

You need a reality check

This morning, I was reading an personal advice column in the Washington Post. It was about a woman whose mother-in-law is constantly bad mouthing her and who is trying to protect her son from the MIL's barbs. The columnist's advice was to keep the MIL away from her impressionable son. But a reader offered a different perspective, saying that kids can see through those things and they can develop good relationships with grandparents in spite of this negativity. I don't know who is right, but it shows the need to look at something from a different perspective or even various viewpoints. In other words, the woman seeking advice needed a reality check.

What is a reality check?

A reality check often provides a perspective we hadn't considered before or that we have discounted. It's why we often seek advice when making big decisions.

Why do you need a reality check?

If you are facing any sort of challenge—marketing, communications, interpersonal—you need a reality check. When you don't get advice or outside perspective, you will make decisions that are not always sound. This is why there's value to doing research and holding focus groups before you launch a product. It's the value of hiring consultants to provide non-organizational viewpoints when you are trying to find a solution.

It's like when you don't get someone to proofread your work and it goes out with a typo or two. (As an aside, last month I saw a big typo in a poster for a large consulting firm's advertising campaign. It was classic...I wish I had a picture). You are so involved in something you no longer have a clear-eyed view of it. You don't see the shortcomings or the mistakes or the errors in judgement.



Pic by Fauxels from Pexels.com

It's the value of professional advice and an outside perspective

In communications, the lack of a reality check often results in you missing the target or having a miscommunication. If you think something is clear because you understand it, it could be that somebody else does not get it. Perhaps you are using jargon that only people in your field use. Perhaps you are using language that is above the grade level of your audience. For example, a few years ago, I wrote some marketing copy for a hotel booking software company. I wrote that using this software would give hotel operators exponential growth. The client hated it! He said that most people won't understand what exponential means. I am not 100% sure he was right, but at the same time, he gave me a reality check about the words I was choosing to use.

Reality checks help avoid mistakes

Reality checks in the form of outside counsel can often save you from making costly mistakes. You get a reality check whenever you hire a professional to do something for you. It

could be market research, or graphic design, or UX design, or copy editing. Let someone who has experience and an outside perspective help you.

Do you need a reality check?

3 actions to improve your marketing communications

Improving marketing means making it effective

It's not enough for your marketing efforts to include a clever headline, a fantastic design or great graphics. Your marketing communications need to be effective. To be effective, your communications must *resonate* with your intended audience. That is, audiences must *understand* what you are saying, *agree* with the premise, and then *act* (e.g., buy your product, donate to your cause, vote for your candidate).

But sometimes, marketing communications efforts don't achieve their goals. Here are three actions you can take that are guaranteed to improve your efforts. And improving your marketing communications could improve your results.

1. Explain the why

Your primary task is to explain why your customer should do business with you. Is it because you have the best quality, the best prices, the highest reliability? Do you solve an issue your customer has? You also have to establish why someone would choose your organization over another organization that does the same thing.

2. Use plain language

Plain language is about making it easy to understand what you are saying. Perhaps you think using big words and industry terms makes you look more knowledgeable. It doesn't. It makes it harder for your audience to understand what you are saying. So lose the jargon and the multi-syllable words. Focus on making things easy to read and understand.

(Read my post on plain language: People should understand)

3. Pay attention to details

The other day three packages were delivered to my door. I wasn't expecting anything, and when I opened the door, I saw none of them were for me. The delivery truck was still outside so I called out to the driver. She claimed that the GPS sent her to my house. The house number on the packages was the same as my house, but not the street. If you don't pay attention to details, you end up delivering packages to the wrong address.

You have to check and double check. Fact check and proofread everything, from the headline or the subject line to the website link to the caption. EVERYTHING. If you don't, you risk making sloppy mistakes.

Mistakes (sloppy or factual) result in lost credibility. Lost credibility results in lost support. Yes, details do matter.

Here's the bottom line: Prioritize the basics of communications to improve your marketing efforts and boost your results.

One attribute to improve your marketing efforts in 2022

First, a story

Over the holidays, I flew in and out of Dulles Airport, which has an (exclusive?) arrangement with the Washington Flyer taxi company. I made a reservation for a Washington Flyer taxi to pick me up and drive me to the airport. The driver arrived early to pick me up. He carried my suitcase down my front steps to the car. He asked me if I had everything I needed and then we were off. We had a nice chat, and before you knew it, we were at the airport, where he wished me a safe journey. It was a five-star experience.

