

Are you talking at or talking with your audience?

I recently attended a panel discussion where the five speakers on the panel were going to share their insights about industry trends. The first speaker got up (literally, up out of his seat) and started providing stats and information *about his business*, and then proceeded to ask the audience for questions. The moderator had to jump in to remind him that questions would be taken after all the speakers had their say.

This speaker didn't seem to know what the panel's topic was (trends) and he was completely focused on sharing what his business does, even though the audience wasn't there to hear that. Worse, he acted as if he was the only one presenting by pacing in front of the other panelists.

The speaker was *talking at* the audience. He was giving a speech that was all about him and did not respond to what the audience wanted or needed.

Does the expression "given a talking to" convey positive feelings for you? I bet it doesn't. Nobody likes to be *talked to* and being *talked at* is almost as bad. Both imply that the speaker has power over the audience or that the speaker is superior in some way.

On the other hand, if someone is *talking with* you, there's a conversation going on. There's some give and take, even if it's not verbal. Speakers who are *talking with* an audience are paying attention to what the audience needs, they are responding to cues and they are engaging the audience's attention.

You want to be talking *with* your audience. You want to be *responsive* to their needs.

There are three basic steps to make sure you are talking with your audience:

1. Understand **who** your audience is
2. Understand **why** the audience is there
3. Understand **what** the audience needs from you

You get bonus points for adjusting your speech depending on **where** you are and **when** you are giving it.

Have you sat through a speech that was all about the speaker? Did you feel talked at? Did it bother you? Please share your stories in the comments.

First, ask this one question

“What do I need to know about this?”

Here’s the thing—you don’t know what you don’t know. And if you don’t know, you can’t ask the right questions in order to get the answers you need. So you have to start from zero, and ask “what do I need to know about this.” You’ll want to ask someone who has more knowledge or experience than you.

What does a new home buyer need to know?

A couple of weeks ago, I was talking to an acquaintance of mine, who happens to be a top-selling real estate agent (she’s sold something like \$25 million in property). I was telling her about my first few months as a homeowner, when I had to

have a bunch of things fixed. The real estate agent asked me if I had gotten a home appliance policy. I told her that I hadn't and that I didn't even know about it. She went on to tell me she negotiates that for every single one of her new home buyers. She told me my real estate agent *should've* told me about it.

What do you look for in a real estate agent?

This question of course led to a discussion about my real estate agent, whom at first I really liked, but, after being in my house for a few months and dealing with a bunch of issues, I came realize didn't really do her job well. She didn't point out what I needed to know as a new home buyer. And I didn't know the questions to ask her, since I said before, you don't know what you don't know.

The more I learn about real estate and home ownership, the more I realize that my real estate agent (unlike my new acquaintance), was just not very good. She was mediocre but the fact is, it was my own fault for choosing to work with her without having educated myself more about what to look for in a real estate agent.

You need to acknowledge that you don't know

I should've started by asking myself: "what do I need to know before buying a house?" I could've asked friends, I could've read books, I could've done more research online. I didn't.

I did watch a lot of HGTV (don't laugh, it was very helpful), especially *House Hunters* and *Property Virgins*. I watched enough HGTV to know that you have to look at the bones of the house, not the current esthetics and also to know what your priorities are. But those shows don't talk about issues such as heat pumps versus furnaces, or what costs you should plan for in your first year, and so forth.

But this blog is not about real estate, it's about

communications

Not knowing what questions to ask is what gets so many projects off track. Say you are launching a blog, and you don't know to ask what you need in a web host, you may end up with a blog that doesn't work.

So before you start any communications project—whether it be launching a website or putting together a social media campaign—ask someone who's been there before: “what do I need to know?”

How do you know what questions to ask? Have you ever been in a situation where not asking the right questions made a project or situation go wrong?

Authenticity matters (or, Why Bobby Jindal Won't Win but Chris Christie Might)

Bobby Jindal just announced (via Facebook) today that he is adding himself to the slew of GOP 2016 presidential hopefuls.

