

# If a tree falls...

You've all heard that famous question: if a tree falls in a forest, and no one is there to hear it, does it still make a sound?

Let's change that question: if you are telling a story, but nobody can hear you, are you still communicating?

I was considering this second question during Rosh Hashana services this week. The synagogue I was attending does not have microphones, and the rabbi there is not good at projecting his voice. As he was giving his sermon, I was having a hard time hearing what he was saying. I am sure the further back in the synagogue that people were sitting, the less they could hear.

If you couldn't hear the rabbi, then you would not know what he said, and therefore, it was like he never gave a sermon at all. So, was this rabbi communicating? In short, he wasn't.

In essence, **communication is the exchange of information**. If you can't hear the information being shared, then you do not know what that information is, therefore information is not being exchanged.

The rabbi may have had some great insights or inspirational messages to share, but if nobody heard them, then he failed to enlighten or inspire his congregation.

## **Make sure they can hear**

The takeaway from my Rosh Hashana experience is simple: It's not enough to have good information to share, you have to make sure your intended audience can receive that information.

---

# What does that mean?

Yesterday, after Pilates class, I was chatting with another student for a couple minutes as we gathered our stuff. In the background, I heard a bell ringing. I noticed it but didn't know what it meant. We kept on chatting. The bell rang again. Again, no idea what it was. Then, one of the instructors tapped me on the shoulder and said we were being too loud, to please leave, and that the bell means be quiet. I turned to her, and after apologizing (#sorrynotsorry), told her that I had absolutely no idea what her ringing bell meant. Neither did the other student. We went outside, feeling a bit peeved.

In my experience, a ringing bell indicates something is starting or ending. In yoga classes, teachers often ring a bell to indicate final relaxation is over. I do not associate a ringing bell with the need to be quiet.

I've been going to this Pilates studio for several weeks. Not once has my instructor ever rung a bell, even when there have been other people chatting. There's no sign indicating that you need to be quiet or that a bell will be rung if you're not. There's nothing about it on the studio website. In fact, this is the only instruction regarding behavior:

## *Protocol*

*Clients must sign-in at the Front Desk upon arrival. Please remove your shoes and silence your cell phone upon entering the studio. Pets are not allowed. For your safety, clients who arrive more than 10 minutes late to a group class will not be permitted to join the class.*

This studio is quite small and there's no separate waiting

area. It's one big room. If noise is a problem (and mind you, Pilates, unlike yoga, lacks a meditative/spiritual aspect), you need to remind students to be quiet. You could put up a sign saying something like: please, no talking or cell phone use (or whatever else).

We all understand what this means, right?:



**That's because some symbols/signals are universal.**

Here's the thing: if you are going to use a symbol or signal that is not universally understood to mean what you intend it to, you will have to define it and educate people about what it means.

If you want to communicate clearly, you cannot make assumptions. You'll have to keep in mind that other people have different experiences and understanding than you.

---

# How to undermine your credibility

## An important message for Deborah

That was the exact subject line of an email I got this morning from AT&T.

Since I have my cell phone service through AT&T, and the email clearly was *designed* to sound official, and I thought it was service-related news about my usage or bill. But no, it wasn't about my cell phone service at all. Instead, the email was an advertisement for a "flash sale" on AT&T's home security services.

Let's review: A company with which I have an established (and may I add, quite long) customer relationship sends me an email that claims it's important. The subject line is personalized, but the purpose of the email is to sell me other, *unrelated* services.

## A case of misdirection

In other words, the subject line of this email was misleading. The email was neither important nor specifically for me. It was a promotion that required a subject line that would hook me into opening it.

## Entering the realm of unintended consequences

Today's misleading email from AT&T had two unintended consequences:

- it eroded my trust in AT&T, undermining the company's credibility
- it caused me to unsubscribe from their promotional emails (all of them)

## **Raise interest but not at the expense of your credibility**

Yes, companies and organizations need to have email subject lines that will raise interest and make people open the email. That's the purpose of email marketing after all. But when the subject lines are misleading—designed specifically as click-bait—the organization's credibility takes a hit. No longer will readers believe emails with words such as important, or urgent. Down the road, this can have negative consequences.

