

Don't Waste Your Marketing Dollars

Unless you are Verizon, a company that seemingly has no cap on the amount of marketing dollars it can spend promoting FIOS, you have a budget. Use your budget wisely. Sounds simple yet how many companies don't get this?

You may be wasting your marketing dollars (and creating bad blood along the way) if:

- You are sending newsletters without permission or too many times a week or without a clear, easy opt-out
- You are sending non-targeted direct mail
- You are using robo-calls to mass dial anyone in an area code (this is not only stupid, it is illegal)
- You are using threatening language
- You are sending multiple pieces and none of them have the same offer
- You are sending marketing pieces that contain typos, grammatical and/or spelling mistakes
- You are sending marketing pieces that look home-made (and not in the enticing, chocolate chip cookie kind of way)
- You are mistaking the fact that someone once gave you a business card for the opportunity to blanket him/her with marketing messages
- You are using your social media platforms to sell, sell, sell...never bothering to interact/engage
- Your marketing does not match reality (you say you offer 24/7 support but what that means is that you can hold for assistance for 24 hours or more)

Marketing that works is strategic and thoughtful. Sending out hundreds of letters to people who have no need for your service (like sending coupons for garage door openers to

people who live in apartment buildings) is a waste. Use your dollars wisely.



What makes stories work?

Last week, I attended a Washington Women In PR (WWPR) panel on “The Art of Storytelling.” WWPR’s Past President Debbie Friez has a great recap on the BurellesLuce blog.

While I agree with the concept that creating a story will help your organization to connect with its target audience, one thing was not answered. What makes the story work?

Danny Harris of People’s District said that stories help “show the texture,” which I take to mean give life and detail to otherwise dry and boring concepts. For instance, if I tell you I saw a homeless person on a street corner, that means nothing. But if I tell you that I stopped to talk to the homeless person, and he was able to tell me that because of a health issue he lost his job, and then his house, now you understand the situation. The story fills in the details.

Stories should be memorable, ideally. But then again, not every story, and certainly not corporate stories, is memorable. Stories should aim to create recognition and let you find commonality with them through the details they impart. Yet what details will resonate with your audience?

One thing not one person on the panel said and which I think is absolutely critical for storytelling is this: authenticity.

Although it is a much-vaunted word (especially on social media), authenticity is a concept that is often lacking in marketing communications. When something doesn't ring true it is because it is not authentic. Case in point: my criticism of Pepco's ads about customers being first. Those ads were simply not authentic. Why? Because anyone who has had to deal with Pepco knows that customers are NOT first. Same goes for Comcast (Here is a total aside, I went to Comcast to return equipment and saw a sign that said "Customers are our first priority." Of course, the customer service office was a small cramped affair where a dozen people were waiting in line for one or two surly customer service reps. Yes, I am sure Comcast puts customers first.)

If you are going to use stories to relay your marketing message you have to be sure they are authentic. People see through the BS. And people who see through it will now have a really bad impression about your organization.

What do you think makes stories work?



Are you trying to bully your customers?

Today, I got this precious direct marketing letter:

Dear Deborah:

Again congratulations on the purchase of your home [address omitted]. We hope that it has been a pleasant experience for you.

We have been trying to contact you regarding our termite warranty but have been unable to do so. We also did not receive a response to our previous letter. Please call [name and contacted omitted] at your earliest convenience so that we may discuss this important matter with you. Also, be sure to ask about our PEST CONTROL SERVICE PLAN for as low as \$376 per year. This will be our final effort to contact you by mail. This will be our final effort to contact you by mail.

(Yes, in the letter the last sentence is repeated and it is underlined.)

Let's break this down. This company is trying to get me to buy a service plan at \$376 per year. They are direct mailing me off a list of recent home buyers. Apparently, I should contact them immediately and if not, they will do what? Apparently, they will start contacting me by other means other than mail. Will they be sending out their bully squad to my door to get me to purchase their plan?

Also, they claim they have been trying to reach me. What they have been doing is sending this same letter at least three times.

What this letter is doing, plain and simple, is bullying me. This company thinks that sending a letter like this will get me to call them, when all it does is make me think that they just don't get it.

What do people do when they are being bullied? Do they turn around and do business with you or do they run the other way?

How to become irrelevant

How many blogs have you stopped reading? How many products have you stopped buying? How many ads do you ignore?

If you answered just one to any of these questions, the reason is because whatever the blog/ad/product/service has become irrelevant.

Some irrelevancy is by attrition—meaning that you will stop buying a product because you no longer need it (like baby diapers when your child is potty trained). Other irrelevancy is because you just don't care anymore or the information does not ring true.

How do you become irrelevant?