There are lots of reasons why Jindal does not have even a small chance of winning the nomination: Louisiana (the state where he is currently governor) is doing badly, he lacks charisma, and he has made a series of questionable/false/stupid comments recently (Muslim no-go zones, for example).

Currently polling at about one percent, Jindal faces tremendous challenges even getting in to the Fox News GOP candidates debate that will only allow the top ten contenders

on stage. It's pretty clear that Jindal is jockeying for a vice presidential nod, but even that is out of reach for him. Why? **He has a huge authenticity problem.**

Jindal, who was named Piyush by his Indian parents, seems to have rejected his background. He converted to Catholicism and changed his name to Bobby. He has even said he doesn't consider himself Indian-American, but just American. The *Washington Post* explores the question about how Jindal views his past in this article published yesterday: From Piyush to Bobby: How Does Jindal Feel About his Family's Past.

This passage from the article (the bolding is mine) is very telling:

Suresh C. Gupta, a Potomac, Md., doctor, gave a fundraiser for Jindal's first gubernatorial bid. But he said Jindal has actively tried to disassociate himself from the Indian American community in recent years.

*"So what if he's Republican? So what if he's Christian? I don't care about those things," said Gupta, who is a Democrat. **"But you can't forget about your heritage. You can't forget about your roots."***

*When Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to the United States last September, a host of politicians attended his rally at Madison Square Garden. Jindal did not. **When Jindal's name was mentioned, he was booed by the crowd.***

It's impossible to say what motivated Jindal to embrace being "American" while at the same time downplaying his roots. Perhaps he is embarrassed by his background or perhaps he thinks people can't relate to an Indian-American. Whatever the reason, it's clear that potential supporters are turned off by his disassociation with his background.

Although the United States is a melting pot, and most immigrants try to assimilate, many still have pride in their heritage. And there are many politicians who embrace hyphenation, from the first Italian-American mayor of New York City Fiorello LaGuardia to former Congressman David Wu (D-OR), the only Chinese-American serving in the House of Representatives from 1999 to 2011.

An even more negative view of Jindal is given in the *Politico Magazine* article by Alan Greenblatt: "The Stupid Party's Candidate: Running to the Right is not Working for Bobby Jindal."

Greenblatt argues that Jindal is pandering to the more conservative base of the Republican Party. He writes:

A governor who reshaped his state by overhauling the education and Medicaid systems now hardly talks substance at all. In fairness, he has released detailed plans on taxes and education, but he routinely spends his time on the stump throwing red meat to the most conservative parts of his party.

He adds:

His pander approach hasn't worked for him. "He is smart, he is policy knowledgeable," says Henry Olsen, a conservative analyst at the Ethics & Public Policy Center, "but rather than build a public persona around his strengths, he has crafted a public persona around other people's strengths."

This adds up to an authenticity problem. Who is Bobby Jindal and why does he keep changing his stripes? People respond best to what is authentic and can generally spot a fake. Jindal seems to be working hard to be something he can never be. As long as he's trying to be something he isn't, he will continue to lag behind in the polls.

Authenticity matters, especially when you are trying to persuade.

What do you think? If you were Jindal's communications person, what would you advise?

Can you rehab your image by deleting offensive posts?

Here's the story:

Yesterday, Grammarly (a site that promises to be your best grammar check resource), posted an article titled "5 authors who died old maids" to Facebook (unfortunately, I was not quick-thinking enough to take a screen shot). The post was about great female writers such as Emily Bronte and Emily Dickinson.

I did a double take when I saw that on my timeline. Old maids? What year is this? Who calls unmarried women "old maids?" I commented on the Facebook post that it was sexist and ageist to use the term, and that Grammarly should rename the post. Many others had similar comments and sentiments. Some (minority) thought using the term was perfectly OK and that the rest of use were too easily offended.

Then, I went to Twitter where I posted this:



I remind you that Grammarly is a site that claims it offers a “better way to write.”