### **Bottom line**

Cultivate your credibility, even at the expense of potential sales. Once you've destroyed your credibility, you will have a very hard time getting it back.

---

# **It is about feelings**

There's a quotation floating out there that has been often attributed to Maya Angelou, but which may have other sources. It's this:

*They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel.*

If you are working in communications, especially marketing communications, you should take that quote to heart. Perhaps, even print it and post it where you always can see it.

As a communicator, your job is to elicit *positive feelings* from your audience. Perhaps you want them to buy something, donate money, advocate or like your company. If they feel

positively toward you or your organization, they are more likely to take the action you want them to. On the other hand, if they feel negatively toward you, they are less likely to want anything to do with you.

Organizations that “get” it are the ones that have the more engaged, loyal supporters. Organizations that don’t are the ones that ignore customers or that communicate with them in ways that are not customer-friendly.

So remember to take your customer/supporter/donor’s feelings into consideration. Think about how you want your audience to feel the next time you write an email or website copy or anything else. If you focus on that, I can promise you will have better results.

---

## Poor grammar is poor communication part 3

### Grammar matters

This is a lawn sign that has appeared around my neighborhood:



## Lawn sign

I believe what they meant to say was “No Townhouses on Historic Chestnut Lodge.” Or maybe they meant to say “Not More Townhouses on Historic Chestnut Lodge,” which would still be awkward. I am not sure. Perhaps the people behind this campaign were not sure either. But what I do know is that this sign is wrong.

### **It’s spelled A-L-A-N**

U.K’s Vision Express had a major typo, transposing the L and A, in a letter to a customer. It was quite insulting. You have to read this Daily Mail article to see what I mean, but suffice it to say, a proofreader would have saved the day. (Thanks to Leslie O’Flahavan for sharing the article on her company’s Facebook feed.)

### **Copy edit your work, or at least, do some proofreading**

Having poor grammar, or a typo (or two or three) in your marketing materials is poor communication. Your message will be muddled and any mistakes will distract from what you are trying to say.

Typos and grammatical mistakes are fixable, and if you don’t catch them in time, they can be costly. There is a solution and that is to copy edit *and* proofread your written materials.

Watch this space next week for the next On Writing interview, with a pro who certainly knows that grammar and spelling matter.

---

# Asking the wrong question is poor communication (part 2)

This post is about how Delta Airlines compounded a bad experience by asking the wrong questions. Here's the story:

## **International flight on Delta**

A few weeks back I was returning to the United States on Delta from a trip abroad. My first port of entry was Delta's major hub, Atlanta. If you've traveled internationally you know that you must claim your suitcase and then pass with it through customs, to then be able to check it back through to your final destination. However, on this occasion, my suitcase never arrived in the customs baggage claim. And even though I asked several Delta agents and baggage claim workers, not one person was able to tell me where my bag was, if it had been loaded off the plane or even if it had arrived in Atlanta at all.

## **Tweeting doesn't help at all**

I was forced to check with Delta's customer "service" counter outside the customs area, where I was quite unhelpfully told my bag would "automatically" be transferred to my Washington bound flight, since it was tagged to DCA. I tweeted Delta to see if they could help me find out the whereabouts of my bag. Their response was to ask me if I had spoken to a manager. That was not the right question. The question should have been "how can we help?" If I had spoken to a manager (which, I would have had one been available and I did not have to catch my next flight), why would I be tweeting @Delta?

