

Is your marketing communication better than you?

Have you ever run into a situation where a company has absolutely gorgeous marketing materials, but its service or product is sub par? That's a situation where the marketing draws people in, but the product or service loses them.

I am looking to do some home improvement and I went to Angie's List. I found several companies in the category and checked out each company website. I was pretty impressed with one company in particular. Their website was not only attractive, but functional and informative. I called to make an appointment for an estimate. The woman seemed friendly and knowledgeable and set up an appointment that would be confirmed via email. This company seems to be pretty technologically savvy. The appointment was confirmed but a couple of hours later I got an email from a manager saying that he couldn't keep that appointment and could we change it. We went back and forth and settled on Tuesday (yesterday) at 6 p.m.

At 5 p.m. yesterday the estimator called to tell me he can't make it and can he come tomorrow. As it turns out, I don't have time today, and I figured that if a company can't keep an appointment that does not bode well for the process. Further, it is not professional to keep changing appointments and to offer excuses. My time is valuable and if this company wants my business, the estimator would make an effort to show at the appointed time. I told him to forget it. There are other companies that do this work, and so far, two other companies have shown up on time for our estimate appointments. For me, punctuality and reliability are important indicators of how a company performs.

In this case, this company appears to be competent but in practice is not.

When your marketing is bad, you may not get the customers you want. But if your marketing is better than you are, your potential customers will not stick with you. They will be drawn in, but you will lose them.

Your marketing should be attractive, but if you are spending more money and time on marketing and less on your service or product, that marketing dollar is wasted.

Thoughts?

Are you rewarding loyalty?

I have been thinking a lot about loyalty and whether companies value it or not.

Take for example, my customer relationship with ATT Wireless. I have been a customer for several years now (although not by choice rather by the acquisition of my old carrier Cingular). I called customer service the other day to see if they would credit several spam texts I received (I don't have unlimited text and pay 20 cents per message). The agent placed me on a ten minute hold "to check my account" and later informed that it was not company policy to do so, but she would credit 40 cents to my account. Now, mind you, I had a similar conversation with another agent last year, and there was no problem crediting my account. No need to review. No lengthy process. I asked the agent if she was really giving me a hard time over 40 cents when I had been a customer for so many years.

This interaction seems to prove that ATT is not particularly concerned with customer loyalty. They would rather talk “company policy” to me than think about rewarding my patronage, which over the years is in the several \$1000s.

I have been at my gym for several years. Has it ever given me anything to show appreciation for staying with it? NEW members get perks (free personal training or a t-shirt or whatever) but what do OLD members get? NOTHING. How does this reinforce customer loyalty?

Yet, everywhere you turn there are loyalty programs. From the local bakery, where 12 stamps will result in one free loaf of bread to the pharmacy where you swipe your card to get “reward dollars” after you’ve spent a certain amount. Some of these loyalty programs do reward a loyal customer with something tangible and some are meant as a database mining operation. Guess which is which.

Large companies, especially financial institutions, seem to take customer loyalty for granted. Either that, or they simply don’t care if customers are loyal. If you have been at your bank for more than five years, are you getting anything? A better interest rate? A free safety deposit box? I bet the answer is no, you aren’t getting a single cent. Yet, some banks will reward new customers by giving them a cash bonus deposited to their new accounts.

Customer loyalty is an area that marketing communications can’t fix by itself. It needs operations/institutional support. However, as a marketer, you need to be concerned about it. **You can attract all sorts of new business with good communications efforts, but can you retain it?** Are you doing something to reward “old” business?

If you aren’t thinking about customer loyalty and what you are doing to maintain it and reward it, then you are probably losing customers at this very moment.

Weekly communications #fail: losing momentum

Momentum is a physics term, which means that speed or forward motion of an object is equal to mass times velocity. In everyday usage, momentum is the strength or speed gained by motion or a series of events (here is Merriam-Webster's definition).

Momentum is good for marketing—it helps you build up steam and propels you forward (gets you new business, more readers, bigger audience, etc). But if when things are starting to speed up, you apply the brakes, you (like your car) will quite literally slow down (lose momentum).

Losing momentum is a marketing killer.

How do you lose momentum? There are many “brakes.” Here are few examples:

Not returning inquiry calls: If I call you for information, I am what they call a warm prospect. By not calling me back, you are losing me. By taking your sweet time to return said calls, you also lose momentum.