No response from Grammarly on Twitter or on Facebook. No comment whatsoever. But this morning, the post is gone from Facebook and from the Grammarly blog without any type of acknowledgement.

It seems that Grammarly understood that using the term was offensive enough to some, or at least, controversial enough, to remove the post. They have erased it from Grammarly post history. But Grammarly has not admitted anything explicitly. It ignored tweets and Facebook comments.

Is ignoring comments a wise move?

And just this past weekend, in the *Washington Post Magazine*, humor columnist Gene Weingarten had this to say about Grammarly:

In short, as a sleuth, Grammarly is top-notch. As an editor, however, it is of the prissy, arbitrary, rule-besotted sort whom good writers want to kill. Under the circumstances, I would do it slow and ugly, like what Dave the astronaut did to HAL.

Perhaps not super humorous, but definitely worth it to read the whole piece.

Grammarly can't erase Weingarten's piece as easily as it can erase it's own mistakes.

Now, is Grammarly in crisis, even of the fleeting social media kind? No, of course not. But in my book at least, it has a damaged image. Between Weingarten's criticism and Grammarly's uncaring attitude, not to mention the fact that a sexist term got through the supposed strict usage checker folks, I am not keen to promote or use the service. And no amount of erasing posts (would this also be called white-washing? I am not sure) and ignoring comments is going to fix that.

What would you recommend that Grammarly do, if anything? Oh, and had you even heard of Grammarly before or am I doing it a public relations favor by mentioning it?

One type of headline will always fail

You're invited

That was the subject line for an email I got recently from Boston University. Naturally, I assumed that I was been invited to attend an event. But no, I was being invited to donate money to the annual pledge drive.

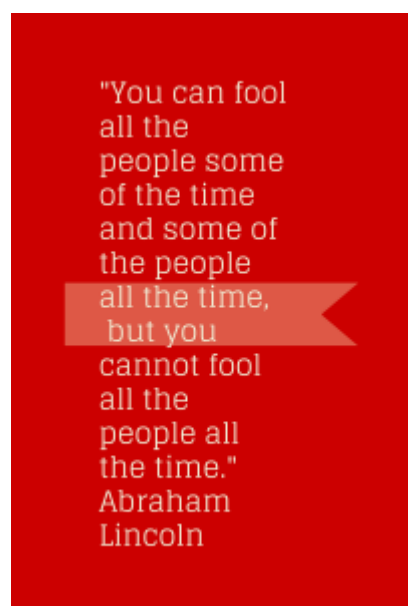
This was a classic bait-and-switch.

The following week I got an email from BU that said something

about women (fewer/more women getting degrees, I can't recall). Again, I opened it since I thought it would be an article about gender disparity. It wasn't. It was another bait-and-switch. Again, BU wanted me to be among the women who donate to the university.

Bait-and-switch headlines/subject lines are trust-killers.

I understand there's clutter and that you need to work hard to entice readers. Using a bait-and-switch can guarantee people will open your email or read your article, but at a cost. When you fool people this way (and that is what you are doing), you ensure they will no longer trust your content.



What's going to happen when BU really wants to invite me to an event? What type of subject line will they use? I am not going to believe "you're invited" again.

Writing a subject line/headline is not easy. You want to entice readers to open your email or read your article. You are much better off describing what you are offering inside than using a false premise.

What is your experience with bait-and-switch headlines or subject lines? If you use them, how well do they work for you?

Do you really want customer feedback? Ask the right way.

Lately, I have been inundated with customer feedback requests from what seems like every company with which I have even had a glancing blow. And all of these feedback requests have serious flaws.

Self-serving: The airline I flew wanted to know about my recent flight, but not about the other part of the same trip, which included one segment that was delayed five hours.

Bordering on harassment: My gym wants feedback (about what, I don't know or care) and they have sent me at least five or more requests reminding me they want my feedback. Apparently they don't take no for an answer.