On my way back, however, my experience rated two stars at best. Why? It was the same company (Washington Flyer), the same route, but a different driver. The driver on the return stretch did not speak to me. He would not engage in any small talk about the weather or the traffic. So we traveled in silence. And then, when we arrived at my house, he took out my suitcase out of the trunk and left it there, not offering to carry it up the stairs for me. I am not sure if he didn't speak English very well, or perhaps was hard of hearing, but the lack of engagement made the taxi ride tedious and the driver's lack of attention was irritating.

Your experience matters

Having a friendly interchange makes a difference in how you feel about your experience. Think about when you go to a store and the clerk can't be bothered to help you. You probably just buy what you came for or you just walk out of the store. Then think about the store where you go in and you are greeted with a friendly smile and a "what can I help you find today?" You feel welcome, which may lead to you spending more time in the

store or even buying more than you planned. Or when you go to a party, and the host greets you warmly and introduces you to others. Or when you are at a networking event, and someone smiles and comes over to speak to you. Or when you are traveling, and can't find an address until someone offers to show you the way.



Photo by Belle Co from Pexels

What is it to be friendly?

Friendliness is a positive attribute.

Merriam-Webster provides several definitions for the word "friendly," among them:

showing kindly interest and goodwill

cheerful, comforting

serving a beneficial or helpful purpose

easy to use or understand

designed or intended to accommodate particular needs, users, etc.

What is friendly marketing?

Friendly marketing creates a better, more positive experience for your audience.

- Friendly marketing considers you (the audience/end users) its first priority.
- Friendly marketing makes things clear and easy to understand.
- Friendly marketing gives you the information you need to make a decision.

What's not friendly marketing?

Unfriendly marketing creates annoyance and frustration, and results in a negative experience for your audience.

- It's not friendly to overwhelm your audience with email marketing messages.
- It's not friendly to use jargon and hard to understand language.
- It's not friendly to make your website visitors struggle to find what they need.

Bottom line: Make it your marketing resolution for 2022 to be more friendly

Marketing by attrition?

Is your idea of marketing to send out the same offer over and over and over and over again in the hopes that your target will get so tired of hearing from you that they'll just pay up to get rid of you? No? Well, it seems to be the force behind a lot of marketing, especially direct mail and email marketing. I call it marketing by attrition and I think it is probably the least effective type of marketing there is (not too mention the most annoying to recipients).

An example

Case in point is Sirius XM. A few months ago, I bought a new car that included three months free of Sirius XM radio. Before I even had the car a couple of weeks, I got a letter from Sirius that said I could sign up for \$5 per month for a year(!). But then, I read in the small print, I would be charged \$16.99 per month after. SiriusXM sent me this exact offer in a letter several more times. Then, when my three-month trial was over, they sent me another slew of letters. So many in fact, I don't have an exact number.

The offer is always the same. I am still not interested, but I bet they will continue sending me letters for the next year or more.

Is there a strategy?

What is the strategy here? Is there a strategy? Or is it a mandate that hasn't been ever reviewed?

It seems to me that there's some sort of mandate or directive at large companies, which have hundreds of thousands of potential clients, to keep marketing the same offer to each person who doesn't sign up for the product or service. And keep sending it until they sign up.

But what happens if the target doesn't respond?

Experience says that if a target doesn't respond to your marketing, you may need to change something. Perhaps you need to revise the offer. Or perhaps you need to change your marketing tactics. In the marketing by attrition "strategy," there seems to be no course correction other than eventually giving up. I wonder if there is a certain number of mailings that these companies send out, perhaps based on cost, after which they conclude the cost of having you as client is too high. This method seems highly ineffective and costly.

What would work better?

Perhaps what would work better is to really understand what motivates each particular potential customer. This could involve sending out a survey or having a better sense of each customer through demographic and psychographic data.

Bottom line

If you are marketing by attrition, you may be fighting a long and losing battle.

4 Avoidable Pandemic Marketing Failures

When the pandemic forced the country into lockdown last year, yoga studios were among the many non-essential businesses forced to close. Although yoga is best practiced in person with close instructor supervision, yoga studios adapted to the situation and figured how to provide classes online.

