

Special is special unless it isn't

I recently flew to Fort Lauderdale and back on US Airways. On both flights, the flight attendants had a “special” offer for us, a “specially selected flight.” The offer— only available until April 30 (or the whole month of April, whichever way you look at it) was to sign up for a credit card, and get bonus miles. The rest was so complicated that the flight attendant was struggling to explain what it was and how it worked (something to the effect that if you spent x dollars then you could buy a free companion ticket to anywhere except where it is not available).



Photo by Dr. Keats from Flickr

This was not a special offer. It was a run of the mill sign up today for our credit card so that we credit you 5000 miles for the trip. This is not different from any of the airline credit cards or even the points credit cards out there.

This was not unique to our flight. The flight attendants made the same pitch twice. And the guy next to me had heard it on another flight.

Moral of the story: Don't say something is special if it is not. Most people are savvy enough to know when something is really special and when it is not. Also, don't repeat your special offer by saying it is only available to a select few when you've already offered it to many many others.

Just because you are doing the hiring doesn't mean you don't have to market yourself

Have you ever been to a job interview where you are not encouraged to ask questions? Have you been offered a job where you don't ask about benefits, salary or vacation/sick day policy? I would bet that if you went to a job interview and you did not meet who you would be working for, and where, and if the interviewer did not tell you a bit about the hiring organization, you would be a bit hesitant about it being a good fit for you.

Some organizations seem to believe that if they are deigning to hire someone—be it an employee or a consultant or an agency or any type of service—they don't need to market themselves. Potential hires should just be excited that someone is offering to consider them or their services.

Companies that care about providing a good work environment

are proud to let the world know about it. They even use it as a differentiator. You have probably seen organizations that tout that they were selected as a top employer for working moms, or most socially responsible organization and so forth.

There are many organizations out there, and if you are in marketing, you must differentiate yourself from everyone else. Even if you are "just hiring."

Yesterday, I got the following email (identity is concealed):

Subject: What type of work do you do?

Body: Just starting the process to see if we want to bring in a firm as a consultant on several projects. What type of work does your firm do? Who/what are your clients?

[name]

Marketing Manager

[COMPANY NAME]

[phone/fax/email/address]

This marketing manager is not managing to market herself at all. What does her company do? What types of projects is she interested in? Why would I want to answer her? (Not to mention that you can find answers to all these questions right here on my website.)

Marketing is about making an impression. Even if you are doing the hiring does not mean you don't have to impress your potential hiree about what a good/special/professional company you are. Perhaps you are known for paying well, or paying on time, or being responsive, or having employees that have been there for decades. Whatever it is, it is what makes your organization special and different from other organizations.

ATT's not so special offer—a marketing #fail

ATT sent me a “special customer offer.” The letter giving me notification of this “special offer” starts like this:

Dear Deborah Brody,

You've been such a great customer, you deserve something special from us.

*That's why I'm offering you a **FREE Android Smartphone** when you activate an additional line of service with a new two-year voice agreement with qualifying monthly data plan required per phone.*

To recap, ATT will show its appreciation for my business by giving me a “free” phone, which will require me to subscribe to more services and pay more per month and only if I activate a second line.

Basically, they are offering me nothing.

The thing is, I don't need a second line of service.

I have gotten this same offer over and over and over again. Never once have I gotten an offer for a phone upgrade without ATT requiring a second line activation.

This offer is all about ATT and not at all about me. It is not even remotely tailored to the customer's needs.

ATT finishes its letter to me by saying:

Don't think twice about this one, Deborah. Call today [phone

number] and get it all.

I don't have to think about this at all. I know it is not an offer for me.

ATT, your marketing is a big, fat #FAIL.

Who should handle your newsletter?

If you have an organizational newsletter, who handles it? In my experience, it probably is one of the following:

- Administrative assistant
- Intern
- Volunteer/Development assistant or coordinator (for nonprofits)

And yet, an newsletter should be part of your communications and marketing efforts. At the very least, your communications/marketing people should take a look at the newsletter and check for the following:

- Consistency of message
- Use of logo and tagline
- How it fits into the overall messaging/communications campaign
- Timing (is it coming out too close to other communications?)

Of course, someone needs to be the final editor and proofreader. In the past couple of weeks, I have received an

newsletter that has had date mistakes (saying an event is on Wednesday instead of Tuesday, with Tuesday's date) or with location mistakes or even speaker name mistakes.