Not interested in my opinion at all: The conference I attended last week says it wants my opinion, but sent a survey that focused more on my demographic profile than on my opinion.

Asking every possible question on earth: I got a questionnaire that I abandoned when I realized that after five minutes I was only twenty percent done, thanks to the helpful completion meter at the bottom of the survey.

Really, just give us a glowing review: Some companies send you a link to online customer response sites like Yelp, basically asking for you to provide a testimonial, and may even try to promote this action by offering a discount next time you come in.

Customer feedback can be very valuable. *If* done the right way, feedback requests can tell you what customers/clients/supporters are thinking, and can alert you to any issues. However, there's a big "if" there, and as evidenced by my own examples above, many organizations are not handling these requests well.

Many times, I have provided specific feedback, only to never hear from the company again or see the problem addressed. I think the problem is that customer feedback requests straddle the line between communications/marketing and operations.

Communicators/marketers see asking for feedback as a way of communicating further with customers. Operations folks see feedback as a potential for improvement (theoretically). But if these two factions are not in consultation, you end up with customer feedback requests that don't actually address any issues the customer may be having or may even hurt the brand as customers are bothered by repeated requests or intrusive questions.

Before you ask for customer feedback, here are four things to keep in mind.

1. **Determine exactly why you want feedback.** Are you trying to assess your product/service? Are you trying to pinpoint problem areas? Do you want to get testimonials?
2. **Determine what you will do with the feedback.** Will you address any issues?
3. **Determine the best way to get the feedback.** Is it email? Or a phone call?
4. **Remember your customers are not obligated to give you**

feedback. Customers are in fact doing you a favor by providing feedback. Respect their time. Don't harass them.

How do you handle customer feedback? Do you even ask for it? If you do, how do you go about it? Please let me know.

Beware of the dog(ma)

You may have heard about the ongoing discussion in the public relations world regarding the usefulness of the press release. Many are saying the press release is dead. Some are not so quick to give it last rites. Then there are those that are dogmatic about it: "always send a press release" or "never send a press release."

Always and never are absolutes. To be dogmatic is to state a position unequivocally, to be absolute about it. The problem with dogma in communications is that nothing should be absolute. In the press release issue above, I would say that it *depends*: What is the news, who is the target audience is and where do you want to communicate the news.

A definition of dogma

Here's what my Webster's dictionary says dogma is:

1. Something held as an established opinion, esp. an definitive authoritative tenet.
2. A doctrine or body of doctrines concerning faith or morals formally stated and authoritatively proclaimed by a church.

Notice what the two definitions have in common? The word authoritative, which is a synonym for official, conclusive, and **dictatorial**.

Examples of dogmatic communications thinking

Back when I started working in advertising, when I was a lowly media coordinator and my job was to place print media buys, I had a supervisor named Eileen. Eileen's dogmatic belief about newspaper advertising was that you *never place a print ad in Friday or Saturday newspapers*. Never. (This was in the 1990s and people did not have the Internet. They read actual physical newspapers.)

But, back in the '90s and even today, the entertainment/weekend section always came out on Friday. I thought most people would get the Friday paper just for the entertainment section, to see what was going on, what movies were playing, etc., so I argued with Eileen that Friday was actually a great day to be in the paper. It was an uphill battle. Eileen had been taught, and believed with absolute certainty, that Friday was, in her words, a dog day for ads.

Recently, I had an online discussion with an website design firm that states it *never uses WordPress for its clients because it is "always" more vulnerable to hacking*. Instead, the firm always uses Adobe products. When presented with an alternative view (WordPress has open developing practices with thousands of plug-ins that increase functionality, for example) the design firm shot me down. It has a design dogma that disallows it from seeing the benefits of something alternative, or even using WordPress for some clients and Adobe for others, depending on needs.

In the blogging world, there seems to be a dogmatic belief that *you must blog at minimum once a week and more is better*. I have subscribed to this belief, but lately, I think it depends. I have seen blogs that I follow drop to blogging once

a month with no ill effects (at least not visible....I don't know if it affects their SEO).

