

You must know tech

Amy Webb, principal of Webbmedia Group, spoke yesterday to a Washington Women in Public Relations (WWPR) Executive communicators brown bag lunch. She is very knowledgeable and highly enthusiastic about technology and has made a business consulting on the various trends and applications of the new tech stuff.

Some of us are a bit recalcitrant about tech stuff. There are so many changes that it is hard to keep up. Most of all, tech is changing the way things are done and change is hard.

However, we must learn about tech and how it is affecting the marketing/communications space. Just this week, long time Washington Post writer Howard Kurtz announced he is leaving the Post to go to the online-only Daily Beast. Print is giving way to online more and more.

Amy Webb talked about being in the space where the consumers are—even if you aren't on there—places like Facebook, Foursquare, Tivo and mobile apps. She sees the world of media (traditional media, the web, mobile, e-readers, tablet pcs) as all connected by social media. Social media is part and parcel of all forms of media, not a separate entity.

Webb divides the social media world into:

- Geo social (Foursquare)
- Corporate social (Yelp)
- Social commerce (Groupon)
- Social content (YouTube)
- Mobile social (Loopt)
- Pure play (Facebook)
- Social curation (Digg, Delicious)

Other key take-aways from Webb:

- Keep your taglines and messaging simple for sharing
- Curation is huge right now simply because there is too much information out there to make sense of.
- Personalization is becoming more important. Journalists don't want mass press releases or multimedia releases but rather personalized content.
- Whatever you have done on line can be found by anyone with a bit of research knowledge
- Before launching a brand—make sure the name you want is not being used on social media.
- Tablet PCs are really big, witness the huge sales for the iPad, and there are many more on the horizon

My conclusion is that you must know tech. As Amy Webb suggested, read Mashable and/or Techcrunch every day to keep up with technology.

How is tech affecting your marketing life?



Who is your rep?

Your representative could affect your reputation. And yet, how many times have you seen big firms and/or top tier colleges represented at a job fair or college fair by a young, inexperienced person? When you go to trade shows, who is sitting at the booths? Top brass? Fat chance—most likely, exhibitors at a trade show are represented by someone from the marketing department.

Have you ever gone to a networking event and met someone from a company who does not have any idea of what the company

message is?

The other day, I was at a fair here in Bethesda. A very young girl handed me a flyer for a political candidate. The flyer tells me the candidate “has the experience to work for us,” and yet her representative was probably not even out of college. The rep did not back up the message.

I got a phone call the other day from a marketing company. I had been seeing their name pop up on my caller ID for weeks, calling at all hours and on the weekend. When I finally answered it turns out they were representing a charity. I thought it was a telemarketer and I told the young man at the other end of the call to remove from his list. He launched into the rigamarole about charities are exempt blah blah. And then I said I was irritated that they kept calling me never leaving a message. He then started to tell me how the charity is busy helping people in need (so my concerns are not quite as legitimate). I hung up. He was not a worthwhile representative for the charity.

Who is sitting at your front desk/reception area? Who is out a chamber events representing your company? Do you know? What have you taught your representatives about your key messages? Can they give an elevator speech for your company?

Remember, your representative is you.



Don't go knocking traditional

media

Last week I wrote that social media is not all that. Even if I do believe in the importance of social media, I don't think everyone HAS to be on it. And now, Pew Research has found that 1 out of 5 Americans do NOT use the Internet. This means if you are still aiming for high coverage you cannot rely on Internet ads/social media marketing alone. Traditional media (I know, it sounds old-fashioned) is still viable when attempting to reach those Americans who won't or can't access the Web.



Is customer service your best marcom strategy?

Perhaps no other sales strategy is better than good customer service. Think about it, when you get good service, you develop a good impression, right?

I just had the pleasure of flying on Taca Airlines, a Central American airline. It was great. The flight crew were pleasant, helpful. They served a snack, free of charge. I got to my destination on time, on a clean, comfortable, new airplane. I made my reservations with an agent who was patient and who did not charge me for ticketing. Given my druthers, I would fly Taca again in a heartbeat.

