

Why giving thanks is a marketing win

During this season, and especially during Thanksgiving week, we see a lot of talk of gratitude. At least one DC-area TV channel is asking people to post what they are grateful for (and hashtag it, of course).



Those that do

I have been getting several email thank you notes—from airlines, rewards programs and organizations that I have supported in the past. It's nice to get an email that is simply expressing thanks and not trying to sell or promote or convince.

And every end of year, I get a couple "Season's Greetings and Thank You for your Business" holiday cards in the mail. I generally get one from my accountant and one from a company that painted the exterior of my house three years ago. I get so few actual printed holiday cards, especially from vendors, that I really notice them.

And those that don't

On the other hand, I don't get anything from the painting company that painted the interior of my house, or from the

company that installed the hardwood floors in my house (a much bigger job than the house painting) or from the company with which I had a multi-year service contract.

Perhaps these companies don't send any thank yous at all. Or perhaps they don't value my patronage.

I have been thinking about this because I just had a new HVAC unit installed. It is the largest purchase I have made this year, and it was a hard decision to make. The company that sold and installed the unit was very professional. The salesperson followed up and answered a ton of my questions and concerns. The installers were on time and worked diligently, leaving everything clean and tidy. All the paperwork was in order.

But a week later, I have not heard a word from this company. No follow up to see how the system is working, no inquiry about my experience with the installation, and most surprisingly, no thank you for buying the product/service.

Polite, and meeting expectations

We don't expect thank you notes from the grocery store (even though we probably spend money there more consistently and frequently than almost anywhere else) or for the vast number of regular transactions we all make during the year. But when we buy something big—a car, a house, a time share—we do expect a thank you.

Writing (or emailing) thank you notes is what polite people do when they've received a gift. And it is what companies should do when you've made a big purchase or done business with them. Because so few companies do it, sending a thank you is what differentiates them. It also shows, in a tangible way, that a company values your patronage. It's a marketing win.

Do you send thank you notes to your customers or clients? If not, why not? If so, how do you do it—electronically or with a

printed card?

And with that, let me say thank you for reading this post, and this blog. Have a very happy Thanksgiving!

Hidden benefits are not beneficial

It seems fairly straightforward: if you offer something, especially if it's of benefit to your customers/members/audience, you should make it known. And yet, I would bet good money that you aren't reaping the benefits from various companies and associations simply because you don't even know what they are.

Case in point: I called my car insurance company today about renewing my policy. The very efficient and pleasant (almost shockingly so) customer service agent helped me out and informed me that with my policy came various discounts at car rental agencies, oil change shops, and even restaurants.

If you don't know about it, it's as if it doesn't exist.

Say what? I had absolutely no idea. None. Zip. Mind you, I have been a customer of this company for ages. And in that time, not once has anybody pointed out that I could be saving 20% on my car rentals or getting \$25 oil changes.

Turns out that this insurance company is doing a very poor job of showcasing these great perks. Which leads me to wonder why it bothers negotiating these deals with vendors if it isn't sharing them with customers.

Hidden benefits or perks don't benefit anybody.

Your customers/members/associates should understand why they do business with you, in other words, what is in it for them. If they don't know what benefits are derived from their association with you, there's no reason for them to stay.

Do you know what benefits you offer?

Right now, answer this question: what are the top five reasons that made your customers/members do business/become affiliated with you? These are your primary benefits, and should be absolutely, 100% obvious.

Are there any secondary benefits? Are you offering special discounts or deals like my car insurance company? Are your customers entitled to anything special such as annual policy reviews, information sessions, special access to museums or cultural events, etc.?

Benefits don't communicate themselves!

In order to maintain your customer/membership base, you must communicate all of the benefits you offer.

Don't just assume your audience knows. Audit your marketing materials (website, social media sites, printed materials, newsletters, etc.) to see if you are letting your customers/members know what's in it for them when they do business with you. Survey your people to see what they know about your offerings, about why they do business with you.

When you lose your internet service...

I meant to post earlier in the week. However, Verizon “inadvertently” cut my FIOS line—so I had no TV or internet Wednesday into Thursday. Yes, this is a first world problem. Regardless, it had to be resolved, which involved the thing I despise the most in the world: calling Verizon customer service.