Dogma may be necessary in religion. Faith requires absolute conviction. Communications, however, must be flexible. Things are constantly changing. Look at social media. Five years ago it was all Facebook and Twitter. Today, we have Medium and Tumblr and Pinterest and Instagram and on and on.

An alternative approach: use guidelines instead of tenets

You cannot afford to be dogmatic in communications. Always and never will leave you boxed in and unable to react to situations. A better approach is to create requirements and guidelines for your communications that take into consideration the why, what, where, who and how of what you are communicating.

Do you have a communications dogma? What is it? Please share.

Are you seduced by the cheap and fast?

You can select only two of the following three types of service: good, cheap, fast.



It's been making the rounds lately, although I first heard it from a graphic designer years ago. Basically, if you want something to be good and fast, it won't be cheap. And if you want it to good and cheap, then it won't be fast. And if you want cheap and fast, well then it surely won't be good.

And yet, we are continually being sold cheap and fast. Every day there's a new free tool to help you do something (as I wrote about a couple of weeks ago). Or you'll find services being offered to do stuff fast (manage your social media in just minutes a day!).

Just yesterday, I saw something about how to make your own infographics quickly. This is because creating shareable infographics is a common digital marketing tactic. But not all infographics are shareable, mainly because they are not very good. Many times they don't have enough information, or the right information, or they are not visually appealing. And other times they have too much information and are hard to understand. If digital marketers continue thinking all that is needed is an infographic, and that designing one can be done cheaply and quickly, then infographics will become useless if they haven't already.

When you are going for the fast and cheap, you are focused on cost (time and money) instead of value (what you get for your time and money).

In times when budgets are tight and time is scarce, unless there's a shift to focusing on value, people will continue to fall for the fast and cheap. And we know the fast and cheap may work in the very short term, but will rarely work to achieve long term business and communications goals.

What are your thoughts? Is there something that can be done fast and cheap and be worthwhile?

3 big reasons to avoid sarcasm in your business blog

A few weeks ago I came across a blog post with a headline that said something like "Why my business is getting off Facebook immediately." Naturally, I was intrigued. But then I read the article, which told me the many reasons why it would be stupid for him or anybody to leave Facebook, saying things such as: Yes, I want to get off the fastest growing social network that has 800 million readers and counting.

The article, awash in sarcasm, was *designed* to make readers feel stupid for considering leaving Facebook.

I had been drawn in a headline that I didn't realize was sarcastic until I read the blog post—a prime example of bait and switch. I felt angry and insulted that the author thought

that anybody considering getting off Facebook was stupid.

And then last week, I came across this article on Ragan.com: 31 terms that will complicate your writing. The headline is not sarcastic, but the article is. However, the article is written pretty badly—I was confused as were many other readers as evidenced by the comments. The article, in my opinion, does not work at all.

I asked Brad Phillips, author of the Mr. Media Training blog, what he thought about using sarcasm in professional communication. Here's what he said:

The challenge is to make sure people don't take a comment you meant sarcastically as a straightforward, more serious one. Therefore, I try to always either preface a sarcastic comment with an obviously absurd rhetorical question or put it in italics to make clear that it stands apart from the rest of the post.

Exactly. **Your reader or audience has to understand you are being sarcastic.** If not, there will be misunderstanding and in essence, a lack of communication.

When you decide to use sarcasm, you run three big risks:

1. You risk irritating or even alienating your reader

According to *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Clear Communication* by Kris Cole, sarcasm inhibits communication: "Sarcasm in fact is in the same league as name-calling, ridiculing and shaming; and it leads to the same results."

In intra-personal relationships, sarcasm can be extremely damaging. According to the post *The Damage of Using Sarcasm in*

Workplace Communication by Skip Weisman:

There is no positive upside to using sarcasm. It offers only short-term positive impact for the sarcastic person whose ego may get a boost by putting others down in this manner.

