

# Avoid Alienating (nearly) Anybody

Marketing communications is about persuading people that your product, service or organization offers something that is of value to them. It's really that simple. *How* you do it may not be so simple as there are many different strategies and tactics that you can use. Perhaps you will show the benefits of the product, perhaps you will make people feel good about choosing your service. But, whatever you do, you should not alienate your audience.

Businesses and organizations can alienate their customers and supporters by taking certain negative actions. Perhaps it is raising prices or cutting back services. Sometimes unpopular actions are necessary, which is why how you communicate those actions becomes even more important. In fact, taking a negative action does not have to translate into alienation if it is handled correctly. Perhaps, you work on making the case more forcefully.

Yet, how often do we see companies doing things that alienate their audiences? We see it often. Two recent examples stand out for me: Facebook with its privacy problems and Spirit Airlines with its decision to charge for carry-on bags. Both situations have been widely reported in the media, and both companies have done a mediocre job of explaining why they have taken those decisions. Facebook seems to think that what benefits it as a company should benefit you as customer. And Spirit actually claims that by charging for carry on baggage you benefit from lower fares. Both companies insult their customers' intelligence, thus, alienate them.

Here are a few tips to avoid alienating your customers

- If you must take a negative action, explain it from your

own perspective before the media/others do it for you.

- Don't underestimate your audience's intelligence: they can usually see right through a bad explanation.
- When you communicate, avoid being too self-promoting or too self-serving. Your customers and supporters are more interested in what you can do for them than in what you did for yourself.
- Be forthright and say what you mean.
- Research! It is amazing how many organizations and companies don't understand who their audiences are and what they want.
- Offer good-will gestures. If you've done something that is bad (cancelled a concert for instance), give your customers a carrot (make it easy to get money back, give an additional discount, etc.).

How do you think companies can avoid alienating customers?



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## Qualities of a PR Pro

**PLEASE READ UPDATES AT THE END OF POST**

In the last couple of weeks, I have come across a few blogs where the authors are complaining about inappropriate public relations overtures or of getting mass and untargeted pitches. I have come across a great deal of grammatically incorrect, spelling challenged and generally poorly written PR material.

I also have met several PR people who don't really follow the news or ever read a newspaper (including online). A few months ago I witnessed a gathering of PR professionals who

expressed fear of social media, and resistance to change.

Today I came across this excellent and cautionary article, *Almost Everyone Gets PR Wrong* by Nick Morgan in Forbes, about public relations and public perception, and how PR folk just don't seem to know how to shape the narrative. Morgan writes the following:

*Executives everywhere take note: Beware the power of the narrative. Stop keeping score, and instead look at your organization from the outside. What is your basic job, as far as the world is concerned? And what is the story that has developed over the years? That's where your PR efforts should be focused. That narrative has to be simple, consistent and all about your functional role in the world. You've only got one story. Make it a good one.*

All this made me think about what makes a good public relations person (no matter if he/she specializes in media relations, crisis communications or strategic communication). Following a list of qualities a PR pro should have, in my opinion:

- Ability to use the language correctly (grammar, spelling, word usage), both written and spoken
- Common sense: being able to see what is important and what won't make a difference
- Interest in the news and the news business
- People skills and emotional intelligence (e.g. being able to pick up cues)
- Understanding what public relations attempts to accomplish (getting the big picture)
- Ability to network (meeting people and being able to connect with them is a learned and important skill)
- Eager to learn new skills and communication trends
- Seeing the possibilities and being creative ("thinking outside the box")

**UPDATE: As per the two comments below:**

- **Listening skills (not as easy as it sounds!)**

In short, a PR pro should be a great communicator and should be able to understand how communications works to shape perception.

**UPDATE: Just read this great post about the 14 attributes for new PR practitioners. Matches up quite nicely.**

What makes a PR pro in your opinion?



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## Timing is everything

Timing is everything. You've heard it when you walk up to a fast food counter, and breakfast is no longer being served. So perhaps it's more accurate to say good timing is everything. So many times it seems that had you shown up five minutes earlier, called two days later, or whenever was the "right" time, your outcome may have been different.

Of course, the right timing is also key in communications. For instance, if you are promoting an event, you want to send out calendar listings and email blasts with plenty of lead time, but not too much lead time so that the event gets buried. If you have an newsletter or a printed newsletter, you also want to make sure that any highlighted events don't happen before the newsletter gets to its audience. I know this seems like plain common sense, and yet how many times have you gotten an invitation that is not timed right?

