

Wishing for better communications in 2021

Count me in as one of the many who are glad that 2020 is over. I am optimistic about the year ahead, in spite of the horrendous and deadly insurrection last week at the U.S. Capitol.

There's a lot to look forward to this year: a new administration, worldwide COVID vaccinations, and the subsequent return to normalcy. Maybe by the end of 2021 we'll be back to attending in-person events!



As a communicator, I thought the biggest lesson of 2020 was the need to adapt and quickly. Events went from in-person to virtual. Many workers were no longer commuting to their offices (I wonder what happened to drive time radio costs!). There was (and continues to be) a lot of stress and anxiety. Those realities impacted marketing efforts. We saw an increase in email marketing, on-line presentations and events, and a general toning down of advertising.

Now that we are in a new year, I have five wishes to make 2021 the year for more effective, high-impact communications.

1. Use email marketing more effectively

At the end of the year I got bombarded with donation pleas from many nonprofits—and I mean several in just one day. On December 31, 2020 it was particularly bad, as I got emails from each and every organization I have supported, and one organization sent me four or five emails! And then there's Overstock.com, which sends at least an email every single day—one day offering me 12% off and the next 15%. The lesson here is: Don't overwhelm your customer or donors. Be strategic and think of your recipient. And then there's the many small groups who are still sending all-image emails. The problem here is that unless the recipient downloads the images, your email appears blank. Follow some guidelines before you send out that next email. Jill Kurtz wrote a great Email Marketing Checklist, which is worth a read.

2. Leverage your website

Your website is your reception desk to the world. If people have questions, chances are they will check your website before they call. It follows your website should have all the information they need. Keep it updated, especially with any COVID protocols you are following. For many, the idea of spending money to update a website in these times may be anathema. However, an outdated website will result in customer

frustration and maybe even lost business.

3. Focus your social media efforts.

This is they year to choose your social media platforms and embrace them. The truth is that you can't effectively manage too many platforms. You won't be able to have meaningful engagement if you have to monitor too many streams. Choose the platforms that *perform* best for you, where you have the most traction and/or where the majority of your audience is. Do you really need to be on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, TikTok, etc? I am not saying that you can't try out a new outlet, but if you do, and it works well, perhaps you replace instead of adding. And if you are using multiple platforms, create content with each platform in mind. The post you use on LinkedIn should not be the same as the one you use on Twitter.

4. Use Zoom or Livestream more effectively.

Check out my post about this. I've spent too much time having to hear people explain how to use Zoom, muting/unmuting, and just plain wasting time reading lengthy presenter bios. People are spending much more time in front of computer screens, and want you to get to the point. I can read the bio myself if you send it in an email or provide a link to it during the presentation.

5. Copy edit and proofread all your marketing materials, including (perhaps especially) social media posts.

The other day, my local police department posted about how a driver ended up with her car on the train tracks because she used the gas pedal instead of the "breaks." And the local weather Twitter feed told me there would be "peaks" of sun. These are very small examples, but when you make these type of mistakes, you are showing a lack of care. So, proof everything before it goes live. And say what you mean clearly and concisely, and if you need help doing so, use a copy editor!

Happy New Year 2021! Let's work on making it better for our communications. If you have a 2021 communications wishes, share them with me in the comments.

Desperate times call for desperate measures?

Among the COVID economic downturn, some companies are getting desperate for business, as I wrote in my last post.

If you are desperate for business, does this mean you should do desperate things or act in a desperate manner? In one word, the answer is no. Appearing desperate or doing desperate things will backfire, guaranteed.

Jane Doe thought that she would reach out

Take for example the case of Jane Doe (using this name to protect this person's privacy). Jane Doe attended an online business presentation a couple of weeks ago, as did I. There was a networking component to the presentation, but I did not participate. After the event, the organizers sent a follow up email that included a list of all who attended. Several days later, I got an email from Jane Doe. This is what it said, in part:

It was great meeting you at the virtual event last week.

I am passionate about travel, having traveled to over 80 countries and 60 cruises on 5 continents. At award-winning [our company], we create amazing customized travel experiences for you, your friends, family, colleagues and

clients, saving you a lot of money, time and stress, on your “ideal vacation”, all with risk-free booking guarantees!

I would like to know more about you and your business and see how we can help grow each other’s businesses. Are you open to a 15 minute phone call? What is a good day/time/phone number?

I would like to add you to our email list where you will receive travel deals and travel tips. If you do not wish to receive these emails, kindly let us know via this email address at your earliest convenience.