If you are a blogger:

- You write about things that people don't care about or are not interested in.
- You write about the same things over and over.
- You write about you, you and more about you.
- You never update your blog.

If you are an advertisement:

- You advertise the same offer, over and over
- You advertise an offer with tons of small print
- You advertise things that are just not true (we beat any price, for instance).
- What you advertise does not match reality.

If you are a product:

- You don't work as promised.
- You don't fill a need.
- You are not well priced.

If you are a website:

- You have outdated information.
- You look like you were designed in 1999.
- Your visitors can't find the information they need to make a purchase/visit your location/etc.

Basically, you become irrelevant when you forget what your audience needs or wants.

What makes you tune out marketing? Let me know what makes blogs/ads/websites/brochures irrelevant.

WaPo: Carney hopes and Pepco failures

Two items from today's Washington Post caught my eye. One was about Jay Carney, the new White House press secretary and the other was a letter to the editor regarding Pepco.

Speaking for the White House

Jay Carney is taking over from Robert Gibbs as White House press secretary. Carney was a journalist, and many people think he will bring a journalist's viewpoint to the White House briefing room. Dana Milbank wonders "Can Jay Carney Hack it as a Flack" in an op-ed in today's Washington Post. Few people will miss Gibbs, so maybe by comparison, Carney will already do better. I wrote about Gibbs snark here. If one thing Carney can learn from Gibbs is how not to act. I think the press corps are looking for information without sarcasm.

Proving advertising doesn't turn the lights back on

Another hot topic this week (other than the ongoing protests in Egypt) is Pepco. If you live in the DC area you know that

Pepco failed, once again, to restore power in a timely fashion following a weird snow storm last week. At one point, they had 300,000 customers without power and in many cases, it took them three or four days to restore power to all of them. Witness how people felt about it, and more importantly, about how Pepco mishandled communications by reading letters to the editor in today's Post. Notice the title of the piece includes the word "outrage."

This latest episode in Pepco's ongoing reliability struggle proves my point that no matter how many nice ads and promising assertions you make, you have to back them up with real action. As you recall, Pepco started running an ad campaign talking about all the stuff they are doing to make themselves more reliable and responsive. Well, sadly, it was just words. No one believed it then, and certainly, no one believes it now. Instead of spending lots of ad dollars on an image campaign, Pepco should spend some money figuring out how to increase its reliability, responsiveness and communications with customers.

The bottom line for both these stories is that communications matter a whole lot. How you handle communications, what you say, when you say it, can truly impact public opinion and your image.

Marketing old school

This past Monday, I attended the What's Next DC marketing communications conference put on by Green Buzz Agency. For a nice recap, please read Daria Steigman's post on the Independent Thinking blog and also check out slides from the conference.

Most speakers at the conference talked about social media, and how traditional marketing is dead (the press release is dead, social media shouldn't even be called that, etc.). And although I agree that social media has transformed the marketing landscape, making everyone "networked" as one speaker put it, it has not changed the fundamentals of marketing nor the viability of old school marketing channels. One speaker said marketers need to be "remarkable." To put it in old school terms, what is it to be remarkable if not to find your USP (unique selling proposition)?

In my opinion, marketing is still marketing regardless of whether the tools have changed. If you don't know what you are selling, or what sets you apart, you will not succeed, no matter how many Twitter followers you have or how much of a "digital native" you are.

Yesterday, I experienced true old school marketing. I had a leak in my refrigerator and needed to find someone to fix it ASAP (before the snow that hit us yesterday), but had no Internet access or Smart Phone. I couldn't tweet out my concern or go to Angie's List (my go-to spot for all matters home related). What did I do? First, I remembered a electrical/plumbing place I have seen advertised in the paper and online. I called 411, got the number and called them. They don't do appliances. Back to square one. Then, it dawned on me that I have PHONE BOOKS/Yellow Pages. I looked up appliance repair, called a place that said they do emergencies, and about two hours later, a technician was at my house fixing the fridge.

The moral of this story is don't give up on old school marketing just yet. Not everything is solved by the Internet or Twitter. In fact, today, many people in Maryland are sitting without power or Internet access due to the snow. Many don't have Smart Phones. Some may not have Internet access, or only have it at work. This is why ads still work. The Yellow Pages still work. And yes, well written press releases still

work too.

Are you still marketing old school?

One move to guarantee social media success

If you do just one thing, I can almost guarantee you will improve your social media success:

Post a good (perhaps even professional) picture of yourself on your social media profiles.

First a caveat: I said a GOOD picture of yourself. Not some quirky, smirky mugshot *a la* Jared Lee Loughner (that is guaranteed to drive people away). I know that good is subjective, but aim for some of these adjectives: professional, pleasant, smiling, poised, polished, approachable.