And it was just as bad as I feared. First you have to get through a phone tree (I can’t stand talking to machines). And then I got disconnected. Then, when I called back, the phone tree was stuck on whether I had power at my location or not. Thanks Verizon, for thinking I am that stupid that I would think that without electricity I would have working TV/internet. On the third try, I went for the Spanish option, from which I was able to finally speak to an agent (whose command of Spanish was not the best as he was versed in Spanglish more than Spanish).

To make a long story short, after more than 24 hours without service and after several calls to support, my FIOS is back on a temporary line that will eventually have to be buried (meaning I am still not done with Verizon).

I work from home, so having internet access is essential for me. Yes, I have a smartphone so I wasn’t entirely disconnected from the world wide web, but try proofreading a brochure on your smartphone. Not so easy.

The only positive from this fiasco is that it sparked this blog post. Here’s what I learned from losing my internet service:

1. The measure of a company is how it responds to customer problems. Verizon does not do well on this measure. Verizon, like most companies, is fine *as long as you don't have a problem*. Verizon makes it very hard for customers to talk to customer service agents. It makes customers run around in circles: repeat information, navigate phone trees and so forth. I lost a whole day of service PLUS more than an hour getting someone to help PLUS using data on my phone PLUS having to go somewhere to be able to access the internet to do work PLUS waiting during a three-hour window. If I call to request a credit, I may be compensated for the service loss but not for my time and certainly not for the aggravation. I am sure Verizon is betting that I won't want to lose more time on this, and it may be right. As I said before, I despise calling Verizon's customer service.

2. Monopolies like Verizon have no incentive to be customer-centric and they don't advertise or promote their customer service. If you notice, all FIOS advertising is about what great speeds you will have or any other benefits of having WORKING service. There's no mention of the great customer service that accompanies this "super-fast" internet because there is none.

3. Some companies provide better customer service via social media. Verizon does not. Several years ago this was not true. You could get better, faster service from Twitter since @verizonsupport agents seemed to be more empowered than those on the 1-800 number. Now, if you complain on Twitter, Verizon reps will quickly want to move you over to direct message so that they can give you a link to report your problem. Agents on @verizonsupport seem to have little or no ability to actually help or intervene in your favor, unlike @deltaassist, which has the ability to rebook your flight, etc.

4. The problem is with company policies not with employees. It's been my experience that people want to help, but they are forced to follow company policies and procedures, which are

not customer-friendly. The technician that came to my house was far more helpful and on the ball than the agents on the 1-800 line. He was empowered to do what he had to do to fix the problem, whereas the agents in the call center were forced to call other departments and work within constraints.

5. You must have a “plan b” or “plan c.” If something fails (you could lose power, or your car is in the shop or any other unexpected problem), you have to find a work around. In this case, my county libraries all offer wi-fi, and have desks with power outlets. That was the way to get some work done for me.

And lastly, on a personal note:

6. I have to try to stop sweating the small stuff. I get upset because I expect things to work and work well. And they often don't. Yesterday, I was reminded that our time on earth can be very short and you just don't know how life will turn out, so perhaps worrying about Verizon is a complete waste of time. I had my annual eye doctor appointment, and the usual optometrist was not there. I was shocked and very sorry to learn that she died suddenly after an aggressive illness. She was around my age. She was a very nice person and I always enjoyed chatting with her. The doctor told me she had been very healthy and health-conscious, but this illness came out of nowhere. She was gone in a matter of weeks. Rest in peace Teresa, you are missed.

Enjoy your Labor Day weekend! How did we get to the last weekend of “official” summer so fast? Sigh.

Marketing communications efforts do not fix organizational problems

This morning, the Washington Post reports that Metro (the Washington Area Metropolitan Transit Authority or WMATA) is hiring two big public relations/communications firms

“to help the transit agency rebuild its tattered image in the wake of a fatal Jan. 12 smoke incident.”

The two agencies, O’Neill Associates and Hill + Knowlton Strategies, are expert in crisis communications and will help develop a reputation management communications plan.

The problem for Metro is that it has more than an image problem. It has an organizational problem.