I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Right off, I am irritated by this email. First, we didn’t meet. Second, this email is not personalized. And third, she says she will add me to her email list unless I opt out. And last, she says (twice) she needs to hear from me at my “earliest convenience.” Apparently, Jane repeated it because she meant immediately as she added me to her list and sent me a marketing email just two days later.

Jane Doe became a spammer to her email marketing company

Once I got her marketing email, I immediately unsubscribed. When asked why, I said I had never requested being on this list. That response will most likely categorize Jane Doe as a spammer, since she didn’t follow CAN-SPAM rules. People should opt in to your email, not opt out.

Is there a less desperate way?

You don’t have to take desperate or even illegal measures just because things are grim. Jane Doe could have reached out and said something like this:

Hello [name of person],

I got your name from the [event name] list, since we both attended the presentation by [presenter]. I enjoyed the presentation and wanted to reach out to attendees to introduce myself and my business.

My travel company, [name of business] specializes in customized travel experiences. For example, we recently created an unforgettable business retreat for a small company, in which we [insert salient details of special trip].

Is customized travel something you'd be interested in? If so, I'd love to chat with you. Please email me at [insert email] and we can set up a phone appointment. In the meantime, I invite you to visit my website at [insert website address and link] and view some of the many customized experiences we have created. Learn more about our other services, and take a moment to sign up for our weekly newsletter, which is chock full of travel specials and other great information. You can also click here [insert newsletter sign up] to sign up.

I look forward to staying in touch.

The bottom line and three better business tips

There's a difference between wanting to get more business and being desperate to get new business. Here are my for non-desperate, best business and email marketing practices:

- Don't spam people. Know the CAN-SPAM rules and remember you need audiences to opt in, not opt out.
- Customize outreach emails and personalize when possible.
- Write a compelling introductory email. Think about your audience—what's in it for them?

Don't let pandemic cause pandemonium in your business practices

The pandemic has left many desperate for business. These are tough economic times and lot of people around the globe are hurting. I get it. But the need to grow your business doesn't mean you can overlook best practices. In fact, doing things in a slipshod manner may even backfire.

Do I know you?

A couple weeks ago, I started receiving emails from "Debra" with no last name and no affiliation. The subject line had something to do with yoga classes. I figured it was spam from a company that knew I had signed up for a yoga event. I kept deleting these emails.

But on Monday, the subject line said something about outdoor yoga this week. I opened the email and found it was from a yoga studio in Washington, DC. I have never attended this studio. And I don't recall signing up for its emails. I unsubscribed because it is highly unlikely I will ever go in to Washington for a yoga class.



Email marketing best practices

1.) Introduce yourself

Bad: Adding people without permission; sending emails to a new list without introduction or buy-in.

Best practices: It's best to requiring consent, but if you are building your email marketing list, and you have new names, *always* end an introductory email explaining who you are and what you want, and then ask whether those people want to be on your list. You achieve this by segmenting your list.

2.) Use your business name

Bad: Not having a professional/identifying sender name on your emails.

Best practice: Use your business name in the return email unless you are the business, and then you should use first and last names. Think about how emails show up in your inbox.

Would you open an email from someone you don't know?

3.) Use your subject line to inform

Bad: Uninformative or vague subject lines that don't provide any specifics or needed details.

Best practice: No need to be clever, but don't be obtuse. Be clear as to what your email contains. If I don't know you, your subject line has to provide enough information for me to open your email.

Bottom line:

The pandemic is no excuse for forgetting your best business practices. By letting desperation for new business lead you to doing things thoughtlessly you are bound to hurt yourself more than help yourself.

How to be better at event marketing

Some event marketers are killing it. I have been impressed with Boston University Alumni Association's efforts. They are doing everything right: well-timed, well-designed event invitations, pre-event reminders, and always a post-event thank you email.

Not everyone is doing so well. Some event marketing, especially by small nonprofits, seems haphazard, with little planning and even smaller attention paid to details. And really, better event marketing pays attention to the details, the logistics, and the user experience.

First, plan good events

Marketing an event successfully starts with the event itself. Is it interesting or relevant to your audience? Is the date good, with few conflicts?



Photo by Karolina Grawbowska on Kaboompics.com

Entice and inform your audience

Once you have chosen the event, the date and the venue you are ready to market it to your audience. You will have to develop a description of the event that entices but also informs. Why would your audience want to come to this event? Who is speaking? Why are you hosting the event? What makes this event special or important? And you must provide all the important logistical information, such as: date, time, venue name and address, cost (including if free to attend), and ways to sign up.

Time the invitation properly

Think about how much time your audience needs to make a decision. If it is an event that requires travel and hotel reservations (e.g., annual conference, wedding), you will need to send it with a few months lead time. If the event is local, then you can market closer to the event time. However, don't send out an invitation too far in advance because it will be forgotten, but don't do it too close to the event because your audience may already have made other commitments.

