

Editing makes everything better!

Over the weekend, I went on walking tour of Georgetown history. In case you don't know it, Georgetown is a historic neighborhood in Washington, D.C. and home to Georgetown University. Georgetown has been around for a long time—it even predates the city of Washington—since it was founded as a port on the Potomac River in 1751. As you can imagine, there's a lot of history there. A lot.

(Check out this photo tour from the Georgetown website)

Lots of stuff has happened in and around here

The tour started on the Georgetown Waterfront, right on the banks of the Potomac River, not far from the Key Bridge. The guide pointed out the Kennedy Center and the Watergate Hotel (both of which are NOT in Georgetown, but are also on the banks of the Potomac). And he started talking about the scandals associated with both those buildings. Then he gave an anecdote about John Quincy Adams and how he nearly drowned in the Potomac River. Then we walked on, and the tour guide told us a story about a family that had traveled to Georgetown on the C&O Canal in a barge, and how a fire broke out and killed three of their young children. He then showed pictures of the graves of these kids, graves which are located in Maryland. Then, we switched to 1985, and to discussing KGB spy Aldrich Ames and where he met his handlers (in a bar near the Waterfront). And to discussing the buildings along the Waterfront. And the construction of the C&O Canal. And the unsolved murder of a purported lover of John F. Kennedy, whose body was found near the C&O and who had lived in Ben Bradlee's home in Georgetown. And we went to the oldest structure in Georgetown, the Old Stone House. And then to a bank that had been a hospital during the Civil War, and where Louisa May

Alcott was a nurse.

(There was much, much more...)

And he kept going

After two and half hours we weren't done. The guide said we had a good 45 minutes left. As interesting as it was, the heat (it was near 90 and very humid) and the hour (it was near 6:00 p.m.) convinced me it was time to go home.

When I got home, I was reflecting on the tour and decided it could have been much improved by some editing. The tour guide suffered from what many writers do—the desire to throw as much information as possible to show the breadth and depth of knowledge. But so much information can become amorphous—lacking in structure—to such an extent that it becomes irrelevant. He also had no overarching theme. There was little to connect the unresolved murder of a woman in the 1960s to the Old Stone House or to how divided Georgetown was during the Civil War. He also had too many asides—as important as the Watergate was to American politics, it does not belong in a Georgetown focused tour.

In writing, editing means deciding what to leave in and what to take out. Editing means tightening up concepts and getting rid of wordiness. Editing means finding focus.

For the Georgetown walking tour, we could start editing by deciding to stick to a time period (Civil War or the 1800s), or to a specific type of event (murders, spying, politics) or to a specific area (Waterfront, N Street). This would give it a tighter focus and more meaning. And in this case, it would've also have shortened the tour.

Editing does make everything better!

Successful companies are customer-focused

United learns the hard way what's important

As you no doubt have seen by now, United Airlines has been forced to make several changes in the wake of the customer abuse incident seen around the world (where a passenger was forcibly removed from a plane and injured in the process). United has now released a report that concludes it let company policies trump customer's rights, and is now making changes to focus on the customer. You can read more details in this [Washington Post article](#): United dragging report: 'Our review shows that many things went wrong that day.' Also, today, United placed a full-page ad in the Washington Post (and I assume other large dailies) apologizing for its actions and outlining the policy changes.

It took very negative publicity and its consequences to make United realize that customers are the reason for being of any company. Without customers, a company simply does not exist. We know that companies that are more customer focused are also better regarded and therefore more successful. Southwest Airlines comes to mind.

UX is about your customers

All this brings me to UX (user experience) and how important it is. UX is being customer- focused when it comes to designing your website/app. If you don't consider UX when you design, you are not being customer-friendly. It's that simple.

Verizon FIOS On Demand versus Fandango Movies on Roku

Take the example of Verizon FIOS' On Demand screen versus Roku's Fandango Movies screen.