As anybody who lives in the Washington, D.C. area and who rides Metro knows, WMATA has frequent problems, including lengthy delays, broken car doors, broken escalators, and smoke-filled stations. Most of these problems do not result in fatalities, as did the January incident, but they do inconvenience hundreds of commuters every day.

WMATA has also experienced a drop in ridership in the past year (D.C. area sees fewer taking public transit). Although the article attributes this decline to lower gas prices, it is hard to imagine it doesn’t have to do with the unreliable and expensive service that WMATA offers.

Most news reports about the January incident detail aspects of WMATA’s organizational challenges. There’s a lack of internal accountability (why weren’t NTSB safety directives followed?) and a lack of cooperation with external parties (first responders did not know where the smoke-filled train was in

the tunnel and their radios did not work underground).

It's beyond my knowledge to detail the workings of WMATA, but as a rider, I have seen countless examples of poor service. Track work (or "rebuilding" as it is now called) happens nearly every weekend, causing lengthy delays. And the cost is astronomical. At the highest end, a round-trip peak-hour commute costs nearly \$12.

Frustration with Metro does not have to do with its image. It has to do with the real, day-to-day interactions most riders have with the system. A crisis communication plan is always good to have (as an aside, several years ago I heard Metro's then public relations director say that the agency had a plan in case of terrorism on the system, *but not in case of accidents*).

I hope that by hiring outside communications counsel, Metro is admitting it has a problem and that it is ready to seek for a solution. But the solution is not simply to *appear* to have stuff under control (create a positive image). **The real solution would be to address the organizational issues that underlie the image problem.**

What are your thoughts?

Is the chamber of commerce model still viable?

As I mentioned in the last post, I am not a member of my local chamber of commerce, and never have been. I am not alone. According to reporting in the Washington Business Journal (which I can't link to here because it is behind a paywall),

membership is dwindling at the chambers of commerce in the Washington metro region.

Almost all of the DC metro local chambers have experienced a drop in members over the past ten years. The D.C. Chamber lost 15.7%, Montgomery County lost 17.8% and Fairfax lost a jaw-dropping 54.9%. However, the chambers haven't experienced a drop in revenue, since they have increased dues and other income-generating programs.

One of the reasons I haven't joined a chamber is because it is expensive and I feel there is little benefit. After all, there are plenty lower-cost to no-cost alternatives for networking purposes, not the least of is on social media. The other reason is that I find most chambers attract small businesses that may not have the budget for the marketing services I provide.

I would guess that the ease of using Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook to connect with folks, and then maintain the relationship is behind the remarkable drop in membership for the chambers. Why pay dues when you can easily network with people who share your interests or whom fit other parameters like work in a certain industry, live in a geographic area and others.

Perhaps the chamber model is no longer suited to our Internet-driven world. We no longer need the chamber membership guides to find people or services. We can look up services on any number of sites, like Yelp, which may even have ratings. We certainly don't need chamber networking events to meet people in person. One remarkable and low cost alternative is Meet Up. Meet Up hosts many groups of local people who share an interest, which can be as narrowly or as broadly focused as you like.

Do you think chambers of commerce will survive another ten years? I'd like to know if you are a member of chamber of

commerce. Why or why not? Please tell me in the comments.

Is it time for a makeover?

Have you ever looked at someone and wanted to make him/her over? Yesterday I saw a woman with frizzy, long and shapeless hair wearing an equally long and shapeless prairie-type dress of a circa 1982 vintage. Perhaps vintage wines are good but dresses fade and look, well, dated. I wondered if she was aware of how she appeared: as someone who did not care about her appearance and/or hadn't been shopping in 30 years and/or didn't have a good friend to tell her she needed to update.



Little Claire on the Prairie by
Chris_Ford_UK on Flickr

What does this 80s refugee have to do with marketing and

communications? Simple, they too can benefit from an update and a makeover. When was the last time you really examined your website? Does the design indicate that we are in 2013 or is it the same look you had when you launched your website back in 1996? When was the last time you posted something on your blog or changed your about us page? How about your logo? Still using fonts that were popular in the 1970s?

But updates don't only refer to outward appearance. You must also look at the back end. Is your software up to date? Have you looked at your mission statement lately? Or your target audience description? Perhaps your messaging needs an update too.