What to include in the actual invitation

Emails must have text and a link to sign up. *Do not* ever have an image/graphic-only email, since some email programs do not automatically open images and require them to be downloaded.

Again, make sure to include all the details your audience needs to decide whether to attend or not (look at the list above).

Signing up should be easy

You should have an easy way to sign up—do not make me jump through hoops such as making me scroll through multiple screens, and having to create accounts and passwords. You are not selling tickets for an international flight. Think about what information you absolutely need (e.g., name, contact info such as address and email, credit card information), and start with that. Other information (e.g., phone number, demographics, etc.) that might be good to have should be weighed carefully. Asking for too much information can be a huge turn-off.

Always acknowledge sign-ups

This should go without saying, but once people sign up for your event, they should get an email confirmation.

Calendar links!

Be sure that the software you are using has a universal

calendar link both in the sign up screen and in the acknowledgment/confirmation email. Attendees should be able to download the event info to any major calendar (i.e., Apple, Outlook, Google).

Friendly reminders are welcome

Always send a reminder at least one day ahead. Include all important logistical information (i.e., start time, address, directions, public transportation/parking information, and any requirements (e.g., picture ID, cash on hand, laptop, etc.)).

After the fact

Always send something after the event—it can be a simple “thank you for attending,” or a survey/request for feedback, or sharing of information relevant to the event (e.g., contact information for speakers, handouts, bibliographies, etc.)

Would be nice if...

The software you use would be smart enough not to send event invites to people who have already registered. When I get another invitation to an event I have signed up for, I always think that I forgot to register or that my payment didn't go through.

Bottom line

Make your event marketing better: Always think about your audience and what they need in order to make a decision and attend your event.

Stupid on repeat=marketing fail

Repeat phone calls from different numbers, same message

Around 11 a.m. my cell phone rings and the caller ID shows an 1-800 number. I don't answer. Seconds later there's a voicemail message. It is a recording of a robotic woman warning of some account suspension. I delete the message without listening to all of it. About five or ten minutes later, another call from another 1-800 number. Again, I don't answer. And again, there's the exact same voicemail message. This has happened for the past three days. That's six calls from six different 1-800 numbers and six identical robotic voicemail messages.

Perhaps the spammer's "strategy" is this:

- Use an 1-800 number since it looks official
- Use different 1-800 numbers for each call, so target won't figure out it's the same entity calling
- Scare the target with an official sounding message about "immediate account suspension" to create fear/anxiety. This fear will lead to target answering the phone five minutes after the original message and/or calling back.
- Call at the same time every day because this will make a target answer or pick up

Stupid "marketing"

What's behind this "marketing" strategy is the assumption that the target won't see that the 1-800 calls are not official, and that they will pick up. In other words, the "strategy" is based on the idea that the target is too stupid to see that this is a scam.

Sending the same email, over and over and over and over...

There's a guy named Steve Marriot who really wants to speak to me about my credit. He wants it so much that he sends me the same email day after day. His subject line says "Let's grow together in 2019." He just wants to set up me to call him to discuss my credit needs. Or better yet, just apply since his company has analyzed my company and determined I am eligible for a quarter million dollar loan at a low rate! Okay then. Oh, and there is absolutely no information about Steve's "company" in the email. No website address, no description, no nothing but there is a link for an application. As if I am going to click that.

Putting the stupid in marketing

First, sending the same email multiple times does not make me want to open a line of credit with you. Credit and finance are trust-based transactions. I don't know Steve, but I do know he is running a con. He knows nothing about my company or me and nobody but nobody pre-approves you for a loan without knowing anything about your finances. Second, are you really that stupid to think that I am so stupid as to respond to an email from an unknown "financial" company?

Do you assume your customers are stupid? If you do, please stop. The only marketers that bet on stupidity are spammers. And that is the bottom line.

What's in it for me?

It's Copywriting 101

If you ever looked at any basic copywriting advice, you'd

probably have seen the bit where they tell you to talk about the benefits of whatever it is you are writing about. Benefits is what is in it for the audience. Perhaps they get a good price, or look younger, or help save the world. You are always supposed to highlight what the audience gets from the good or service or organization you are promoting. It's Copywriting 101.

But spammers don't take copywriting classes

The other day I got a spam email (meaning it was from someone I don't know, who probably harvested my name from the internet, and is trying to sell me something). I got the same email again yesterday. Here's what the email said:

Hi Deborah,

I just came across your blog madmimi.com and wanted to reach out to you. I am reaching out because I was wondering if you would post a 500 word article that contains 2-3 links that would be relevant to the article topic. The article would also need to be written .