Verizon re-designed their On Demand screen a couple of months ago. They made fonts and images smaller, they crowded the images together and they changed the categories. Adding to that, the background is dark, making it hard to see the writing. To find out whether a movie is available for purchase or rental, you have to click on the title and only then will you be able to see what it costs.

Fandango has several categories on the left hand side of the screen, starting with "New movies to buy" and "New movies to rent." The background is a light color, the images are slightly bigger than Verizon's, and easy to read. Just by scrolling through the titles you can see the price of the movie, its Rotten Tomatoes rating, its MPAA rating, and its length.

Fandango most definitely considered UX when designing its movie screen. It's clear they thought about how customers search for movies, and what information (cost, time commitment, ratings) they need to make a decision. In contrast, the Verizon On Demand screen UX is plain horrible. It's hard to search, hard to find the information you need, and in my opinion, it's just ugly. Oh, and Fandango movie rentals cost less than Verizon's.

Think about your customers, and it will pay off

In my case, I have been renting movies from Fandango and not from Verizon. I definitely find the Fandango interface easier to deal with. Additionally, I voiced my concerns to Verizon, and so far, they've made no changes. I don't know if the redesign has affected sales, but I wouldn't be surprised.

Your customers and their experience with your company/brand/organization has to be your first concern. If customers are mistreated, they simply will not come back. And

in this age of social media, any negative publicity is amplified. Your customer's bad experience can be shared over and over.

Being customer-focused and thinking about their user experience will go a long a way in making any organization successful.

How to be better at communication than Sean Spicer

THIS POST HAS BEEN UPDATED.

What is good communication? In essence, it's getting your point across to the people who need to hear it. It's having those people (your audience) understand what you are saying, and be able to act on that information if necessary. Also, the information you pass on must be credible. Good communication, therefore, is built on clarity and trust.

If anything, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer has shown us that some people are better communicators than others. Spicer is not example of how to do communications well, but rather, of what not to do. Thankfully, we can draw lessons from his ineptitude. Following are five points to being a better communicator.

Understand your subject matter very well

If you don't understand something yourself, you have zero chance of explaining it (well) to someone else. Yes, this means you have to do some studying (or cramming). It means you have to ask people who know more about the subject to explain it to you. It may even mean looking at charts and graphs.

If you don't know what you are talking about, someone will be quick to point it out to you. Recently, this happened to Sean Spicer. During a press conference last week, Spicer showcased his ignorance about Hitler and the Holocaust by saying that Hitler didn't use chemical weapons (he did), and then when questioned, corrected himself by saying Hitler only used gas at "holocaust centers" but not against his own people (they are called concentration camps and many Germans were killed there). When his errors were pointed out, Spicer had to apologize often and profusely. The Anti-Defamation League even sent him a letter offering to conduct a private Holocaust education training for him and his staff. I don't know if Spicer took the ADL up on its offer, but I think he would greatly benefit from it and/or a visit to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

Use only words that you completely understand and can define

Spicer regularly uses the wrong words. He recently said something couldn't be *quantified*, when he meant that it couldn't be *qualified*. In his defense, this is a common mistake, especially in speaking. When you write, you have a bit more time to figure out the words you are using. The

bottom line is this: If you *think* you know what a word means, but you can't define it, don't use it. Also, remember that using big words, especially incorrectly, will make you appear to be trying too hard, and being ignorant too boot.

Check your facts and statistics

If you are going to use any numbers or other facts that can be easily looked up, make sure that they are accurate and correct. Sean Spicer famously trotted out some made up statistics about Trump's inauguration crowds. Those things can be verified, and if you are using incorrect numbers, you are threatening your own credibility.

Don't exaggerate

With a boss who is fond of hyperbole, Spicer also tends to exaggerate. Everything is the best or the worst, terrible or fantastic. As any communicator knows, exaggeration also threatens credibility.