## **Do you really want to know what I think?**

Well, my bag did not arrive at Washington with me on my flight. It was delivered to my home the next afternoon. At



which point, Delta sent me the following email, with the subject line "Deborah, We Value Your Opinion:"

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Dear Deborah,</b></p> <p>We are very sorry for the baggage mishandling you experienced on May 05, 2016.</p> <p>As a valued SkyMiles member, your feedback about your experience is important to us and will help us continue to improve. We ask that you please provide feedback on your experience by answering the question below.</p>				
<p><b>How likely are you to recommend Delta Air Lines to others?</b></p>				
Definitely Will	Probably Will	May or May Not	Probably Will Not	Definitely Will Not
<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<p>Your feedback is important to us and again, we offer our deepest apologies for this inconvenience.</p>				
<p style="text-align: center;">Sincerely, Gil West Chief Operating Officer</p>				

There are literally countless other questions they could have asked such as: was my bag delivered in good shape, as promised, was the delivery service professional, did DCA baggage services handle my claim correctly, did the service met my expectations or anything at all about the actual incident. Delta would have had to ask questions like that if it actually cared about its operations and customer experiences. Instead, Delta only wants to know if, based on this experience, I would recommend it to others.

**That was not the right question. It showed me that Delta is only interested in its reputation and not even vaguely about their operational efficacy or customer experience.**

I wrote Delta a three-page letter (not an email) about this travel experience (there were other issues too). I enumerated the various things that Delta should look into and correct

(customer service, their Twitter presence, among others). I got a two-paragraph email back, basically repeating what I had mentioned and offering me some Delta SkyMiles for my troubles.

### **No, really, what do you think of us?**

And then I got another email from Delta with the subject line "Deborah, We Value Your Opinion." This is what this email said:

<b>Dear Deborah,</b>				
We recently sent you an email regarding your Delta Customer Care request. It was our pleasure assisting you.				
Our goal is to deliver the very best service possible, so your feedback is important in helping us recognize and improve our quality. Please begin this short survey regarding how I did by answering the first question below:				
<b>How likely are you to recommend Delta Air Lines to others?</b>				
Definitely Will	Probably Will	May or May Not	Probably Will Not	Definitely Will Not
5	4	3	2	1

Again, Delta is mostly interested in whether I would recommend Delta. Which, again, is not the right question. The question should be whether I was satisfied with the response to my letter (I was not) or whether the response had addressed any of my concerns (not to my knowledge).

### **Do you really want to know?**

Companies that are serious about improving ask for real feedback. To ask me whether I would recommend Delta is not a good or useful question. It is poor communications and even poorer customer service.

What do you think? Would you have answered this question? What benefit does it provide the company and does it provide any benefit to the customer?

---

# Forcing “likes” is poor business communication (part 1)

A few weeks ago, I told you about how a Udemy instructor requested that I change my review from three stars to five stars because it would help him remain high in the ratings. He had no interest in whether his course merited five stars or why I had rated it three stars. He just wanted me to like him enough to further his purposes.

And then today in the *Washington Post*, I read this article: “This landlord said ‘like’ me on Facebook or get evicted.” Basically, in both a show of poor communication skills and even poorer business law knowledge, a landlord in Salt Lake City, Utah posted notices on tenants’ doors, telling them to “like” the building/complex on Facebook or be in violation of their rental agreement. Naturally, the tenants did not like this at all and many took to Facebook to complain and some threatened legal action, saying that it was an invasion of privacy, etc. The landlord was forced to retreat, and even had to take down the Facebook page because of the various negative comments and ratings that arose due to this move .

**You can’t force people to like you.**

But hidden in the article, lies the purported reason why the landlord made this move: since there had been pictures taken at a community party, the landlord wanted to have legal authority to post them and tag them. I am not sure if this is

an excuse, or it's real, but the way the landlord communicated this was poor or non-existent.

**So again, it is an issue of poor communication.**

In today's social, online world, it is increasingly difficult for businesses to hide bad behavior. Businesses can't force positive reviews or likes, although many times businesses ask customers to like them in order to give discounts or other preferential information. In this way, the number of likes on a page has become completely meaningless. Similarly, if a business has only glowing reviews, they are suspect, and may not be seen as valid.