Another aspect is when to send things out. In media relations,

if you want to bury some news, you release the news on Friday. Same goes for a press conference. Often, you don't reach out to broadcast venues during busy times in the broadcast day cycle (right before the evening news for example).

Good timing is about finding the right time to reach your audience, or when your audience will be most receptive. I would never send out an enewsletter on Monday. Why? Because Mondays are catch up days, and people are busy getting back into the groove of the work week.

**Consider your audience and what works best in order to figure out the right time to communicate.**



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## Are you being obtuse?

The definition of obtuse I am referring to is this one, from Merriam-Webster: difficult to comprehend; not clear or precise in thought or expression.

Have you ever visited a website or picked up a brochure that makes you wonder what is really being said? Sometimes there is too much information, sometimes there is not enough and sometimes what is there is hard to understand, unclear. And in certain cases, the information is being presented in a hard to comprehend way ON PURPOSE.

Let me tell you why I am writing this. I ordered my business cards from a place called Overnight Prints. I have ordered my cards there before, and they are of good quality. They are also fast. As the name implies, they print "overnight." Well, I ordered my cards on Thursday and on the next Tuesday, it

occurred to me that I had not received a notification that the cards had shipped. I checked my account on line, and it told me that the order was "in process." I wrote an email to their customer service asking why my cards had not yet printed. A few hours later I received a notification that my cards had shipped. Hmmm.

More than 24 hours later I received an email response from customer service telling me that my cards had shipped. I replied telling them that when I checked the cards had NOT shipped, and that I expected they would have shipped by Monday at the latest, and that a more than 24 hour response was not acceptable. The CSR replied that their new policies suggest that if you choose ground shipping (the least expensive choice) your cards are also printed later. I replied that shipping time is not equal to printing time. Amazon, for instance, will ship your book within 24 hours, and depending on how you pay for it, you may get it the next day or the next week. I also told the CSR that perhaps they should make this little rule of theirs clearer by saying: We expect to print your order on DATE and ship on DATE. Fairly simple and straightforward in my opinion. Well, apparently Overnight Prints is committed to being obtuse. This is the response I got back from them:

Our print and ship time differs by product. Please see charts below for more details. For Business Cards & 4×6 Postcards the print & ship times are as follows:

Shipping Service	Your Order Will Ship...	Your Order Will Arrive In...
Next Day Air	The Next Business Day	2 Business Day
2 Day Air	The Next Business Day	3 Business Days
3 Day Select	Next Business Day	4 Business Days
Ground w/ Priority Printing	Next Business Day	4-6 Business Days
Ground	Within 3 Business Days	5-7 Business Days

Clearly, if you truly want overnight printing from Overnight Prints you need to pony up more money for SHIPPING. If you pay less money for SHIPPING, your PRINTING will also be delayed.

As a customer, I am irritated. I have ordered from this outfit before and I am still paying a fairly high price for printing as well as a high price for ground shipping. I know the shipping will be slower, but the printing should be the same. If you have changed your policies, it is not clear. Your wording is not clear. And when I point that out to you, you revert to your unclear wording. Why endanger a customer relationship over lack of clarity?

**In any case, it is a good exercise to try to see what your customers are seeing when they read your marketing materials. Are you being clear? Or are you being obtuse?**

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# What language are you speaking?

Are you by chance speaking in jargon? Why are you doing that?

As a writer and a consultant, I often ask my clients what their “keywords” are. It is helpful, and sometimes crucial, to use the right terminology for any given industry. Especially when you are working in a business to business environment, you need to know how these businesses look for the services/products that they need. But when an outsider lands on one of these B-to-B web pages or marketing materials, he or she will most likely end up not understanding a word. For instance, a client of mine uses the terms “professional services.” For general marketing purposes, this is the emptiest phrase out there, but in the client’s world, it carries a specific meaning.

Setting aside the need for industry-specific terminology, and recognizing the importance of specific terminology in a B-to-B setting, what is going on with language today? Why are so many people talking in gobbledy-gook? Lately, I have heard the following phrases/terms on TV, in conversation and seemingly, everywhere else:

- Drilling down (apparently, this means getting to the heart of the issue or talking specifically)
- Sweet spot (as in where the perfect opportunity lies)
- Being out of pocket (never got this one although it means being unreachable)
- Getting your ducks all in a row (oldie but goodie, means be prepared)
- Leveraging an opportunity (making the most of something)



- Staying ahead of the curve (presumably, leveraging opportunities to get to your sweet spot)

In a sense, these universally used phrases serve as a crutch. Use them and other people will understand what you mean, even when the meaning isn't entirely clear. Sometimes, using touch phrases makes someone look like an insider, someone who is in the know.