Be likeable

Sean Spicer is a very combative person. This may have served him well when he was the spokesperson for the party out of power, but it is making him unlikeable. By constantly fighting with the White House press corps, or by belittling their questions, or by refusing to answer questions, or by mocking people, Spicer is ensuring that his attitude becomes the story.

It's really important.

Trustworthy and reliable communications have become even more important and necessary in this world of fake news, where bots and fringe political groups are working hard to muck up the

information that is available. Taking the time to study your subject and work on your credibility will go a long way to making you a better communicator than our current White House press secretary.

Is there anything you would add to the five points I have listed above? Please share in the comments.

UPDATE:

I am not the only one who thinks Spicer is bad at what he does. Today, New York Magazine had this post: [By Being Bad at His Job, Sean Spicer Nearly Causes Market Panic](#). Because Spicer does not bother to learn his subject well, he says inaccurate things, and in his role, his statements have consequences.

Can they read it?

Perhaps you have a great tagline or you have a fantastic, limited time offer, and yet you are getting no response. It could be that few people are enticed by your offer, or that there is little demand for your product, or, maybe, just maybe, it is that that they (quite literally) *can't* see it.

What is it that you do?

Yesterday, I was in my car driving behind a commercial SUV, which had the name of the company written in green letters on the back of the truck. But for the life of me, I couldn't, make out what this company did because I could not read the

line below the company name. I kept trying to figure out as I was driving a car length or so behind the truck. I finally came to a stop right behind this SUV, and it was only then that I was able to read the line saying it did plumbing. This company probably spent some money to have their company name, telephone and website painted on the back of their company SUV, and yet, it was done with such small letters that it was practically useless. Unless you were stopped right behind it, you would not know what it was.

If you've driven around during the day, you will have seen any number of commercial trucks and cars, each with the name of the company painted on the side of the vehicle. If the name and service are prominent, and easy to read from a distance, there can be big benefits. It creates brand recognition. It can also be free advertising. Say your heating system is on the fritz, and you see a truck for a heating company, you may make note of the name, and even the website and/or telephone number.

Crammed with content, harder to read

Verizon FIOS recently redesigned its On Demand screen. Everything is now more compact (about half of the previous iteration), and all sorts of information is crammed on the screen. To be able to fit all this stuff on the screen, the font size was reduced. The result is that it is hard to read the titles of the movies. And they also added the extra step of making you click on each title to see more information, including cost. It has become very frustrating for me to deal with this new On Demand screen, and as a result, I am no longer going there to see what movies are available.

I am pretty certain that Verizon embarked on this redesign without consulting its users. I wonder if the company has seen any change in the amount of On Demand content users rent/buy now. Based on my experience, I would bet fewer people are getting stuff On Demand.

Can your audience see it? Can they read it?

You must keep **readability and visibility** top of mind when you design or redesign any marketing material. If your audience cannot read your material, or cannot see it properly, then they cannot interact with it.

A website mantra to help you achieve marketing nirvana

A mantra is defined by Merriam-Webster as a mystical formula of invocation or incantation. In Sanskrit, a mantra is a phrase, word, or sound that is repeated during meditation to help practitioners focus.

If you want to increase your website's performance and focus, I have come up with a mantra for you:

Make it easier to find.

If you concentrate on this mantra, you will have a website where people have an easier time finding the information they want.

If you don't, you will make your website users so frustrated that they will leave your website and will end up not doing business with you.

Searching and searching

This morning, I decided to research CD rates at a local bank. First, I had to put in my zip code "to get localized results." Then, I had to navigate to a "Savings and CDs" page. Then, I had to click on "Savings Accounts and CD Options." Then, I had

to click on “Certificates of Deposit,” and then scroll down to find the link for “Interest Rates.” To sum it up, I had to go through five different steps/clicks to find the information I was seeking.

What do most people need and want to know?

I think going through five steps to find simple information is too many steps. It can be discouraging to have to keep clicking through various pages to get what you need. In the case of the bank, I assume the one thing most people research are rates. Every industry and business has to answer some questions more frequently than others. Restaurants, for example, may need to provide their menu, hours and location. Banks need to provide a list of services, current rates, hours and locations.