I have never seen an ad for Taca, but had heard word-of-mouth how good their service is. It's true. I am sold and all because of great customer service.

Your thoughts?

Social cues

Although I think many people who march to the beat of their own drummer are interesting, some folks are just plain clueless. This past weekend I went on an organized hike. Most hikers were dressed in hiking clothes of one stripe or another, except for someone my friend dubbed “Disco Dan.” “Disco Dan” was attired in short shorts made of corduroy and of a peach hue, to match his multicolored button down shirt. Furthermore, “Disco Dan” was wearing non-hiking shoes. To say the least, “Disco Dan” stood out, and not in a good way.

Although “Disco Dan” was harmless and mildly amusing, it made me think about how people act in a societal context. Most people are adept enough to fit in. Some people, like Dan, either don’t get it or don’t care to get it, and still others are avant-garde, doing today what most of us won’t do for months or years.

How is this a marketing issue? First, responding to social cues is important in personal marketing. If you are trying to get people to buy you, the product, you can’t be out of touch with what is socially acceptable. For instance, if you are interviewing at a law firm and you show up in jeans and a t-shirt, you are saying with your clothing choice that you don’t understand the law firm ethos, or that you are going to do what you are going to do, no matter what.

Secondly, observing and listening to understand what is socially acceptable and what is not, is essential when marketing. I would say that if you have trouble with social cues you are not going to be able to create great ad copy or

be in public relations or in event planning. Say you are tasked with writing copy directed at senior citizens. You use the terms that GenY appreciates but that seniors don't understand. You are being tone-deaf to the needs of your audience. Or a more common occurrence, you go for the intentionally hip or what you think is really funny, but that your audience just doesn't get.

Unfortunately, as more people lose the ability to interact directly with other people due to the over reliance on electronic gadgets like smart phones and gps, the less they are able to pick up on social cues. It is common to see people with headphones on walking around in their own personal bubble, and when they are looking for something, instead of asking a live person nearby they go to Twitter or Facebook and ask there.

The bottom line is that we live together in a society, where some things are more acceptable than others. When you want to be like Disco Dan and wear what you want because you want to, you are only communicating to the world that you don't care or that you don't get it. Either way, it creates a degree of alienation.

What are your thoughts? Have you noticed an increase in people who don't react to social cues?

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A big, fat problem

This past weekend I took a little trip out to the beach in Rehoboth, Delaware. The weather was great and hanging out near the ocean is always relaxing. You see all types out on the

beach but what struck me as I looked around was how many obese people were there. In fact, I am seeing more and more obese people everywhere. The New York Times reports that obesity rates are rising, so it really is no surprise. Pretty close to one out of three Americans is obese.

As the New York Times article points out, obesity is a national health epidemic. Obesity can be tied to many deadly diseases, including heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure.

Is marketing to blame for obesity? On the boardwalk in Rehoboth it is hard to avoid the aroma of french fries and candied popcorn. Candy stores are everywhere, and healthy food is hard to find. There were a lot of people jogging on the boardwalk, but there were many more people just sitting on the beach. Fast food and junk food don't really have to market too much—they just have to be available. Which begs the question, if healthy options were available (and made to look as tantalizing), would people choose to buy those instead?

Is there an effort being made by public health authorities to market a healthier lifestyle? I don't see any evidence of it. Obviously, it is hard to change people's habits. And when on vacation, people tend to want to reward themselves with treats like fried dough and salt water taffy. How many people want to use vacation to start a healthy eating plan? Not many—because it is not appealing.

If marketing has a fault in the obesity epidemic, is that not enough is being done to market healthy choices, or the benefits of NOT being obese. Or perhaps, more should be done to show people the MORTAL DANGERS of obesity. It is not just about looks—our society certainly markets thinness as an equivalent to beauty—but about health. Fat people are at risk, and the sad thing is they can do something about it: eat less, exercise more.