Not following up: In mid-December I attended the inaugural event for a new DC networking group. It sounded good and I provided my email, saying I would be happy to help organize an event. I haven't heard ONE word from them. They haven't held another event. They lost momentum.

Changing your terms suddenly (dashing expectations): Say you

always get bread served at your favorite restaurant, and suddenly, the restaurant decides to cut costs and there goes the bread basket. It may have been what you enjoyed about the place, and now your expectations are dashed. You may not return.

Not blogging (or Tweeting or posting on Facebook) for months:

You started your blog, and you had lots to say. And then you stopped posting. Any readership (or followers) you had, will dwindle. You lost momentum.

Whenever you do something that slows down your interaction with a prospective customer or client, you are losing momentum. That is a marketing/communications failure.

Have you experienced lost marketing momentum? Please give me your examples in the comments.

Why you must have a marketing timeline

This past Saturday, I received a 6"x11" size postcard, in color (read: higher printing costs) advertising an event taking place on Sunday. Yes, you read that right. I got the expensive postcard one day before an event, and this was for a nonprofit group. You know what this postcard was? **A total waste of money.** I had already heard about the event via social media and newsletter. I had already decided not to attend.



Photo: Time by Thomas Hawk, via Flickr.

Why have a marketing timeline

What this organization probably failed to do was a build an accurate marketing timeline. Without a timeline, you will print and mail stuff too late (or too early), send newsletters too often or not frequently enough, send a press release too far from the event, etc. Marketing takes planning. Planning is essential if you want to get the most for your marketing dollars. In the case above, the postcard was a complete waste of marketing dollars. Very few, if any people, decide to attend an all-day event (which has a registration fee that is higher at the door) the day before.

How to build a marketing timeline

You probably will want to either sketch this out on a calendar or use a spreadsheet program to map this out.

1. Start with the end (your target date) and work backward.
2. Create a row for each communications vehicle, such as press release, newsletter, email blast, brochure, etc.
3. Decide how many days prior to the target date you want each communications vehicle to reach your audience.
4. Consider preparation time for each communications vehicle. For example, for printed materials, you have to consider printing times, shipping to you, delivery times (are you using first class mail or bulk) and approval process. Set target dates for each preparation step.
5. Fill out your timeline.

Remember to give yourself time to plan your marketing timeline!

Your thoughts?

Why cold calling doesn't work

It's 9:30 a.m. and I am trying to concentrate on a project when my phone rings. It is a representative from my credit card company. She is selling some additional service like travel insurance or some such. She is speaking in a monotone, and barely letting me get in a word edgewise. I speak over her and tell her to remove me from the marketing list. She goes away but only after she has interrupted my work and made me lose five minutes listening to her spiel.

I'd bet you have had the exact same thing happen to you. Everyone has. Unsolicited telemarketing calls are the bane of my existence, and worse yet if they are recorded calls (robo-calls). And we get pounded with them—I get at least two or three a day. Luckily, most of us have caller ID and don't pick up calls from numbers we don't recognize or that are places we don't do business with.

One time, I got a call from a real estate agent who went on and on about “listings in my area” and when I asked her what area that was, she referred to a place I hadn't even heard of. I told her that she was calling the wrong person, and she had the nerve to be huffy at me.

Cold calls just don't work. Why?

- Because you are quite literally interrupting someone or catching him/her at a time that is inconvenient.
- Because with caller ID, people can choose to ignore your call.
- Because these calls are not invited or welcome.
- Because they are blindly selling something based on broad factors like ZIP codes or business codes.
- Because there are too many variables that must align to make a sale: person answers call, person is receptive to talking, person is interested in the offer.

The best type of marketing is targeted. Cold calling by its nature is not targeted. Even if you a home insurance sales person cold calling ten people who just bought a home, you aren't really targeting because you don't know whether those people already have home insurance.

The best type of marketing is customized. With cold calling, due to volume and your lack of knowledge about the target, you will likely follow a script, which, by its nature is not customized.

The best type of marketing is inbound marketing. Cold calling is outbound marketing at its very worst. It's sending out messages to people who don't necessarily want or need these messages and hoping that through some margin of return, you will get enough business to justify the expense.

Ah yes, I know. You got the biggest client you have through cold calling. I think you were lucky. You called someone at a convenient time, with a message to which he or she was receptive. And you were able to get him or her to actually pick up the phone. Or that person did not have caller ID. Or that person was in a very good mood that day.