The best way to handle an newsletter is to have an editorial calendar—created by your communications department—which can adjust for any special events or needs that arise each month. Your admin or intern can write the content, but it must be checked before sending out. Every single time.

An newsletter is a valuable communications tool, which when done right, can help your organization. When done wrong, it can reflect badly on your organization and make people unsubscribe.

How do you handle your newsletter? Do you have any good tips? Please share them in the comments.

One key to a successful pitch

I have been seeing a few articles lately about how to craft an elevator pitch (or whether to even have one). The latest one I have seen was today's blog post from BurellesLuce: "Creating a Successful Elevator Pitch." Although Lauren Shapiro does a good job of summarizing Robert Pagliarini's article (have a hook, be concise and passionate and have a call to action) about the same subject on MoneyWatch.com, she misses what I consider THE key.

CLARITY

Although Merriam-Webster is not helpful with its definition ("the quality or state of being clear; lucidity"), we instinctively understand that clarity is something we

recognize rather than explain. If something is clear, we “see” it, we “get” it. If something is not clear, it is opaque, it can’t be understood.

Yes, clarity is the key to *any* successful pitch, be it an elevator pitch or a media pitch. If you don’t say exactly what you mean so that the other party understands, you are not communicating.

In a previous post, I spoke about a woman who gave an elevator pitch that went nowhere. She wasn’t being clear. She could not distill her message and therefore she was confusing us.

Pitches are not about being clever or even about explaining everything there is to know about something—they are about communicating **one central point clearly**.

You should be answering the key question the entity you are pitching has:

- Why should I do business with you?
- Why should my publication run your story?
- Why should my product be advertising on your channel?

If you can’t give a clear answer to the question you can be as clever and pithy as you like and still not communicate.

Should you be handling your own communications?

When businesses are very small they tend to not be able to afford outside help. Sometimes, the business in question works

in the communications space (writing, editing, advertising, etc.) and thinks it can handle it.

Chances are good that you should NOT be handling your own communications, unless you can answer the following three questions:

1) Do you know what you offer, and can you say it in one sentence? Recently, I was at a business meeting and someone was attempting to describe her business. She gave us many sentences but still it did not make sense. Someone had to ask her to clarify, and she still wasn't able to do it.

2) What are the top three benefits of working with you? Unless you have been asking your customers all along, chances are good that you may not be sure what your customers really appreciate about your business.

3) Are you able to speak(and write) in plain English? Many firms, especially those in the technology sector, speak in jargonese. Most people, including your customers, do not understand jargon, or convoluted sentences. Being clear and making yourself understood is not so simple!

Hiring outside help can be invaluable in helping you to refine your message, clarify your thoughts and communicate them concisely.

Some people won't change

If you are in the marketing business, a pretty big chunk of your time is probably spent convincing people about something. If you are in sales, you are probably convincing them to try

your product. If you are in advertising, you are doing the same on a larger scale. On the other side—the internal side—you are also trying to convince. You may be trying to persuade your client to embark on a public relations campaign or back a new creative direction.

Sometimes this works, and sometimes it doesn't. Some people resist change but can change if they see a good reason. Some people just resist change and no amount of reasoning is going to work.

I have a client that refuses—flat out—to consider social media. The higher-ups at the company will not budget for it. They see no value to brand and image building. Their only criteria is bottom line. And in marketing communications we know that there can't be a direct correlation between your communications efforts and the bottom line. If you are trying to create an image, the costs could be higher up front and the payoff later. To think that you will spend \$100 in advertising to bring in \$100 in business is wrong. It could happen, and in fact you could spend \$100 and bring in several times more in business. But it may not happen immediately.

Some people won't change. If what you are offering/advising does not fit with their worldview, they won't even consider it. In this case, just give up. Don't spend energy and ideas trying to convince someone who doesn't want to be convinced.

Getting your facts straight

If you need to do anything when preparing any type of communications (printed, online, even spoken), you need to get your facts straight.

Seems fairly obvious, but as usual, it escapes many.

