It sounded as if an animal had gotten in. My first thought (and fear) was that a small bat was in there and it would then come into the house. Since it was close to midnight, there was nothing I could do except check the website for the local animal trapping company that I've see working in my neighborhood. According to Google results, their office opened at 7:00 a.m. The website listed an 800 number, and four local-area numbers. I decided to call first thing to see if they would send someone right away.

At 7:00 the next morning I called up the company. I got a message saying their offices opened at 8:00 a.m. Their Google My Business listing was wrong and their website did not list hours at all.

Sometimes companies spend more time and money on developing new marketing or on sales pitches, and they forget to check

the basics. So, before you do anything else marketing-related, check your current stuff for accuracy. Do it now. Seriously.

What to check:

- Business name (is it complete, spelled correctly?)
- Address/es (accurate, current?)
- Telephone number/s (accurate, current?)
- Website URL
- Hours/days of operation
- Staff names/positions/contact information
- Email addresses
- Pricing information

Where to check:

- Your website
- Your social media pages (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, etc.)
- Google results/Google maps/Google My Business
- Yelp and other review or listing sites (e.g., Angie's List) you appear in
- Printed materials (business cards, brochures, letterhead, postcards, etc.)

In the end, I was able to get the animal trapping company to come to my house later in the day. They checked the chimney and nothing was there (thank goodness!). They put some mesh on the chimney cap to prevent bats or birds from getting in.

This company has plenty of business around here. I've seen their trucks before as squirrels are constantly getting into attics (and bats are always in the belfry). They certainly have developed brand recognition. But you only call them when you need them and it is usually an urgent situation. Having

multiple phone numbers and inaccurate hours is not helpful for anybody needing their services.

Any organization needs to consider what information potential users/customers/donors need to have, and then make sure that information is easily *available and accurate*. It just makes good marketing/communications sense.

Why Scaramucci failed

I was going to write a post about how Anthony Scaramucci, the shortest-lived White House Communications Director in history, embodies the problem at the core of the Trump administration's communications failures, and then the "Mooch" got fired after 10 days on the job.

Basically, Scaramucci got fired because he failed at Communications 101. He was bound to fail also because he was not the right person for the job. He had no experience in communications, and his actions showed it. As the wrong person for the job, he got hired by a boss and an administration that don't understand communications fundamentals.

The communications person is never the story

First, Scaramucci failed because he broke the cardinal rule for communications pros: he became the story. As anybody who has worked in public relations/communications knows, the comms person is there to help get the story out. Under no circumstances are you to become the story.

You have to know how news reporters work

Second, Scaramucci did not seem to understand that unless you explicitly state otherwise, everything you say can be quoted.

If you have not said something is off the record, it's on the record. Period. Reporters are always looking for quotes. That's what they do.

Just because you feel that you are simpatico, does not mean you are pals hanging out at a bar

Third, Scaramucci made himself look extremely crass and stupid by using obscenities where none were needed. We all curse, but we know that in certain circumstances we don't. Scaramucci also seems to lack imagination—and here it is—an ability to communicate, in order to convey his thoughts without resorting to obscenities.

But the larger problem is a White House that doesn't get it

In TrumpWorld, it seems communications is *all* about marketing. It's *all* about persuasion. And it's not about sharing information and facts. I don't think this country has ever seen such a fact-averse White House ever.

When you practice communications you are aiming to inform, and yes, to persuade. But persuasion is not something to be done with threats and alternative facts. As I have written before, Sean Spicer (the former communications director/press secretary) thought he was in a fight with the White House press corps. He berated them and belittled them and even refused to provide them with information they requested. He turned the cameras off for briefings, thinking that by cutting off video he would be able to control the narrative. He cherry-picked media outlets to respond to that were sympathetic to the president and would not ask any hard questions.

Communications is not a one-way street

To communicate, you must inform. You can't simply try to force your viewpoint on everyone. We see Trump using Twitter to talk directly to the people. What you don't see is Trump using

Twitter to respond to questions from the people. To Trump, communication is a one-way street (sort of how he views loyalty too): push your message out and steamroll anyone who questions it.

Scaramucci's failure is indicative of a much larger problem that does not seem to have a solution: a White House that does not value real communication.

Proof that local TV news still matters

This past Saturday, Jim Vance died after being diagnosed with cancer back in May. Jim Vance was the long-time (45 years!) anchor at Washington's NBC affiliate, WRC (channel 4). His death created a tremendous outpouring of grief, from his colleagues, and from the many people in the area who watched him on TV. You can see how NBC4 reported it here.

When I first read the news of Vance's death on Saturday morning I was not surprised (he had announced on air he had cancer and I hadn't seen him on the news desk in several weeks even though he had said he would work as his treatment allowed), but I was incredibly saddened. I've watched NBC4's evening news for many years, and liked watching him and his anchor partner Doreen Gentzler. I liked how they interacted, how genuinely friendly they were with each other and with the other reporters. I especially remember how Vance paid tribute to Doreen when she celebrated her 25 years of sharing the anchor desk with him.