In the end, jargon and catch phrases muck up your meaning. It's one thing to use these in conversation where I can stop and ask you what you mean. It's another to use them in writing. When things are written (especially printed) there is no easy or quick way to ask the writer what he or she means.

Catch my drift?

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## **What do Toyota and snow have in common?**

Both Toyota and snow are causing lots of problems for people, that is what these two have in common. But that is where the similarity ends.



Although snow does not have an official representative (although lots of people keep talking about Mother Nature), it has a leg up on Toyota. People who deal with snow (utility companies, county government, forecasters) are all telling us what is going on, almost every second of every day of the storm (s). If you live in the Washington, DC area you have no doubt seen interviews with representatives from various organizations involved in snow removal, such as the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT). You have seen the PEPCO (Potomac Electric Power Company) spokesperson explain why power hasn't been completely restored and so forth. You know what is going on.

Toyota, on the other hand, has not, apparently, been telling us what is going on. As you no doubt know, Toyota is having a "few" problems with many of its most popular models, including the Prius. Problems include sudden acceleration and braking issues. Dangerous stuff. Yet, apparently, Toyota was slow to realize there was a mechanical/electronic problem in the cars' manufacturing process. At first, they blamed faulty floor rugs. Now, they have recalled hundreds of thousands of vehicles, stopped production at some plants and have finally taken to the airwaves, paid advertising and even op-ed pieces to explain what happened and defend the integrity of the company.

But the damage has been done. Not communicating with your customers, especially when there is a problem, is a recipe for

disaster. This is the essence of crisis communication. One has to wonder what type of communications counsel Toyota has received. Clearly, it is of the “too little, too late” variety. Of course, there is the possibility that Toyota management ignored communications counsel, which in addition to their inability to realize the problem, says that management is completely out of touch.

**More communication is always better than no or too little communication. People want to know what is going on, whether how long the snow is going to last or what to do about their faulty Toyota vehicle.**

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## **Improve your email marketing!**

Our inboxes are cluttered with hundreds of email messages—some from friends asking us to join for dinner and most from companies looking to sell us something. We may have signed up for a few newsletters. We may have met some people at networking events. Regardless, our inboxes are overwhelmed with email.

In the past week, my company sent out its newsletter. It got two unsubscribes, one report for spam (the person who did it may have had some sort of personal vendetta, not sure) and a fairly good open rate. I am going to call it a moderate success. The newsletter did not have a call to action, so it is hard to measure its effectiveness.

In the past couple of days, I got two emails from two sources. Both caught my eye for different reasons. The first was from someone I met a while back who just started a new business venture. The subject line said “Hi Deborah.” The body was the following (with identifying info cut out):

Dear Mr. Sample:

Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is XXXX, Director of Media Services for XXXX and XXXX— two truly groundbreaking companies that have recently joined together to become one of Washington's newest and most innovative full-service production resources. If you're in the neighborhood, I hope you'll stop by for a tour of our facility, just off XX here in downtown D.C.

Our owner-operators are award-winning media professionals with more than 25 years of experience, and our list of long-term clients include companies like X, Y and Z, together with advertising and public relations agencies, corporations, associations and government agencies, both local and nationwide.

We'd like to show you exactly what we can do. By addressing your creatitve and technical needs with our deep expertise in all forms of broadcast and corporate production, creative editorial, 2-D and 3-D graphics, sound design and audio mixing. With our detailed approach to client service, we can easily guide your next project from concept through completion.

Feel free to look through our demo reels and check out the bios of our skilled artists, editors and producers. Just go to (website) and (website) to find out more. Or give me a call personally, at 999-999-9999 I'll be happy to answer your questions or set up a convenient time when you can pay us a visit. I look forward to the opportunity to meet you in person.

Warm Regards,

**What is wrong with this email?** First, the personalization is not working. Second, the formatting was off. Third, there are several grammatical mistakes (and at least one typo). The

first paragraph is a waste. The sender could have mentioned a reason that I would be interested in this email and new venture. Instead it is an “introduction” to someone I met already. The email was sent out in plain format—and this is a multimedia production company? Why not make it look pretty and professional? There is no signature from the sender. No way of opting out of the email. No permission. I could go on and on.