Please advise on the cost for this service and if you offer a bulk pricing package.

Have an awesome Thursday,

Thanks,

[name withheld]

So many questions

Okay. Let's start with the blindingly obvious problem. I don't have a blog called madmimi.com (I do, however, used Mad Mimi for my sadly neglected newsletter).

Let's go on to the next part of the email: I'm being asked to post an article, presumably on my blog, about a non-disclosed

topic, and include two or three links, but to where exactly? The article “would have to be written,” presumably by me. Then the writer wants to know the cost for this service.

But really there is nothing in it for me

I’m supposed to conclude, only guessing here, that this email’s writer is willing to pay me to write an article about whatever I want to post on my own blog. But of course, that makes no sense. The email writer must have a subject in mind. And really, why would I post an article about any random subject on my blog, and charge someone for it if there is nothing in it for them, and it is not clear what is in it for me? I already have an established blog (you are reading it right now), where I have been posting articles written by me for the past 10+ years.

It seems that what the email writer is really trying to do, quite in-artfully, is to get me to respond asking for more information or perhaps check out the website associated with the writer’s email address. That’s why this is spam.

Answer “what’s it in it for me?”

If you want anything you write to succeed, start with how your audience benefits. What will they get from it? Imagine if this spammer would have said exactly what he/she meant (i.e., we’ll pay you to promote our product/service on your blog), I may have been more interested. Instead, I wrote a blog post about how bad these spammers are at selling. Perhaps it was a win after all.

You can have too much of a good thing

A visit to a good Indian restaurant goes bad

Last week, a friend and I headed out to a very good, local Indian restaurant to satisfy a craving for some naan and sag paneer. When we arrived, there were barely a couple of other people in the place, and so the hostess told us we had our choice of seats. After we sat down, a male server came by to take our order.

After the meal was served, a female server came by to see whether everything was satisfactory.

And then a different female server came by to see if “everything was OK.”

And then the male server came by to ask how everything was.

And then one of the female servers came by again to see how things were.

And then the other female server came by.

And before we were even done with the meal, one of the female servers asked if we needed a box for our food.

I lost count, but we were asked if everything was OK at least six or seven times by different servers and in fairly short intervals.

After all these unnecessary interruptions, my friend and I were annoyed, and left wondering if they needed the table (although a good half the restaurant was empty).



Photo by Chan Walrus from Pexels

Checking in is good...but doing it too often is not

After ordering, we should all expect two contacts in a restaurant: one to get asked if everything is to our liking, and a second one, closer to the end of the meal, to ask whether we want to have food boxed up, want to order dessert, or need our check.

But this restaurant took follow up and checking in to a level that was beyond annoying. They interrupted us too many times, seemingly without cause. Was it that the servers didn't communicate with each other? Were they bored because they didn't have enough customers? Who knows what motivated these servers, but all that checking in was way too much of a good thing, turning it into a bad thing.

Too much contact or follow up is disruptive, intrusive, annoying, and unnecessary.

What is true about overzealous restaurant servers is the same with email marketing. As I said in my last blog post, your email marketing should aim to be "just right." Just right

means sending not too much, nor too little email, and sending relevant, useful information too. In the Indian restaurant experience above, not only were these serves constantly interrupting, they weren't doing it with any real purpose.

So the next time you want to send one more email to "make sure people got the message," think about your last restaurant meal. Was it enjoyable and peaceful? Or were you annoyed because the servers kept asking you if everything was OK or you wanted another drink before you even finished the one you had in front of you.

Think like Goldilocks to improve your email marketing

I was on vacation for a couple of weeks, and during that time, I didn't hear from one of my friends at all. She didn't want to know if I'd arrived safely, what I was doing, or anything else. On the other hand, another acquaintance texted me several times, wanting to know how my flight was, what I was doing, was I having any fun, and so forth. And yet another friend sent me just two messages, both because she saw something that related to me and wanted to let me know.

In other words, I got too little from one friend, too much from another, and just the right amount from the third. I felt like I finally understood how Goldilocks felt when she broke in to the bears' house.



The Goldilocks Approach to Email Marketing Defined

All email marketers should apply a Goldilocks test to their email marketing, and figure out what make the “just right” email campaign. The Goldilocks test involves awareness of three issues: timing, quantity and content relevance. To be like Goldilocks, ask yourself whether you email marketing is too cold, too hot, or just right.

Too cold!

When the porridge goes cold, you don't want to eat it.