**Give 'em a reason to want to like you**

I am not saying that businesses should avoid reviews or Facebook. Businesses need to communicate better, and more importantly, give customers a reason (through actual good service or products) *to want* to like them and review them positively.

Why do you like Facebook pages? Do you like them to get event information or special discounts? To support a business owner? Let me know your thoughts in the comments.

---

## **Does your audience get you?**

**An exponential mistake?**

Several years ago, when I was just starting out, I was hired by a new client to write a sales pitch letter. The letter would promote a hotel reservations software that the client was selling to small (non-chain, independent) hotels.

The client hated the letter I wrote. He didn't even want to pay me for it! His main complaint was that I used language the hotel owners wouldn't understand. Specifically, I had used the term "exponential growth," and the client thought most people would not understand the word "exponential." I was completely taken aback. To me, "exponential growth" sounded good. You'd want your business to experience it by simply buying a new software, right?

Whether this client was right or not about "exponential," the takeaway is that you have to use the language that your audience will get. If your audience talks at a sixth-grade level, you can't use university-level language and hope they understand what you are saying.

### **Trump gets it (or maybe doesn't know better)**

According to the article "Donald Trump Speaks Like a Sixth Grader. All Politicians Should," by Allison Jane Smith and published this past Sunday in the *Washington Post*, part of Trump's success in the presidential primaries can be attributed to his ability to communicate with the swath of Americans who have low literacy skills. As you probably have heard, Trump always uses simple words, and repeats them constantly.

Smith writes:

*When speaking to or writing for a broad audience, it's a best practice to speak at an eighth-grade reading level. More than 40 percent of Americans have only basic literary skills, according to a 2003 assessment. And even highly educated people prefer to read below their formal education level.*

### **Adjust your language**

In other words, speakers (and writers) who want to communicate more widely would do better to simplify. Using big words when

most people don't get them will only hurt your cause, perhaps exponentially.

Of course, if you are trying to communicate more narrowly, or to a very sophisticated audience, you will have to adjust your language accordingly.

Your job as a communicator is to make sure your audience gets you.

**Have you ever read marketing material that you didn't understand? Do you think it was a language choice issue? Let me know in the comments.**

---

## **Business networking is a form of marketing communications**

Last week, I attended the Women & Business: An Atlantic Exchange, which was an event showcasing women's business concerns organized by The Atlantic magazine. One of the segments included an interview with Melanie Whelan, CEO of SoulCycle, a boutique indoor cycling studio.

Ms. Whelan spoke at length about the SoulCycle culture and its business model. Soul Cycle concentrates on providing a special experience to its customers, where they feel part of a community. She said that SoulCycle has never advertised, instead relying on satisfied users to become brand ambassadors, to discuss their positive experience with friends and in social media, promoting the company. In this way, SoulCycle has grown from being a one-of studio on the Upper

West Side of New York to having several studios in many large metropolitan areas.

Ms. Whelan offered several interesting insights about her company's corporate culture, brand experience and market growth, and it's worth watching her presentation:

### **Word-of-mouth marketing**

Over and over, you hear businesses claim that their best marketing is word-of-mouth and/or referrals. In SoulCycle's case, it seems that word-of-mouth marketing has paid off in spades.

And yet, at this very forum, which was intended both to help women entrepreneurs get some solid information and to network with each other, I saw first hand how hard it is for most people to network and connect with each other.

### **Networking can be hard for some**

There were women who seemed very shy, and couldn't seem to even smile or even look at strangers.

There was a woman with bad body odor. Whether or not she was aware of the issue, I am not sure, but I would think many people steered clear of her.

There was a woman, standing next to me at the buffet line, who barely acknowledged an ice breaker comment I made. Even after being given an easy way to chat, she refused to do so. I am not sure if it was lack of interest or shyness or perhaps she was just hungry.