The information your website visitors request the most, and need the most, needs to be easiest to find. It's that simple.

So repeat after me: make it easier to find. There, are you feeling a bit more zen?

How to show you really don't care

“Your sport is reserved.”

That was the headline in an email I got from a marketing agency confirming my attendance at an event it was hosting. Obviously, it should have read “your spot is reserved.” Is this an egregious mistake? Not really, but it is careless. It

shows nobody bothered to proofread this email. And remember, this is coming from a marketing agency, which presumably creates accurate copy for its clients.

More careless yet was a letter I received from my HOA's management company regarding board elections. The letter stated that the elections would be held on February 7. The accompanying ballot said the elections would take place on February 28. Every homeowner was welcomed to attend (if only we knew which the correct date was).

Mistakes are everywhere

I've been noticing these types of mistakes more and more. Yesterday, a tweet from a leading women's organization talked about principals instead of principles. Another letter from my HOA referenced the wrong community.

I am sure you've noticed it too because it has become rampant. I am not sure what's causing this but I believe it has to do with the expectations of instant communication and the ongoing rush we are experiencing. We've seen news organizations that rush to be first instead of taking the time to ensure accuracy.

Avoiding mistakes takes a bit of effort

It takes time to proofread documents. It takes time to ensure all information (dates, times, locations) is accurate. It involves an extra step and perhaps another person.

And not making the effort communicates lack of care

Remember, not taking the appropriate steps to make sure your communications are clear and accurate shows that you don't care about your reader.

What do you do to make sure your communications materials are accurate? Do you follow a checklist? Enlist a proofreader? Please let me know in the comments.

If you don't get it, you don't get it.

The *Washington Post* runs an advertising campaign with the slogan “if you don't get it, you don't get it.” And on Monday, I did not get my print copy of the *Post*. I called the re-delivery number and left a message. Five hours later, I had not yet received a replacement copy so I called again, and left another message, asking for a call back. Then I went to the online complaints, and left two messages—one about the missed delivery and one about another delivery issue I had during my end-of-year vacation.

I didn't get it

I heard nothing from the *Post*. Not one word. No call back and no redelivered paper. No apology. No credit. No nothing.

Subscriptions matter

The *Washington Post* has seen an increase in digital subscribers and a decrease in print subscribers. This isn't surprising since most people seem to prefer to read their news online. However, in terms of advertising sales, which is what pays the bills at the *Post* and most every other newspaper, circulation numbers are what sets advertising rates. Fewer print subscribers means smaller circulation numbers, which

means lower advertising rates. Obviously, the less the *Post* charges Macy's and the various other advertisers, the less revenue it generates.

Disregard is disrespect

So subscriptions matter. And yet the *Post* continues to treat its subscribers with, if not outright disdain, complete disregard. Prices are increased every few months, credits are no longer given even though the print subscription charges for delivery costs, and customer service has been outsourced to Asia, where the agents barely speak English and don't know K Street from Pennsylvania Avenue.

The Washington Post would prefer if you never called them, so they've created an online account/customer service portal. Except it sucks. Every time you want to do something, you have to sign in, and then somehow, you are signed out of your digital subscription. And not everything works. I tried to change my vacation hold dates, and was not able to. I had to call an unhelpful customer service agent.

When I got home from vacation, I discovered that of the six days I was gone, four days of newspapers were delivered. My vacation stop was not honored. I complained online and nothing. Again, no apology, no credit, no acknowledgment of a mix-up.

Here's the bottom line: The Washington Post can advertise for new subscribers all it wants, but until it fixes its broken customer service, it will continue to lose print subscribers (and by extension advertising revenue).

Customer service matters more than marketing in retaining customers. Marketing is about acquisition and customer service is about retention. If you acquire customers just to lose them because of poor service, you are wasting money marketing and you are threatening your bottom line.