Since his death, I have come to learn more about Jim Vance. He was incredibly active in his community—speaking at high school

graduations, funding scholarships, mentoring others. Many of his colleagues said he lived life to the fullest. A friend of mine told me that as a teen, he met Vance. In other words, Vance was accessible. He was not a distant celebrity, but was part and parcel of his community.

Every night on NBC4 this week, they have paid tribute to Vance. You can see how deeply they feel his loss. And what is interesting is how the community misses Vance too. What's more, his competitors at other TV stations also paid tribute to him. The news community in DC is tightly-knit. Many reporters have worked at more than one local station. Bruce Johnson, who now anchors at the CBS affiliate, WUSA-9, had been friends with Vance. He devoted his show, Off Script, on Monday night to Jim Vance and to helping people quit smoking, an addiction which most likely caused Vance's cancer.

Local TV news still matters. Whether you watch at 6:00 a.m. to get a read on the day's traffic and weather, or at 11:00 p.m. to see what happened in your community, you watch the local TV news to connect to where you live. And because you probably do this habitually, you connect to the people who deliver the news to you. They also live here. They know how hot or how cold or how rainy it is, because they too had to deal with it on their way to work. Local news anchors care about traffic and construction and local crime, because it affects them personally and their families. And because they care about what is going on here, we care about them.

In this age where it seems social media dominates, it's important to realize that people still watch TV news, and they connect with the people they see on the anchor desk.

Is it time for the corporate blog to die?

At a communications event last week, the three panelists were asked what communications channel they felt was overrated. The answer that stood out to me the most was the panelist who said she just wanted to see the corporate blog die already because, in her opinion, nobody visits/reads corporate blogs.

I disagree. Here are a few reasons why:

The corporate/organizational blog is an integral part of any **content marketing strategy**.

It's **owned media** that can help with your SEO, though leadership, lead generation and so much more.

For smaller organizations, blogs are an **easy way to add fresh content** regularly.

Blogs are **flexible and media friendly**—you can post images, graphics, video, audio and/or text.

Regularly updated blogs serve as a clue to your website visitors that your website (and your organization) is **current**.

Blog posts are a great **opportunity to respond** to current events/situations/policies in a timely manner, and in more depth that on other social media outlets.

Organizational blogs serve a purpose, when done thoughtfully and strategically. But far too many organizations don't consider what they wish to achieve with the blog that they feel they must have.

So yes, corporate blogs without a strategy or purpose behind them should die. But they can and should be resurrected to achieve one of the many things I have pointed out above. What

do you think? What's your experience with corporate/organizational blogs? When do you read them?

Small issues ==> bigger communications problems

In the past several weeks, I've noticed a bunch of small communications issues with different organizations. None of them is big enough to merit a blog post, but they do cause bigger communications problems.

Making it extra hard to reach you

I met a graphic designer at an event a couple of weeks ago. I sent her a follow up email, and got an automated reply back from her email service telling me it didn't recognize me and I would have to reply to the reply, so that I could be whitelisted. I've never seen that before, and I get why she does it. We are all bombarded by spam and other unsolicited email. But when you add an extra step to contacting you, especially when you've given me your personal email on a card, you are creating an obstacle to communication and slowing down any potential business. You have to balance accessibility with the desire for less email. I think if you are a business, you must be accessible.

Not including crucial information

The other day I visited microsite for an upcoming conference. It did not list the venue where the conference would be taking place, just the city and state. I've seen some conference

websites that don't list the full date of the conference. And many don't list the price, but force you to hit the register button to find out how much it costs. If you are considering attending any event, you need certain information—where, when, how much and why. If your event page or site does not include crucial information, you are just making it hard for people to decide to attend your event.

Email from unknown senders

The other day I got an email from someone named Orlando. My first instinct was to delete, but something about the headline made me open it. It turns out that Orlando is a new employee at an organization from which I get a newsletter. And it was an organizational newsletter. I will never understand why organizations think it's a good idea to send email from individuals rather than the organization. Unless you're well known already, most people will not recognize you as the new CEO or communications director of an organization.

If your organization recently rebranded or changed its name, you may have to send an initial email from your old name. Last year, I received an email from an organization I had never heard of and I was on the brink of hitting delete. It was communications related, so I figured I must have met someone from that organization at some point, but I wasn't sure. It turns out that it was a new name for an old organization.

Opening external links in the same window

For the life of me, I don't understand why so many organizations want to lose visitors to their websites. And yet, it happens more often than not than when you click on a link, such as the Twitter feed or LinkedIn profile, you are transported out of the organization's website to the other website. It doesn't take too much coding knowledge to have links open in new windows. That way, visitors can still be on your site and view the outside site.

Remember user experience, always.

All of these issues point to one overarching theme: user experience. What do users (visitors to your website, potential customers, potential supporters) experience when they interact with your communications? Are you considering what users need in order to do business with you? As the small issues I described above show, many organizations are not considering their users at all. And that's a big communications problem.