Then there was the socially awkward woman I sat down next to inside the auditorium. She dropped her papers and I picked them up and handed them to her, and she didn't even acknowledge me or thank me. She then started taking notes off my printed agenda, without so much as a word or an "excuse me, but may I see your agenda." And even worse, she kept falling

asleep and leaning on me. Seriously.

### **But networking is an essential business skill**

Then there was a woman who smiled, shook hands and introduced herself, making it easy to converse. She understood the power of networking. As she said to me, networking isn't about closing a sale, but rather about meeting people who will remember you and perhaps refer to you later on when a need arises for them or in their circle.

Networking is the most basic form of marketing communications. It's your opportunity to introduce yourself and your business on a personal, one-to-one level. It is an essential part of business and professional development.

It's not easy for most folks, myself included, to walk into a room full of strangers and just chat it up. But there are ways to make it less intimidating.

**Think quality versus quantity.** You don't have to meet everyone in the room. If you meet one or two people, and get to know them, you will be doing well.

**Think about what you do and how to best communicate it.** It's easy to get stuck in thinking everybody understands what you do, but chances are good that they won't. Think of a simple way of introducing yourself and your business, and that allows for questions to follow.

**Understand that other people in the room are just as uncomfortable as you are.** A smile goes a long way in making people relax.

If you are still having trouble connecting, perhaps you should consider some outside help. Perhaps you can hire a business coach to help you refine your approach and to give you pointers.

How do you network? What works best for you? Please share in



the comments.

---

# What to do about the “no response” response

We're all familiar with the “no response” response, right? That's the response that we don't actually get but that in effect means no.

It happens with all sorts of queries and in all communication modes. Perhaps you sent a text message asking your friend if he wants to go to the movies, and you don't hear back. Perhaps you sent an email inquiring about a job, and all you got in response was nothing. Maybe you are old school, and left a colleague a voice mail message, and she never called back.

Since this “no response” has become the *de facto* “no” response, we've come to assume if we haven't heard from somebody that he or she is not interested in what we are offering, or proposing, or asking about. But, this assumption can be problematic.

## No more follow ups

Sometimes (not many times but still it happens) people genuinely did not get your message. The email ended up in the spam folder or the voice message got inadvertently deleted. But because you've become used to not expecting an answer unless the person is interested, you've stopped following up. And you and the recipient may miss out on a potential opportunity.

## **Too many follow ups**

And then there are people who don't give up until they get an answer. They may be clueless or they may be aggressive or both. When they don't hear back from you, they keep getting in touch. They keep calling and texting and emailing. They don't get that your lack of response means no and it also means "please stop getting in touch, I don't want to deal with you!"

## **It's just plain lazy**

By assuming that everybody understands that no response means you aren't interested, in effect, you are taking the lazy (and rude) approach. Why bother answering an email with a polite "thank you but not interested" response when it is much easier to just ignore and delete?

## **It may make you look bad**

You may think that not responding communicates that you are too/so busy. You may actually be coming off as self-important or uncaring.

## **What to do?**

We've all been on either side of the "no response" response. Sometimes, we get overwhelmed and we forget to respond. And sometimes we sit around waiting for a response that never comes. What, if anything, can we do about it?

**If you get the "no response" response:** Accept that you can't control what other people do. You don't know their motivations or reasoning. So, don't automatically assume a "no response" equals no unless you really know the person and his/her *modus operandi*. Do follow up once, but probably no more than that. If again, you don't get a response, let it go. Remember, you can only try to get in touch but you can't force an interaction.

**If you are avoiding responding:** Become aware of the messages

you are sending when you don't respond. Is it that you can't or don't want to say no? Why is that? Are you not responding because you are overwhelmed? If so, perhaps you need to see about reducing your workload. Perhaps you do it because you don't like confrontation. If so, ask yourself what you think will happen.

What are your thoughts? What do you think when someone fails to respond to you? Or are you the one failing to respond?