Having good email lists became essential as yoga studios had to contact students to let them know how to proceed. Good websites were also important. There, yoga studio owners could post new COVID policies and new schedules. Most yoga studios were already using the online Mindbody software for people to enroll and pay for classes, so that aspect was seamless.



Photo by Dmytro from Pexels

Up to this point, all three studios I have attended in the past couple of years were doing the same. Each studio was offering classes on Zoom and registering for them was easy to do online. Studios would send out links to the Zoom class and with the click of a mouse, we were doing yoga in our spare rooms and basements. In June 2020, Maryland started lifting restrictions and began allowing non-essential businesses to reopen with capacity limits. Also, the weather got nicer. And that's where these three studios showed their business savvy.

Studio A found a nearby park and negotiated a permit with the city to start providing outdoor classes. Outdoor classes cost \$25 (\$5 more than the pre-pandemic drop-in cost) but were offered several times a week over the course of the summer and into early fall.

Studio B found a several locations that were willing to host outdoor classes, including a brewery and a plant nursery. Pretty soon, they were offering various outdoor classes. This studio charged regular drop-in (\$18 or donation) and offered a minimum once a week outdoor option in addition to its Zoom offerings.

Studio C kept doing Zoom and found a place to offer outdoor classes on a limited basis (four times total in the summer of 2020) and charged a workshop price of \$30 for these. Drop-in classes at this studio had been \$18, and it offered a \$15 Zoom drop-in rate.

As cooler weather started and Maryland further scaled back pandemic restrictions, Studios A and B started offering limited in person classes, with few students, air purifiers and open windows, lots of social distancing, and masks required. In the spring of 2021, as more people were getting vaccinated, Studios A and B added more in-person classes and as the weather got warmer, also added more outdoor options. Studio C opened last, but not before announcing a GoFund Me campaign to raise funds to be able to open its doors.

I don't know the financial situation of any of these studios, but it seems to me Studio C's situation was precarious to be asking for donations. And not coincidentally, out of the three, Studio C did the worst at marketing.

Failure #1: Failure to adapt

Studios A and B were the quickest to figure out that people wanted to do in-person yoga instead of over Zoom, and the only way to do it was to hold classes outdoors. Studio C, on the other hand, was very slow to figure out how to offer outdoor yoga, and when it did, it only did so infrequently and at a high cost.

Failure #2: Failure to communicate

Studios A and B sent weekly email blasts about current classes and upcoming changes and generally to stay in touch. Studio C only sent emails sporadically and instead spent the pandemic redesigning its website. When Studio C sent out an email announcing its new website it failed to announce (disclose) that it had also raised prices. During the pandemic, there was a Zoom drop in rate of \$15. From one week to the next, the drop in rate for Zoom classes became \$19, a 25% increase. Once Studio C opened its physical location, it started sending out semi-weekly emails announcing "new in studio offerings" and a link to those, except that link never worked. Studio C didn't use email marketing to its potential.

Failure #3: Failure to check out the competition

If you don't know what others are doing, you can't effectively compete with them. If Studio C had taken a moment to sign up for other studio's emails or even check out their websites, it would have seen that these other studios were offering in-person classes outdoors.

Failure#4: Failure to seek out reliable business advice

When interviewed by a local TV station about pandemic effects, Studio C's owner admitted that she did not like to ask for help but that she was forced to run a GoFund Me campaign to be able to pay back rent and open. If Studio C's owner had sought out business advice early on in the pandemic, she may have been in a better position. We are not all born with business sense, but we should have sense enough to know we don't have it and that we should seek it.

The bottom line

Keeping your business open, and by extension, doing a good job at marketing, was hugely challenging during a global pandemic. The businesses that survived were all able to adapt to the changing circumstances. And those that did the best job at marketing, not only survived but thrived.

The one question you must answer in marketing

There's so much bad marketing out there: Ads that don't convince. Unconvincing pitches that get ignored. Generic email marketing that gets discarded.

All of them fail to answer one simple (not easy) question: Why?

Give a reason to make me want to connect on LinkedIn

Recently, I got a LinkedIn connection request from someone I don't know. She's a marketing manager at a local service provider. We've never met and we don't have any connections in

common. And she didn't personalize the invitation. In other words, she didn't say why she thought we should connect. I clicked ignore. And I clicked ignore on another half-dozen requests I got this month that weren't personalized. None of those people thought they should provide any reason why we should connect.