Make it one your goals for 2013 to determine what needs to be updated and then get it done! Here is a list to help you:

- Logo
- Tagline
- Website (including blog)
- Brochure (even if it's a PDF/online version)
- Business stationery (including letterhead and business cards)
- Annual report
- Press release boilerplate
- Organizational mission/vision
- Target audience description
- Organizational description in various formats and lengths
- Services/products list (and pricing if appropriate)
- Social media avatars/biographies/descriptions
- Software/hardware

A makeover is a chance to refresh and renew. With people, makeovers tend to make them look younger and more attractive. With organizations, makeovers make them look in touch, modern and more attractive (to potential customers/clients/donors/supporters).

What are you going to change this year?

Improve your blog/blogging process!

If you are in the Washington, DC metro area and would like to improve your blog or blogging process, sign up for my How to Write your Blog workshop today! The workshop takes place on Thursday, February 28 at the Silver Spring Civic Building. For more details and to register, visit the Eventbrite page.

Has Pepco changed its communication strategy?

Last week, when we were waiting for Hurricane Sandy to hit, my main worry was losing power. Because the storm was predicted many days out, Pepco was actually ready, with out-of-state assets in place. Pepco also warned it could take a week or more to restore power (managing expectations?) Thankfully, Montgomery County was spared the worst of storm, and although some customers did lose power, the majority did not. Of course, New Jersey and New York were hit pretty badly and are still struggling to get power restored.

Detailed preparedness plan, communicated

Pepco seemed to go to great pains to communicate exactly how it was prepared to deal with the storm (participated in mutual aid calls, got repair crews in place, and so forth). Prior to the storm, every customer received a robocall warning to be prepared.

More faces of Pepco

I noticed that prior to the storm, Pepco held a couple of news conferences. Instead of featuring Tom Graham, Pepco's regional president, who was everywhere during the Derecho coverage, Pepco featured David Velazquez, the executive vice president for power delivery for PHI (Pepco's parent company).

Here's the video:

Different tone and trying to do the right thing

In a full page color ad placed in yesterday's Sunday Washington Post, Pete Pedersen, Pepco's emergency preparedness manager is featured (again, not Tom Graham). The headline is "Thank you for weathering the storm with us." The body of the ad seems to recognize how much suffering being without power engenders saying:

Because so many other communities are suffering right now, we hope you will join us in making a contribution to the American Red Cross.

With any storm like this, we're all in it together.

The ad includes the American Red Cross logo and how to make a contribution. This shows some element of corporate social responsibility, which is in stark contrast to the lack of empathy exhibited during the Derecho, when Pepco even tried to

charge customers a fee for the days they did not have power.

Gone is the defensiveness of the post-Derecho advertising. But this is Pepco after all, and there still is an element of back-patting:

But because of early preparations and your help in reporting outages and downed lines, we were able to respond quickly to this historic event.

Is this a new Pepco? I am cautiously optimistic.

Your thoughts?

Communicating when disaster strikes

If you are anywhere on the Eastern Seaboard you are feeling the effects of Hurricane Sandy (or at least, you are hearing about the effects of Sandy on the nonstop news coverage). You are probably hunkered down at home since few people ventured out to work today. If your job is to communicate, you are faced with a tough situation: you cannot compete for attention! What should you do?

If you already have a **print campaign** running, there is nothing you can or should do. People realize that your ad or press release went out way before the storm.

If you have **TV ad campaign** running, realize that your spots probably won't run. Too much air space will be devoted to

hurricane coverage. The issue you will have to face is whether you can continue to use those spots after the storm. Are they still relevant? More importantly, if people are dealing with after-disaster effects, how much impact will your ads have?

If you had scheduled a **press conference**, you should cancel it. Nobody wants to hear about product launches when they are worried about a tree crashing down on their house.

If you handle **communications for a business or organization**—especially a retail operation—you should update your website and social media feeds regarding your status (are you open or closed, do you have power or not, will you honor late payments etc.) You should also record a phone message for your location. Not everyone will have access to the Internet. You may also consider sending emails/SMS messages to customers who may need to reschedule appointments etc.

If you have a **press release** going out this week, you may want to reschedule it. Your news will have to compete with disaster information.