Please, don't tell me more about you

Of books and how people just want to talk about themselves

Last night I attended my first meeting of a book group. Around the table were a dozen women. One lady, who had also never attended the group, decided she would take the reins and introduce herself. And so she did—telling us her story, her children's stories and her grand kid's stories.

As we went around the table, some women shared their name, occupation and where they live, while some women went into great autobiographical detail, even into the TMI (too much information) territory. We heard about what high school they attended, family secrets, divorce, how their ancestors got to America, angst about the kids (there was a lot of emphasis on their children), and very little about their reading or book interests.

But, let's get back to me

When we finally got around to discussing the book, one (self-absorbed) woman kept bringing it back to her experiences, her life, her likes, her dislikes. Everything someone else said made her want to share something irrelevant to the book and only relevant to herself. At one point, she digressed into discussing whether her second son (who is probably in his early 30s) had attachment issues because he spent a few weeks in the NICU after being born prematurely. (Yes, this really happened.)

I began to think I had mistakenly attended a group therapy session.

Are you being social?

Imagine that instead of a book group, this was Twitter or Facebook. Among the stuff in your feed is a bunch of self-promoting, self-analyzing, self-absorbed stuff. Do you pay attention? I bet you don't. Because when you are in a social setting, like a book group or social media, you are there to share and discuss and *interact*. It is a multi-sided conversation—not a one-sided discourse.

Now, take a look at your marketing materials. How much is about how great you are, and how many awards you've won? How much shows you understand and empathize with your readers (customers, donors, etc.)? If the balance is tipped in your favor instead of your reader, then you are talking way too much about yourself.

Who cares?

To be a more successful communicator (or book group participant), start listening more and talking less. And when you do talk, make sure you aren't being self-absorbed.

Here's the thing: Nobody cares as much about you as you do.

Always start with the reader in mind



Photo by Kaboompics.com

It seems obvious that you should always write your marketing and communications materials with your readers in mind. After all, if you are trying to communicate with them, you have to understand what they need to know.

And yet, how many times have you received a letter that doesn't say anything? Or an email that lacks crucial information? How many times have you had to call up a company because you didn't understand something it sent you? I bet you've had many a moment like this, which left you frustrated.

Missing information

I had such a moment last week. I had signed up for an editing workshop from the American Copy Editors Society (ACES) being

given on November 5 in Washington, DC. Here's the email I received a few days before the event (note that I blocked out the names of presenters and a phone number for privacy):

This message is to confirm that you are registered for the American Copy Editors Society (ACES) Boot Camp from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. this Saturday, Nov. 5, at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. The workshop will take place in the Funger Hall auditorium, room 103, located on the Foggy Bottom campus.

Lunch will be provided by the local chapter of ACES.

Presenters XX, XX and XX look forward to welcoming you on Saturday.

If you have any questions or find yourself lost on Nov. 5, please feel free to call 571-xxx-xxxx for assistance.

Notice anything missing from this email? How about the address for the building? Or how about directions and parking information (or links to those)? How about an agenda and/or schedule for the day? Is there any information about what you need to bring with you?

Trying again

The next day, ACES sent another email, regarding parking information. It is basically the same email as before, except for the addition of parking and Metro information, which I bolded for you to see more clearly.

We look forward to seeing you at the American Copy Editors Society (ACES) Boot Camp from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. tomorrow at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. The workshop will take place in the Funger Hall auditorium, room 103, located on the Foggy Bottom campus.

Lunch will be provided by the local chapter of ACES.

Parking

The closest garage to Funger Hall is the University Parking Garage/G Street

Garage, located at 2028 G Street, NW Washington, DC 20052. There is access from both 20th Street and 21st Street between F and G Streets. The self-service garage is open 24/7, accepting MasterCard, Visa and American Express for payments (no cash). The full day rate is \$12.