The other email I got was announcing a group trip. But guess what? No dates were listed for the trip on the email, forcing me to go to the website. Maybe this was on purpose, to get a click-through to the website. In my opinion, when you don't give people some basic information, you lose them at hello.

### **Lessons about email marketing:**

- Have a call to action.
- Mind your ps and qs—details like grammar are important.
- Include relevant information: dates, locations, contact information, pricing (don't make me work so hard to figure it out).
- If possible, personalize.
- Make it look nice (there are many newsletter/email marketing companies out there at various price points).
- Be careful with SPAM laws. Give people a way to opt-out. Explain why they are receiving your email.

What drives you crazy when you get an email?

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# **The unmaking of Jay**

# Leno/UPDATED

You may remember that back last spring a big announcement was made that Leno would be in prime time, every day at 10:00 p.m., and Conan O'Brien would have the Tonight Show. The idea seemed to be that Leno is pretty popular, and a variety show is cheaper to produce than say a quality show like Law & Order, so why not have Leno take up this real estate which had so long been the province of the good TV dramas.

Well, the programming folks over at NBC are now discussing moving Jay Leno back to his original 11:35 p.m. spot, after the news.

Anyone could have told NBC that this would fail. In fact a TV station in Boston was going to refuse to run Leno, because they thought it would hurt their lead for the late night news. It did. They were right. NBC strong-armed their stations into accepting the Leno show by saying they would be dropped if they did not go along.

What this shows, in my opinion, is the isolated world that TV programming folks live in. It shows hubris. It shows lack of research and a lack of common sense. I think most people questioned whether Leno could succeed at the earlier hour. Especially, up against what ABC and CBS offer at that hour. Leno is about about late night humor. He is not Barbara Walters, up to interviewing all sorts of folks.

In the end, the Leno Show was not bringing in the viewers that the 11:00 p.m. news needed (a very profitable franchise). NBC was probably bleeding viewers at the 10:00 pm and 11:35 pm hours too (Conan was no Jay). Bottom line, it was costing money to produce a lower costing show.

What do you think?

**UPDATE:**

Steven Pearlstein, columnist for the Washington Post hits the nail on the head regarding what NBC did in business terms. Read his column [here](#).

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## We still need editors

Perhaps we have been lulled into thinking that our writing is OK because we have spell-check on our word-processing programs. Or perhaps we just think that we make no mistakes. But we do make mistakes, and some are just awful.

Here's a paragraph from a story posted on the WJLA website, today, about Virginia's smoking ban:

*For the first time, patrons will walk through the doors without smelling smoke for the first time in 15 years at Ireland's Four Courts in Arlington. Friday morning, work started before dawn.*

How many mistakes can one short paragraph have? Apparently, WJLA does not believe in copyediting or editing of any sort. I have seen more mistakes on this one website than on any other major news website I visit. You know what it does? It makes me think that they don't check ANY aspect of the stories they post. How can you trust what they say if they can't even say it right?

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# Plainly speaking, it is better

What is better is to speak and write plainly, a lesson that is being forced on the U.S. Government according to the Federal Diary column by Joe Davidson in the Washington Post. To make that happen (I could have written: In order to facilitate the transition), there will be a symposium on plain language this afternoon at the National Press Club, held by the Center for Plain Language.

There is no doubt that the government (and many in the legal community) loves to make things complicated. The more obtuse, the better. The more wordy the better. Passive voice? They love it. Big words when smaller words would do, check.

But, more disturbing in my opinion (since I already expect government/legal communications to be convoluted), is that marketing folk are jumping on the complicated bandwagon. This blog post, from the Branding Strategy Insider, claims that “Complex Language Weakens Brands.” As the post says:

*A serious impediment to communications is this constant upgrading of the language. No aspect of life is left untouched by the upgrade police. Not only does a term have to be politically correct, it has to be as long and as complicated as possible.*

A great example from the post is that UPS went from being in the parcel delivery business to being a logistics company. How many people on the street instinctively understand what logistics is???? Not many, my friends. The only people who understand logistics are in logistics.

In any case, if you want to be clear, speak and write plainly. Using big words when small ones would do does NOT make you



look more intelligent (if anything, it makes you look less so). From the Center for Plain Language website:

*A communication is in plain language if the people who are the audience for that communication can quickly and easily*

- *find what they need*
- *understand what they find*
- *act appropriately on that understanding*

I think the bullet points above are the point of ANY communications.

And you thought plain vanilla was the boring choice.