The danger of letting junior staff handle your communications

Holiday marketing goes wrong

This past weekend, I got an email from retailer Eddie Bauer with the subject line "Happy Memorial Day." Now, last time I checked, Memorial Day is a holiday that commemorates and honors soldiers who have died in battle. It's a solemn day, meant for reflection, gratitude, and mourning. It is not meant to be a happy occasion.

And Eddie Bauer was hardly alone. Grammarly, purportedly a website/app about proper word usage, also wished its readers a "happy Memorial Day." And Walgreens, the drugstore, had a TV commercial that wished viewers a happy Memorial Day and sent regards and gratitude to the troops. Again, Memorial Day is not about those currently serving, it is about those who died while serving.

Ivanka Trump's company got a bit of negative publicity because it tweeted how to make champagne popsicles to "celebrate" Memorial Day. You do not celebrate Memorial Day, you observe it.

These are mistakes and missteps that come from *assuming* you know something rather than actually knowing it.

These sad examples of holiday marketing show a deep lack of knowledge and understanding. They are mistakes that seem to come from people who have little breadth and depth. That's what I mean by junior staff. Junior staff members are not necessarily young, but they are inexperienced, have little knowledge, don't always understand context, and may make poorly thought out decisions. Junior staff may be aces at the tactics, like posting to social media, but they aren't versed on strategy and communications goals.

When grownups handle communications

Over the Memorial Day weekend, Budweiser was running a promotion in which a portion of beer sales proceeds would be given to Folds of Honor, a charity that provides educational scholarships to families of fallen service members. In all aspects, this is a smarter and much more appropriate marketing tactic than the Memorial Day greetings listed above. It shows an understanding of the meaning of the holiday, and does something to give back (and thus, honors). Budweiser gets that people like to have cookouts and drink beer over the long holiday weekend, so it is taking advantage of a behavior and making it be worthwhile both for the bottom line and for what the holiday stands for.

Understand what it means and how it's best acknowledged

Holidays make easy marketing markers. Every store in this country uses the different holidays to sell something. If it's Fourth of July, get your flag themed whatever (t-shirts, cakes). If it's Thanksgiving buy some Pilgrim/turkey themed

stuff. There are pastel colors and rabbits to celebrate Easter.

Yet, not all holidays are the same. Some are religious, some are patriotic, some are celebratory and some are solemn. Understanding what the meaning of a holiday is, and how people celebrate or commemorate it, goes a long way in ensuring that you won't be making a junior-level, major marketing mistake.

Did you notice any Memorial Day marketing missteps? How do you feel about using a solemn holiday like Memorial Day for marketing purposes? Let me know in the comments.

How to run your organization into oblivion

About a decade ago, I was on the board of a small nonprofit that provided educational programming. I lasted all of a few months since I was fighting a losing battle with the other board members and a spectacularly uninformed (and very young) executive director.

This nonprofit had very little money but insisted on a color brochure printed on heavy paper, listing their courses. The ED would then mail it first class (read, the expensive way) because it would take too long to prepare it for the cheaper, bulk/nonprofit rate.

Among the things I suggested was to print the brochure on cheaper paper (like newsprint), use the bulk rate, and to consider going all electronic instead. All these ideas were dismissed. One board member thought it was crucial to print the brochure on good paper because it made it seem more

serious (?). The ED was balking at using the bulk rate because it meant pre-sorting the brochure. And another board member said that many people wanted the printed brochure and would never abide an electronic format.

Like I said, it was a losing battle and I believe that there's no sense in discussing change with people who don't want to change.

Here we are a good ten years later, and I just got their latest brochure. Yes, I am still on the mailing list even though I have not signed up for a class or donated any money or shown any interest whatsoever. It is still printed on heavy paper, and has full color (which adds to the expense). They are now using the nonprofit/bulk rate. When you use use the bulk rate, you have to be aware that delivery will take longer than using first class postage. Apparently, it is not something that this nonprofit understands. I got the brochure yesterday (May 10). The front cover has a banner telling me spring classes begin on April 26, 2017.

This nonprofit continues to print an expensive brochure. However, it doesn't print it out with enough lead time to be able to overcome the slower bulk delivery rate. In effect, this is a complete waste. If you are using a brochure as your only means to communicate your offering, then it better be timely.

And, it seems this organization does not review its database. It continues sending out brochures to people that have not indicated any interest in years. Of course, this adds to the cost of the printing and mailing.

Can you imagine if they had provided this brochure electronically? They would be able to send it out at precisely the right time. They would be able to gauge interest from the open and click rates. They would be able to scrub their lists of any bad addresses. They would increase their reach through

the ability to share online. But why change?

Here's how you run your organization to the ground: you waste your precious resources and keep doing it until you have nothing left. You keep doing things the way you always have even though it has never been cost-effective.   You don't adapt.

Sigh.