Why not put effort into other things that do work and that don't leave your prospects cold?

P.S. Plus of course, fewer and fewer people are using landline telephones these days, and cell phones are not listed.

Trust

Trust: the movie

On Sunday night I watched the movie Trust (starring Clive Owen and Catherine Keener), which is about how a teenage girl gets scammed by a pervert online. I won't give away all the plot details, but suffice it to say that it is a powerful and sad commentary on the underbelly of the online world, the power of the Internet; teenage angst and desire for acceptance; and parental disconnection.

Weirdly, this movie set the stage for an incident that happened yesterday that has made me think hard about the nature of trust and the online world.



Photo by Libby Levi for OpenSource.com via Flickr

Trust online

The nature of online interactions makes it hard to know who you are dealing with. As in the movie Trust, a person can provide a fake name, or picture or any other details. Unless we know otherwise, we are forced to trust the person is who she or he says she/he is. This is why some of us limit who we are friends with on Facebook or connect with on LinkedIn. Twitter is a bit trickier.

Trust can be gained and lost

This blog and website was built by a virtual assistant/small business web developer whom I found online. I found her through Twitter when I was looking for some VA assistance. Since she had Web and WordPress skills, she fixed a couple of issues on my old website, and then built this website. Along the way, I referred a couple of people to her. **But.** She was a bit hard to get a hold of. She would disappear for days on end and not respond to emails or calls. Getting the project done was painful and slow. However, I was pleased with the end result.

This person also sold me web hosting on HostGator, as she was a reseller. I paid her upfront for a year of hosting. She assured me that I could deal with HostGator directly if I had any issues. Except when I did have an issue, it turned out she wasn't telling the truth. Yesterday, I found I had no email access and my website was down with a page that said "account suspended." I called HostGator immediately, and to make a long story short, I was told that the account holder—the virtual assistant—had not paid her account and that in order to make changes to the account *she* would have to contact HostGator. Well, I told you she was hard to get a hold of. I called both numbers I had for her (one was disconnected and the other one went to a voice mail that was not accepting messages). I sent email, and I tweeted her repeatedly. She was not to be found.

In the end, I was forced set up and pay for a new hosting account, and because I had a password, was able to get HostGator to transfer the files. It was stressful. HostGator has all sorts of rules about reseller accounts about which I had no clue. I was told that my website/email could be down for as long as 48 hours. In the end, it was only a couple of hours.

I learned a lesson the hard way. You can't and shouldn't trust anybody you don't know personally (and even then) completely.

In this case, I should have retained control of my web hosting.

To quote Ronald Reagan, “trust but verify”

There is only so much you can do...some people will try to scam you even if you check out references etc. But before you put money on the table, you must do your due diligence and try to verify a person's credentials. Also, check in with your gut. Your gut always seems to know.

Trust and marketing

As a marketer, part of your job is to make sure potential customers and clients can and do trust you. Without trust, there can be no business relationship. This is why we include actual addresses, names and phone numbers in our collateral material (including and especially websites). This is why we have customer/client testimonials and provide references. And this is why third party sites like Yelp and Angie's List are doing so well.

Trust is integral to marketing a business. Without it, you are toast.

Once trust is broken, you are done. I will never do business with the VA business again. And neither will anyone I know. Because of social media, my voice is amplified. She must not truly understand this because 24 hours later, I still haven't heard a word. Radio silence in an online world.

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.

When ego and attitude derail your marketing efforts

Personality matters in marketing, especially if you are marketing yourself. Personality affects the tone of your marketing efforts, and in the case of ego, what you highlight and what you don't.

Since personality and ego are well, personal, we often don't discuss them as part of our communications strategy. But we should. Having a bad attitude or an insufferably big ego can and will derail marketing and communications efforts.

What do I mean? Perhaps by now you have heard of the fracas that has ensued from the Susan G. Komen for the Cure Foundation's decision to defund Planned Parenthood. I am not going to discuss the politics of it, but I will discuss the communications aspect of it. Komen did not handle communications well at all. Planned Parenthood actually took the news and made it into a fundraising point, while Komen was silent. Not even answering calls from the news media (they provided no comment to CBS Evening News for example). Komen has also been deleting negative comments from its Facebook page.