If you have a **social media campaign** running, first realize that many people may not have Internet access. You may want to postpone your campaign, and certainly, revisit and reconsider any scheduled Tweets, Facebook updates or blog posts. Mary Fletcher Jones of Fletcher Jones has written a very useful blog post: [6 Tips: How Communicators Can Prepare for Hurricane Sandy](#) where she deals with special considerations for social media.

What are you doing to communicate during and after the storm? Please share any insights here.

Are you afraid of being yourself?

I am not trying to get all new age and self-helpy with you. Instead, I am trying to find out whether you are presenting your “real self” to the world in your communications. In business lingo, this would translate into “are you being authentic?”

With social media, there is a blurring of lines between personal and professional. My Twitter feed, for example, features lots of political commentary. Some may not agree with my political viewpoint, but it is what it is. If you choose to not work with me because you disagree with me, so be it.

It turns out that people like authenticity. They like knowing who they are dealing with. And really, don't you want to work with people who want to work with you, when they know your foibles, viewpoints, etc.?

I was inspired by the article “Best Social Media Tactic: Always be Authentic” in Inc. Magazine. Here, writer Christina DesMarais interviews J. C. Kendall, CEO of TekPersona. Kendall is known as being brutally honest in his customer/social media exchanges. He feels that it is part of his branding strategy. He says the following:

*You simply cannot avoid offending some people. **No brand should waste undue time trying to appeal to everyone.** When you are developing and supporting your brand, you are creating an expectation of what will occur through a transaction with your company. Your messaging has to focus on your target customer.*

Emphasis above is mine. I think that too many organizations and individuals work too hard to be “nice,” to appeal to

everyone. They are AFRAID of being disliked. But the truth is that not everybody will like you and that is OK. You don't want everybody to listen to what you have to say—just your target audience. Your target WANTS what you have to offer.

So, if you are afraid of being yourself, stop. Be who you are and forget about being nice to everyone. I am not saying be mean or nasty. Just be authentic.

Are you afraid of being yourself? Why or why not?

How do your customers feel?

It seems that many businesses, especially the big ones, spend much more money on memorable advertising campaigns and very little on customer service. No matter how great a business is, there will always be customer service to be done (changing addresses, paying bills, correcting billing errors, etc.). Yet, many businesses ignore the basics.

A couple of examples:

Netflix. Netflix does not seem to care much about how its customers feel. The company does not respond to Twitter mentions. It doesn't seem to be concerned about negative postings. How do I know? Well, I have had Salmon Fishing in the Yemen at the top of my Netflix queue for about six weeks or more. At first, there was a “long wait.” Now, it's a “short wait.” Bottom line is that I have watched several other movies while still waiting for Salmon Fishing. And I have tweeted Netflix. And I have wanted to email them—there is no easy way

to do that.

ATT. I have been with ATT for years now. I recently upgraded to a smartphone and was told that I was eligible for the upgrade (which apparently means in ATT language they will CHARGE you for this upgrade). I called to see if they would take this charge off—and my argument was 1) I was not advised of such a charge and 2) I was told I was eligible for an upgrade. The customer service agent said he would give me a “courtesy one-time waiver” of this fee, but proceeded to lecture me that this fee was something all carriers do and that ATT would charge me it with every subsequent upgrade. He was combative and rude, and when I pointed this out to him, he hung up on me. I called back and spoke to supervisor and she told me the same thing about the charge (a bit less rudely). I repeatedly told her that I have been an ATT customer for years, I pay my bills on time, and ATT had given me no special offers. Bottom line in my experience: ATT does not care.

Netflix and ATT appear to be utterly unconcerned with how their customers feel about them. I am just one more customer.

In contrast, I flew **Delta** last month and was amazed by the airline’s interest in my customer experience. After the first flight I was sent a survey to measure what I thought of the boarding process, etc. The return flight was badly delayed due to weather in Washington. Delta sent an apology for the delay (even though it was truly not at fault) and asked how the gate agent and flight attendants acted during the delay.

Customer service and experience should be an integral part of an organization’s overall marketing strategy. If your organization does not know anything about how your customers feel, and does not respond to customer issues, you are well on your way to losing those customers.

Marketing should be both about ATTRACTING customers and RETAINING them.

Thoughts?