A politician who is an outsider. So what?

In the recent Virginia primary, the Republican candidate for governor was running an ad touting his experience and background. Then he said this: "It's going to take an outsider [to fix Virginia's issues]" What he didn't address is why. Why would it take an outsider? What does an outsider bring to the situation?

It's about answering the why

To market your product or service effectively, you must tell your audience *why* they should choose your offering. People need to have a reason (preferably a good reason) to act.

Here's the bottom line: Provide an answer to why, and you will improve your marketing. It's really that simple.

Marketing does not work if your operations aren't up to the task

Marketing is not just about promotion, sales, or pricing. Marketing is also customer service and customer

communication. Marketing is about operations and logistics. In other words, can you fulfill the orders? If your operations are not working well, no amount of marketing is going to close a sale.

Where is my order?

A couple of weeks ago, a friend recommended some face masks (I am not going to give this company any other publicity, so I will refer to it as the company). She even had a promotional discount to share with me. I went to the company website, and I bought a set of three masks.

At 2:51 p.m., I got an email with my receipt.

At 3:01 p.m. got another email confirming my order, which said there would be a one to three day processing time before shipping.

At 3:03 p.m. I got another email, this one thanking me for my order and asking me to submit a review to Facebook. Mind you, I don't yet have the product.

At 3:05 p.m. I got an email with the subject line: "Deborah, You Forgot Your Filters!" (I didn't forget the filters, I just chose not to order them.)

At 3:08 p.m., I got a fifth email with the subject line: "You Forgot Your Filters."

In the space of 15 minutes, I got FIVE emails. That's too many.

The next day, I got two emails:

"Your Orders (sic) About To Ship Out...Don't Forget Your Filters"

And

"Deborah, Your Orders (sic) About To Ship...Don't Forget Your

Filters.”

Now, I am getting very irritated. Clearly, they want me to order filters before they ship out my order, and they are not being subtle about it.

One week later, I still hadn't gotten a shipment notification. I email the company asking where my order is. I get this email reply:

Greetings Deborah,

Thank you so much for taking the time to reach out to us ☐

We would like to thank you for your patience and we sincerely apologize for any delays in delivering your order!

I will personally reach out to our fulfillment team and ensure that your order gets expedited and sent out for delivery ASAP.

Once your order has shipped, you will automatically receive an email containing the tracking information.

Thank you for being so patient with us, it has not gone unnoticed <3

If there is anything else we can ever help you with, please, just let us know – it would be our pleasure to serve you.

Okay. Nice enough email, but no answer to my query, “Where is my order?”

I replied telling the customer service agent that if my order was not shipping that day, I wanted it cancelled. The agent replied:

Hello Deborah,

Thank you so much for your reply and apologies for the inconvenience.

I have reached out to our fulfilment (sic) team and found that there are orders that haven't been shipped due to courier delays affected by the pandemic. I've refunded your last order as requested.

Please allow 5-10 business days for the refund to be processed. Reimbursement of funds will be allocated back to the original form of payment used for purchase.

Again, we are truly sorry about the delays.

One full year into the pandemic, this company is blaming it for shipping delays!

Wow. If this were happening sometime in 2020, perhaps this excuse would ring true. Or even during the USPS breakdown in December. But in March of 2021? This is just a stupid excuse.

There are plenty of other mask providers

I got my refund, but then I went to another mask maker, where I ordered masks on Sunday, got a confirmation email (just one email, not five), and then on Tuesday, got an email saying my masks shipped. I got my new masks yesterday. No muss, no fuss. Just the way any other transaction should be. I have gotten no marketing emails. And actually, if I did get a promotional email now, I would most likely buy from this company, since I had a positive experience.

How to fail at marketing

The first company does not understand marketing.

Here's just some of the issues:

- Focusing on its needs or goals (in this case, selling filters), not the customer's

- Not delivering what it promised.
- Blaming an external circumstance instead of taking responsibility.
- Communicating aggressively to sell and not to service.

And how to succeed

The second company just did what anyone expects from any sales transaction: take an order and then fulfill it. It is that simple.

Bottom line

Before you blame your marketing efforts for lackluster sales, take a look at your operations. Are you fulfilling orders in a timely manner? Is customer service working well? Are you communicating any issues to your customers? Marketing can't solve operational issues.

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 downloaded 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.

What helps businesses thrive during COVID-19?