It seems as though Komen did not anticipate or prepare for the

backlash of this decision, and therefore has allowed its critics to transform the message (Komen is playing politics with women's lives). Why? In my opinion, Komen is a victim of big ego. Komen seems to believe that because it is such a large, and up to now, well respected, organization, that its donors will support whatever it does. But Komen miscalculated. Komen allowed ego to get in the way of having a smart communications strategy that would explain its decision, defend it and keep supporters happy.

It is important to remember that companies and organizations are run by individuals, who have attitudes and personalities that influence how they act.

On an individual level, attitude is even more important when marketing. Last week, I attended an alumni event for my graduate school institution. As I was sitting and eating my appetizers, I saw a guy whom I recognized as an alum of my undergraduate institution.

Me: "Didn't you go to [name of school]?"

Him: "Yes."

Me: "I thought I recognized you."

Him: [no comment]

Then I noticed that the other woman at the table had graduated from law school the same year as this guy (both had name tags with the name of the school and grad year). I pointed it out to both of them. She immediately tried to figure out if there was any connection. He didn't. As we continued this increasingly painful exchange, I asked him what law firm he works for. It turns out he is looking for a job in government and is doing tax preparation in the meantime.

If he had a better attitude, perhaps I would try to see if I know of any resources for him. But instead this man has a

tremendously bad attitude, left a bad impression and apparently does not understand what networking is and what it can do for you.

Your attitude matters because it determines how people react to you. If you have ever worked at a large organization with people at its helm that have big egos and/or bad attitudes, you know this impacts how the organization communicates and markets itself. It could be that the CEO/President is a narcissist and thinks that all press releases should quote him/her. It could be that the VP of Communications shuts down any creative idea if it differs from his/her own. And so forth.

Next time you have a marketing/communications failure, check to see if attitude, personality or ego had anything to do with it.

Have you signed up for the DBMC newsletter yet? First edition of the year is coming out next week. Sign up box is on the upper right hand side of this page.

Why so many ads fail

Have you ever been watching TV and seen a commercial that falls flat or that outright offends you? I bet you have. I have: the Go Daddy commercials from last year's Super Bowl, for example, were way offensive and sexist. So, how did they make it to such a massive audience? Why did they get made at all?

I think the answer lies in some nuggets from this Washington

Post-Kaiser Family Foundation survey of black women in America. If you read through the poll (especially the last few questions about sexism and racism compared to black men, white women and white men), you see that each group views the world differently. For instance, a number that is really indicative, is that 55% of white men think the world is fair to everyone, versus 34% of black women and 47% of white women. (In my opinion, the world is fairest to white men, so therefore they think the world is fair for everyone.)

Another telling statistic is that more black women (36%) think sexism is a big problem in society than white men (12%). Again, white men do not experience much sexism, so it does not affect them as a group, and they conclude it is not a big problem in society.

Different people experience the world differently. Marketers need to be aware of this since we are often swayed by our own experience of the world. This is why certain white male politicians have no problems indicting a whole class of people for being lazy or for not believing in the American dream.

So the next time you see an ad that seems to be tone-deaf you will know that it was created by someone who doesn't understand that his/her experience is not reflective of the world as a whole.

Your thoughts?

Have you signed up for the DBMC newsletter yet? It will take about 5 seconds to sign up right there on the upper right hand side of this page.

Show and tell

Show *and* tell. Sure you can just show, or you can just tell, but believe me, doing both will be more effective. I promise.

What makes me even write about this? Well, it turns out I am in the market for some dining room furniture, and have been looking through Craigslist to see if I can find anything appropriate and within budget. In any case, I have come across a great many postings that say something like this:

Like new dining room set with 6 chairs, extension leaf. Contemporary style.

But there is no picture. No picture for me to see if I like the style or the color or anything. You have to have a picture if you want to sell a dining room set...or anything else that people buy based on looks!

Tell, and show.

Showing alone doesn't do the trick either. Some people (and many of these are marketers who paid lots and lots of money for a fine looking website/brochure/advertisement) think fancy graphics and beautiful design will compensate for a lack of content.

No. No. No.

A potential client was telling me she was looking for "sexy" copy to relaunch her website. I asked her if she could point to websites in her field that she deemed to be "sexy." She sent me to a much more attractive website than hers. But guess what, the content was just as deadly dull and meaningless as hers. It just looked better (ok, much better).

Show, and tell.

Pretty but empty does not sell your product or service. People

need information—both visual and intellectual—to make a buying decision.