Your email marketing is too cold when you don't send any/enough email to your contact list, or you send irrelevant email that gets ignored/deleted. In this case, you risk being forgotten, or you are making your contacts think you are not in business any more, or worse, that you don't offer anything that is of value to them.

Too hot!

On the other hand, if the porridge is too hot, you can't eat it because don't want to touch it and risk being burned.

Your email marketing is too hot when you send too much email. You are overwhelming your contacts and risk alienating them. If you send too much email, your contacts don't know what is valuable. Also, too much email is annoying. Statistics back this up. More than a quarter of people who unsubscribe from email lists do so because they say they get too many emails. [Read more here.](#)

Just right!

When the porridge is at the ideal temperature, you can eat and even enjoy it.

The "just right" email campaign is when you send timely email that is valuable to your contacts. If you send well-timed, relevant email, you are doing your list a service. Your contacts will benefit from your email. A well thought out email campaign will have a better open rate, less churn, and may result in action on the part of your contacts (a sale, donation, download, etc.).

What makes an email marketing campaign just right for you? Please let me know in the comments.

Trust is essential and must be earned

My last blog post detailed an ongoing attack on my inbox by a “lead generation company” called Bark. As of today, I’ve continued to receive dozens of emails from both the same sender (“Kate Potter”) or with the same subject line (“new customers looking for your services”). In fact, I got at least six since last night.

But all I have to do is see who the sender is or read the same subject line to hit delete. Bark can continue to send emails until the end of days, and I will never open them. Why? Because I don’t trust that Bark is legitimate. In fact, Bark has earned the opposite reputation, that of a spammer, an illegitimate business that seeks to worm its way into getting you to click or call by sending emails that may have the veneer of legitimacy but are a front for a scheme.



Too many bad actors

Cybersecurity and privacy threats are rampant, and we have to guard constantly against them. There are just too many bad actors seeking to damage businesses and people by installing malware or by phishing to get passwords in order to steal identities.

Clicking on links in emails always opens us up to problems. That is, unless we trust the sender and know they are not acting maliciously.

Reputation matters

In order to keep opening and reading email, we need to trust

the sender. Generally, we trust senders we have a relationship with. We know some senders personally or we've conducted some kind of transaction with them (donation, purchase, etc.) and thus we trust them.

However, if we don't trust the sender, we may not even open the email. And if we do open the email, we are certainly not downloading attachments or clicking on links.

Spammers don't understand trust

Trust is essential in the keeping yourself safe from cyber threats. And that is what Bark and many other spammers don't seem to get. They seems to think that as long as they are hiding behind a *veneer* of legitimacy (looking like legitimate business query or coming from the correct industry), then we will just trust that they are real. But trust is earned. And when you send the same email over and over and over again, you are not earning trust. You are causing suspicion. When you attempt to send the same email from a different sender's names, you are not engendering believability, nor are you increasing the chance that the recipient will open the email.

Endnote

I just checked Bark on WHOIS. All information has been "redacted for privacy." In other words, there is no contact information whatsoever. All I can find out from WHOIS is the name of the domain registrar for this "company." And I can use this information to register a complaint.

How not to do email marketing

My inbox is under attack. In just the last couple of days, I have received no less than 15 emails from either the same sender or with the same subject line.



A barrage of junk

The first one came in on Sunday at 3 a.m. from “Emma Thompson” with the subject line “New customers looking for your services.” When I opened it, it said someone was seeking PR services. I deleted the email because I thought no serious agency would be sending out emails on Sunday at 3 a.m.

Later that morning, I got an email from “Kate Potter” with the subject line “Web designer quote.”

And then an email from “Mia West” with the subject line “New customers looking for your services.”

And then at least ten more emails throughout President’s Day from “Kate Potter” with alternating subject lines:

“Mobile Software Developer Quote”

“Photographer Quote”

“Packaging Designer Quote”

“Web Designer Quote”

Interspersed were two more emails from “Mia West,” subject: “New customer looking for your services.”

Notice a pattern? Same sender and/or same subject line.

This is lead generation?

I opened some of these email and found they all came from a supposed lead generation outfit called Bark(dot)com. This “company” found my website and copied my contact information into their database, and then began “contacting” me.

Perhaps Bark(dot)com is a legitimate business, but it doesn’t act like it. In fact, it is acting in a downright shady manner. Its marketing “method” is more like a spammer’s than that of a legitimate business’ email marketing technique.

If it acts like spam...

What makes these emails look and act like spam, and therefore be wholly ineffective:

- Sending during non-business hours and days
- Sending the same email time after time
- Sending way too many emails in too short a time span
- Sending emails that are not relevant and not personalized

Update

Since writing this post, I received six more emails, making it over 20 emails in a 48-hour time period.