Now, it will be couched in the context of humor and trying to be funny. Yet, that humor comes at the expense of someone else.

In essence, your sarcasm is a put-down to your audience, which can certainly lead to irritation and alienation.

2. You risk being misunderstood

Because sarcasm is a type of passive-aggressive communication – where you say one thing but mean another – there is a very good chance that your meaning will be misconstrued or lost.

It may be challenging for your readers to know that you are being sarcastic and as Brad Phillips said above, they may think you are being serious when in fact you are not.

Because sarcasm is often dependent on tone, and it is hard to express tone in writing, you will be forced to use devices like quotation marks or strike-throughs to make your meaning clear.

3. Your risk seeming ethnocentric and culturally insensitive

Sarcasm does not travel well across cultures. While American culture tends to be very sarcastic, other cultures are not. And even within the U.S., there are regional differences. According to The Science of Sarcasm? Yeah, Right in Smithsonian Magazine:

Northerners also were more likely to think sarcasm was funny: 56 percent of Northerners found sarcasm humorous while only 35 percent of Southerners did. The New Yorkers and male

students from either location were more likely to describe themselves as sarcastic.

Would you ever write a sarcastic white paper or case study? Probably not. Why? Because you think of white papers and case studies as serious documents, intended to share information and/or communicate a finding. Instinctively, we avoid sarcasm in “serious” communications. And many people don’t see blogging on the same level as other, more formal, writing.

The truth is that sarcasm is often used as a distancing technique, and it can be extremely corrosive to clear communication. You should avoid it in business blogging.

How do you feel about sarcasm in business blogging? Do you use it? Do you avoid it?

Tools save you money, except when they don’t

Not a day goes by that I don’t see a post about tools. Just this morning I saw this: “10 Social Media Tools for Small Businesses and Freelancers.” We are obsessed with tools, especially the online and free variety.



watercolors sets 1 by
niftynotebook on Flickr

Tools exist to make jobs easier

It'd be hard to create this blog post without Microsoft Word or WordPress. If I wanted to make a cake, having an electric mixer would be helpful. But, owning or having access to tools, even the most advanced or professional type, does not make you a professional or an expert. In other words, owning a paintbrush does not make you an artist, any more than having Adobe Photoshop makes you a graphic designer.

Having a tool does not make you an expert

Say you bought some sculpting equipment. Do you think you will now be able to sculpt something like Michelangelo's David? Well, you might...*if* you had years of training, Michelangelo's genius, and some amazing Italian marble to work with.

The problem is not using tools to help you do your job, it's that some organizations and individuals believe they can substitute a tool for an expert, or worse, that having the tool (Adobe Photoshop comes to mind), makes you the expert.

Doing it yourself could cost you

Last week, I was meeting with my accountant and he told me about a new client he recently started working with. This client had been filing his taxes using a popular online tax software. It turns out that my accountant was able to find the

client thousands of dollars in tax savings because the do-it-yourself client had not known how to take depreciation on his mortgage and other deductions. Having tax software does not make you an accountant. The reason accountants can charge for their time is that they know what to do with the tax software, they understand tax laws and how they affect individual situations.

How do you say wrong in Spanish?

Some organizations are turning to tools like Google Translate (or other online translation software) in order to save money by not hiring a professional translator. The results can be disastrous. Same can be said for do-it-yourself graphic design, website building and any number of services people think they can get for free or cheap.

Just a couple of weeks ago, I was on a national environmental group's website. The group has chapters around the world, and in the Spanish version of the website, the word used for "chapters" was "capítulos," which quite literally means chapters in a book. In Spanish, capítulo is *not* used as a synonym for a section or group of people.

My advice is to only use tools for routine jobs and leave the skilled work to the professionals. It may seem to cost more to hire somebody, but as my accountant proved to his new client, it could end up saving you thousands down the road.

What do you think? Do you rely on tools to avoid hiring a professional?