What are your thoughts? How can society convince people to stop piling on the pounds?

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Are you keeping your promises?

This past weekend I stayed in a hotel in Rochester, NY. The hotel's website is nice, modern (although it has music) and tells me they have refurbished their rooms. In a tourist magazine that I picked up at the airport, the hotel has an ad that tells me that hot breakfast is included in the price. The website says only they offer "complimentary breakfast."

The hotel does not offer a hot breakfast. It offers what is better known as a "continental breakfast." That is, a selection of muffins and breakfast pastries, cold cereals, fruit and yogurt. They also provide a microwave where you can reheat a Jimmy Dean breakfast muffin or heat up your instant oatmeal. Nothing wrong with the complimentary breakfast but it is not a hot breakfast. Hot breakfast means eggs, waffles, pancakes and other cooked items. None of those were offered.

As for refurbishing—I think this means the hotel added new linens and flat screen tvs. The bathrooms seemed dated and nothing seemed particularly modern (certainly not the alarm clocks or the phones). The room had a safe (not something you see very often in a hotel). In fact, the hotel highlights the safe as a room feature, not mentioning anywhere that they charge guests \$1 per day just to have the safe, regardless of whether it is used or not.

In short, this hotel, while not bad, did not live up to its promises made on its website or in its advertising. It also failed to mention that something that they include in your hotel room is actually fee-based.

In this case, these lapses are not disastrous for the hotel. However, generally, saying something in your marketing that is simply not true in “real life,” will result in broken trust and lost customers. And yet, how many times have you seen ads that are inaccurate? Promises that start with free or assurance of 100s of satisfied customers. Marketers sometimes play hard and fast with these formulas, but if your product or service is not able to back it up, you are going to turn off your potential customers. It is that simple.

Live up to your marketing promises, and be transparent. Don't hit up customers with fees for services you seem to imply are included. Don't promise things you can't or won't deliver. Customers will resent these things and will be cautious in choosing to do business with you again.



Wiki promotion and self-promotion

Promotion is one of the four “Ps” of marketing (the others being price, product, place). You can't market effectively without promotion, and in fact, marketing communications is all about promotion. MarComm people don't deal with price, product or place, other than to give input.

So, to sell a product, a service or an idea, you will promote.

Promotion could go many ways, from traditional advertising, to blogging, to a public relations campaign. That's all fine and good. However, with the rise of social media as a prime promotion vehicle, we run into some problems. In social media, we rely on user-generated content, whether through blog entries or sharing thoughts and ideas via social networks. We now have the term "citizen journalist."

Enter Wikipedia. Wikipedia is an online, USER-GENERATED encyclopedia. Anyone can contribute to Wikipedia. There is very little if any editorial control over content. Products, people, historical events, music and any number of other topics are covered over at Wikipedia. Wikipedia entries tend to come up pretty high in Google searches too. It seems obvious that someone looking to promote something or someone would add a Wikipedia entry. Right?

From a marketing perspective alone, of course you would add Wikipedia as a target for your social media/SEO/SEM efforts. It makes complete sense. However, as a consumer you have to be wary. If anyone can post anything on Wikipedia, then how accurate is that information? Can you rely on it? Should you rely on it? Are people questioning what they find on Wikipedia and if so, how is that affecting Wikipedia entries?

I don't have the answers to this.

You have all heard of personal branding right? And personal branding has everything to do with promotion, and more specifically, self-promotion. You see people on Twitter promoting links to their blogs, to their parties, to their businesses. This is OK (although I have a problem with people who endlessly self-promote but that is another blog post). And to link it back to Wikipedia, individuals are now creating Wikipedia entries about themselves. Again, it makes sense on a macro-scale.