Let me give you an example. Last week I received a check from a foreign bank, drawn from a U.S. dollar account. I have received these before (I do have clients in other countries). I went to Bank of America to deposit it. I was told that it would take up to four months to clear. FOUR months. (This was after lots of back and forth with a clueless teller and her remarkably unfriendly supervisor). I told them time and again that this was a US DOLLAR check—no exchange rate necessary. It didn't matter—they thought they had their facts straight, and did not leave me any option but to take the check elsewhere.

I went to my other bank. They were MUCH friendlier there, and seemed to understand what I was saying. They went ahead and deposited the check, warning that it would take up to six weeks to clear. And that I would be charged a fee. Because of the exchange rate. But, I said, this is a check drawn in US DOLLARS. There should be no exchange of any sort. Bottom line, the check cleared immediately. I have not yet been charged a fee. Seems like the bank teller and her supervisor at the second bank did not have their facts straight.

You have to know what you are talking about plain and simple. Sure you can make mistakes or have to ask someone if you don't know, but it is inexcusable to give customers/potential customers the wrong information.

Get your facts straight before you put anything out there!

Finding a vendor

How do you find a vendor? It is important to know this because it can inform marketing. Depending on what I am looking for, I used Google, LinkedIn, listing services, reviews or Twitter. I am sure you use other tools (and would appreciate your insights in the comments).

For example, yesterday I was searching for a freelance editor. I used Google, and found (remarkably) few individuals had websites, whether I searched for “DC freelance editor” or “Maryland freelance editor.” I did find a couple, and one of them, had a very nice website and clearly defined rates. I searched for her on LinkedIn, and discovered that her background was very technical—no editorial. Made me think twice about her skill set. Another one had very strong writing credentials, but absolutely no social media (and she explained she is not into it). It made me question whether she gets it. I also Tweeted it out, and got a response from a colleague (good word of mouth). But, no freelance editors even picked up on it. Obviously, not using Twitter search to find business.

Tool: Google

Marketing lesson: Websites are important. Google profiles are helpful. If you are in an industry that is reviewed, having positive reviews is important since Google finds results from Yelp and others.

Tool: LinkedIn

Marketing lesson: If you aren't on LinkedIn, you are at a disadvantage. The quality of your profile (both for individuals and companies) is important. For individuals, testimonials, number of connections and your background do matter. Don't make stuff up, but bone up what is there.

Tool: Twitter (or other social media sites)

Marketing lesson: How you present yourself, and even if you are on social media, says a lot. What does your Twitter profile, stream, followers say about your business or you?

Tool: Printed materials (brochures, business cards, etc.)

Marketing lesson: How your marketing materials look (are they printed on quality stock, are they black/white or color, do they look professionally designed), can give an immediate impression. How your marketing materials read—what information you provide—can seal the deal.

Tool: Using the telephone

Marketing lesson: Are you reachable? How do you/your company answer the phone? Do you even answer the phone? Some people will want to talk to someone in real time.

Tool: Word of mouth

Marketing lesson: Each and every customer who has a positive interaction with you can be an ambassador, and each and every customer who has a negative impression can be a detractor. Watch your customer interactions. Improve your customer service.

The bottom line is that if you are marketing yourself/your company, you have to understand how people find you, and how they decide whether to contact you or not.

Your thoughts? What makes you decide on a vendor? How do you find a vendor?

Do you have an internal communications program?

Many companies devote almost all of their communications/marketing resources to EXTERNAL communications, that is, the customer facing communications like ads, press releases, and so forth. It seems like far fewer companies take the time to invest in INTERNAL communications.

Internal communications are the information exchanges you have with your internal audiences: your staff, board of directors, volunteers and any other group internally affiliated with your organization. Many companies communicate company news to employees via internal email or a staff meeting. There is nothing wrong with that, but perhaps you could do more.

An internal communications program should be:

Timely. Your staff should never find out about a company decision from outside sources.

Complete. Provide all the necessary details—more than you would provide the media.

Regular. Even if you have no major announcements, you should communicate with your internal audiences on a regular basis.

What kind of information should you share? Here are some ideas:

- Staff changes and promotions—including dismissals
- Company earnings and market reports
- Competitive information
- Any external communications: press releases, ads, blog posts
- News reports on your organization
- News reports on your field

- Calendar events
- Policies—including any changes

When your internal audiences know less about your organization than the general public you risk a downgrade in morale. Having a good internal communications program will keep your internal audiences informed.

If you do have an internal communications program, what is your preferred form of communication? If not, why not?