While many businesses, especially restaurants and small retailers, have seen their revenue drop because of COVID-19, others have thrived.

Some business failures are due to circumstance and public health regulations, such as lock down orders and capacity restrictions. But in some cases, businesses failed because they were unable to respond to the new situation.

Not adapting to the situation:

I know a small, local gift store carries an item I was shopping for. I went to Google and found the store has no website. According to the Google business information, this store opens weekdays at 10:00 a.m. I headed out to the store on a Wednesday around 2 p.m. I found a handwritten note on the door listing the shop's (reduced) hours, which said the store opens Monday through Thursday noon to 4:00 p.m. However, the lights were off and the store was closed, and I was not able to buy what I needed.

To recap, this store has:

- No website (and thus no way to shop online)
- No updated Google business information

- No social media

Making the best of the situation:

Then, because I still needed this item, I checked out a larger gift store within 10 miles of the small store. This other store does have a website, with online ordering, so I was able to determine whether they carry what I am looking for. It also has updated its Google information, which reflects that it provides curbside pickup. I explore the website, and I find out exactly what COVID measures the store is taking (i.e., requiring masks, providing sanitizer, restricting the number of people in store, widening the aisles to allow for social distancing, and increasing the air circulation).

This second store has:

- Updated website that includes COVID-specific information and the ability to order online
- Updated Google business information
- Social media, with a robust Facebook presence that includes videos and special deals.

How do businesses thrive during COVID? Here are three must-dos:

Embrace digital more than ever. Restaurants and small retailers embraced online ordering (just as the big box stores have done for years). My local library switched to an online ordering and appointments-based way to get books. Successful organizations use all types of digital presence:—social media, websites, Google profiles, e-newsletters, etc.—to communicate with customers, clients, or donors. With many people choosing to stay home or working from home, the internet has become even more important.

Be aware of the situation and explain how you are responding. Do you understand how your customers feel? Are they anxious about getting the virus? Do they want to shop safely? Do they

want to save money? COVID has changed the reality for everyone. You have to make changes, and more importantly, you have to make sure your customers know what you are doing to respond to the situation.

Go virtual and like it. Many organizations and businesses use events to drum up support and sales. In 2020, events went from being in person to being virtual. Using a virtual format is not the same as being in person, but to succeed, organizations need to embrace this reality and adapt to it. Churches and synagogues started using Zoom and other livestreaming software to provide religious services to their congregants. Associations moved their annual meetings to be virtual. Some stores, such as the second example above, switched their product demonstrations to platforms such as Facebook Live.

The bottom line is that to thrive during COVID, businesses have to adapt. Failure to adapt will also mean failure to thrive.

Have you seen good examples of adaptation? Please share in the comments.

Are you asking the right questions?

No doubt, you've heard that Congress is looking into new Postmaster General Louis DeJoy's handling of the USPS. In the last few weeks since DeJoy took his post, the mail has slowed

down, sorting machines have been removed and the post office has told the states to be aware of these issues in planning for mail-in ballots. DeJoy was asked to appear before the Senate on Friday, and the House on Monday.

Representative Katie Porter is very good at asking questions

On Monday, Representative Katie Porter (D-CA), used her questioning skills to establish just how little DeJoy knows about the agency that he is leading. Rep. Porter asked DeJoy if he knew the cost of postcard stamp (he didn't) or how many people vote by mail (he didn't). You can read more about it in this Rolling Stone article or this one in Vox.

Rep. Porter knew what information she wanted to obtain from DeJoy to expose how unqualified he is to lead this agency, let alone reform it, and she asked the right questions to get what she wanted.

Asking the right questions is crucial to getting what you want.

If you ask the wrong questions or not enough questions, you are not going to get the information you need.

Over the weekend, I reviewed a promotional article for a small nonprofit. The article was long and did not get to the point until the last paragraph. I re-organized the paragraphs, and added some crucial information. The nonprofit hadn't known enough to ask the right questions.

What questions do you need answers to?

When you are writing any communication materials, you need to ask the right questions. These include:

- Who is the intended audience for this piece?
- What do I want the audience to know?
- What does the audience need to know in order to act?
- What is the most relevant information that I need to

communicate?

If you don't ask these questions, you are not going to produce the right information or what you produce is not going to be effective.

Bottom line: To produce effective communications, you must start with asking yourself the right questions.