The closest Metro stop is Foggy Bottom-GWU, with service on the Blue, Orange and Silver lines.

If you find yourself lost on Nov. 5, please feel free to call 571-XXX-XXXX for assistance.

This attempt was a better than the prior email, but still, no address for Fungler Hall. It's as if ACES thinks that everyone is intimately familiar with GW's Foggy Bottom Campus. For those of you who aren't in the DC area, GW's campus is a city campus. Buildings have street addresses—they are not in quads as in traditional colleges.

I looked up Fungler Hall on Google, but I forgot to note the address, and when I got to the parking garage on Saturday, I didn't know where to go. I looked it up on my phone and the address I got did not correspond to the building. I called the number on the email, but there was no response. I was able to get directions from a student I saw on the street, and I then got to the workshop several minutes late.

How helpful are you being to your reader?

If ACES had started with the reader's needs in mind when writing this email, it would have realized that providing an address and links to maps and directions would have helped recipients of this email.

It's about the 5 Ws

When you write a press release, you should think like a journalist and answer the five Ws: what, why, where, who and when. You should also answer the how. This advice is also applicable to most any communications material you create.

If you need help creating effective communications materials, contact me!

Why you are failing to communicate on social media

A few weeks ago an acquaintance was coming to town from the West Coast. She posted on Facebook (along with about another five posts the same day) that she was free on a given afternoon and if people wanted to see her, to please message her. Now, I hadn't seen this person in a couple of years, and since I was free on the afternoon she mentioned, I would have liked to get together. But, I hadn't seen her post until it was too late. By the time I messaged her, she had already made other plans since she said that nobody responded to her post.

In my opinion, she failed to communicate effectively. There are several potential reasons why.

Why #1: Not understanding how social media works.

Chances are good that only a few people in your network will see what you post. First, social media is a continual flow of information from many sources. Nowhere is this more obvious than on Twitter, which shows you everything from everybody in real time. If you missed it, you missed it (unless someone re-tweeted it and it gained traction). And to make that more complicated, the different networks use algorithms to show you what the network thinks you want to see. On Facebook, the default algorithm is set to show "top posts," which are the posts that more people have "liked." LinkedIn has a similar algorithm, also showing what it deems are "top" posts.

Additionally, social media provides controls for people to “hide” or “mute” certain users. It’s quite possible you’ve been hidden and thus your posts won’t be seen at all.

In order to work around social media’s constraints, you have to provide relevant content that gets liked and shared, and therefore becomes “top” content.

Why# 2: Not using the right channel for your message and audience.

In this case, this woman was trying to communicate with a handful of her Facebook friends (the ones who live in this area). She may have had better luck by using a more targeted approach. For example, she could have used Facebook messenger to talk directly to those people. Or she could have (gasp) emailed or texted the people she wanted to see.

Different channels and media have different audiences. You probably wouldn’t put an announcement that you are giving away your kittens on LinkedIn, but you might post on Facebook. LinkedIn is about business opportunities, and Facebook is more personal. You could also try sharing a picture on Instagram of those cute kitties looking for a home.

You have to choose the right channel to make sure your message reaches the right (more receptive) audience.

Why #3: Forgetting that social media is only one communications channel.

If you were trying to, say, promote a new product, chances are good you would use a mix of channels to reach different target audiences. You would also adjust your messaging accordingly. You might choose to use an email campaign. Or you could do media outreach. Or you could run some advertising, including Google Ads. Or you could try promotional give-aways. Or sponsorships. You get my drift.

For social media to work, it can't be your only communication channel. It has to be part of a larger communication plan. Social media is just that—a medium that has social aspects that help amplify your message. It is not a substitute for other media.

You want to get your message to the right people at the right time.

For any communication plan to be effective in this way, you have to use a mix of media depending on who you are trying to reach and when. You need to understand each medium, and what type of audience responds best to that channel. And you will need to adjust your messaging (e.g., length, complexity, benefits you highlight, etc.) for each medium.