The reason is simple: people do business (and connect) with people.

A few days ago, an acquaintance of mine who is notoriously shy and quiet, posted her company logo as her LinkedIn profile picture. What a bad move (and I told her so). After all, are people seeking to connect with her company (where she is an employee and not an owner) or with her?

For some people, putting up a picture seems like an invasion of privacy. For some, there is fear of being judged by looks or the worry that they don't look good enough. I have heard of women who want to lose weight before posting a picture. Unfortunately, these excuses don't fly. Social media is

social, and social means people. People are not icons or images or logos. They are themselves, and generally a photo captures this.

According to this blog post by Todd Taskey on Small Business Trends, a PROFESSIONAL photo will increase your chances of having business opportunities find you on LinkedIn. More reason to go out and get a professional portrait done. It truly is a worthwhile investment.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

To quote Aretha Franklin: “R-E-S-P-E-C-T, find out what it means to me.” (I do wish I could sing this to you but...)

We do business with people and brands we respect. This is why we see the rise in rating websites like Yelp and Angie’s List. We are looking not only for value and good quality, but to respect who we are doing business with. On Angie’s List, one of the parameters used to rate service providers is professionalism. Professionalism is about whether a person exhibits good judgment, whether he or she treats his or her customers with respect.

It is said that respect is earned. That is true. To earn respect, you have to act in ways that garner trust. For instance, if you read a newspaper and find interesting and informative articles there, you continue reading it. You respect and trust the information it provides. But once you start seeing factual mistakes, typos and lapses in editorial judgment, you start losing respect and trust for the publication (or its editors). Same goes for blogs, company

newsletters, anything.

As a marketer, one of your tasks should be to earn your customers' respect and make sure they trust your product or service. You do that by providing honest information. If you are marketing an office supply store and you say in your advertising that you carry everything for the office, but when a customer is looking for a desk or a file cabinet, and can't find that at your store, you are not being honest with your customers. Your customers will lose respect for you. If you say you match pricing from any other store (and you make that really large print) and then list exceptions (in very small print), you are not being honest with your customers. And yes, that will cost you respect.

It does come down to R-E-S-P-E-C-T.

When movies cost \$10.75

Have you been to the movies lately? The ticket prices keep creeping up and this past Sunday I paid \$10.75 to see True Grit (a great movie, by the way, and worth watching). Just a few months ago, tickets were \$10, and before that \$9.50 and back in the last century, one could catch a flick for about \$5.

Consumerist reports that movie ticket sales were at their lowest point since 1996 (back in the last century) in 2010. At the same time, movie prices are at their highest point in history. Coincidence? I think not. The article also says more

people are staying home to watch streaming video or waiting the shorter time between a movie's theatrical release and its DVD release. But, I think, the real cause is the high cost of the movies versus the cost of staying home/watching online or on DVD.

What this illustrates is that no matter the quality of your product (and there are some excellent movies out there) or the frequency of your advertising or the success of your public relations efforts there are reasons that people will not buy your product (or service). Consumers will determine whether your product offers value and whether they are willing to pay for that value.

When movies cost \$10.75 and you have a family of four, or you are taking your significant other out for a date, or you are just killing time, you may think twice about it. After all \$10.75 could buy you a meal or even a book. Pricing matters and higher costs will translate into lost customers. There is a balance point where you are charging more to fewer people and still making money—and that probably is the holy grail of pricing.

How does movie price affect your movie watching? Are you going to the movies in spite of the higher costs?

Following up: your number one marketing resolution for 2011

To create real, actionable marketing resolutions for 2011, you need to do two things.

- First, you will need to review 2010 and figure out what worked and what didn't work.
- Second, you should ask yourself what are you going to do differently this year to achieve your marketing goals?

If there is one thing most people could do differently is to follow up. Few people go the extra mile. Recently, I have been looking for contractors for a couple of jobs in my house. Out of five contractors, three followed up. The two who didn't follow up don't have snowball's chance in Hawaii to do business with me. If they don't even want to know whether I got their estimates or if I have any questions, clearly my business is just not that important to them.

To follow up means doing your due diligence with a contact—any type of contact. If you met someone at an event, follow up and make a second contact. If you left a voice mail or sent an email, and didn't hear back, call again and make sure to speak to someone in person. If you sent a proposal or met with a lead, make sure to contact the lead soon after your initial interaction.

Not following up means that you don't care enough to make the effort. Following up shows you care, that you are interested.

Again, marketing is not all about the great looking ad or the slick brochure. It is about personal interaction with the people who you want to buy your product or service.

So how about it, will you join me in resolving to make following up a marketing resolution in 2011?