Still, perhaps I am being "old school" but a self-provided

entry on Wikipedia is meaningless. A third party endorsement, like an article in a newspaper, has much more weight. Presumably, the third party (perhaps a journalist) did some fact-checking. If I can put down whatever I want in Wikipedia, what is stopping me from inflating reality or straight-out making stuff up? And worse, people think of Wikipedia as a real source for information, not unlike an Encyclopedia Britannica.

The bottom line is this: maybe using Wikipedia to promote yourself or your product is a good strategic, social-media-savvy move, but is it ethical?

What do you think?



What to do when there's too much competition

Unless you are in a highly specialized field, you are facing increased competition. Bricks-and-mortar stores are facing competition from Internet retailers. And goodness, if you have an Internet-only storefront, you are facing more competition than ever.

There are two big reasons for the increase in competition:

1. The economy. Because many people have been laid off/lost their jobs, many are becoming entrepreneurs.
2. The Internet. It is easy and relatively inexpensive to set yourself up with a website/blog and to promote said website/blog.

What do you do?

First let me tell you what NOT to do: nothing. Doing nothing ensures that you will remain less visible. Nothing also refers to not pursuing opportunities or answering inquiries. There is more competition out there, and if prospects don't sign up with you, it is easy for them to find someone else.

Here are a few things to do:

1. **Research your competition.** What are they doing that you are not doing? What are you doing that they are not?
2. Based on your research, **figure out what you offer that is different than your competition:** do you have better turn-around times, better prices, more experience?
3. **Figure out who your real target audience is.** Are you wasting time and energy by targeting the wrong people?
4. **Assess your materials:** website, brochure, business cards, blog, Twitter stream. Does anything need tweaking? Are you really transmitting your message?
5. **Network.** I know this is not new advice, but people you know are more likely to give you work/buy your product or refer you.

I'd like to thank Michele Lerner for the idea for this post—we were discussing the freelance writing market this morning. And if you are looking to buy a home, check out Michele's book: Homebuying: Tough Times, First Time, Anytime.

What are you doing to deal with competition?



How to alienate people and lose customers

Some companies just don't get it. They actually seem to want to lose customers. Here are two examples.

Citibank

Just one day after I wrote my last post on alienating customers, I got a letter from Citibank informing that my credit card account is changing. But not to fear, these changes include several "enhancements." But the changes are not enhancements. They are making the card even more useless—no more picture ID, no more 2% cash back for supermarket and drugstore purchases, AND, they are changing the name of the card and issuing a new number. The thing about the account number was in the last paragraph.

You know what this is: it is a way of further alienating me as a customer. Why? Because first, it insults my intelligence. I know an enhancement when I see one—it usually involves something positive for me as a customer. Second, it forces me to do some work. Now, I have to call places where I have recurring charges to change my card number. And third, it is giving me something I didn't ask for nor did I want AGAINST MY WILL, WITH NO OPT-OUT.

Verizon

Although I have few service issues with Verizon, when I do, it is a nightmare to deal with this company. Its customer service truly is atrocious. I dread having to call them for anything. I usually get a phone tree, followed by an inept customer service rep who then drops the call when transferring me to the correct department. Just ugh. So, the idea of adding any services with this company is unthinkable.

Verizon seems to think that if they send me enough direct mail, I will buckle in and get FIOS. So, every single week, I get a minimum of one piece of direct mail with an offer to install FIOS. This week, I got three pieces. This has been going on for two years. Every time I see a letter from Verizon it goes in the trash and I think what a stupid company this is. Spending millions of dollars on direct mail, killing trees and for what? If they had an inkling on how to get customers they would figure out what customers want, and work on serving those needs first (better customer service comes to mind). Instead of doing real work, Verizon keeps sending useless direct mail. How many people are signing up? I bet not many.

How to alienate people and lose customers? Keep hitting them over the head with offers they don't want, insult their intelligence and make them do all the work. On that end, Citibank and Verizon, you are doing a great job.

