

Avoid Alienating (nearly) Anybody

Marketing communications is about persuading people that your product, service or organization offers something that is of value to them. It's really that simple. *How* you do it may not be so simple as there are many different strategies and tactics that you can use. Perhaps you will show the benefits of the product, perhaps you will make people feel good about choosing your service. But, whatever you do, you should not alienate your audience.

Businesses and organizations can alienate their customers and supporters by taking certain negative actions. Perhaps it is raising prices or cutting back services. Sometimes unpopular actions are necessary, which is why how you communicate those actions becomes even more important. In fact, taking a negative action does not have to translate into alienation if it is handled correctly. Perhaps, you work on making the case more forcefully.

Yet, how often do we see companies doing things that alienate their audiences? We see it often. Two recent examples stand out for me: Facebook with its privacy problems and Spirit Airlines with its decision to charge for carry-on bags. Both situations have been widely reported in the media, and both companies have done a mediocre job of explaining why they have taken those decisions. Facebook seems to think that what benefits it as a company should benefit you as customer. And Spirit actually claims that by charging for carry on baggage you benefit from lower fares. Both companies insult their customers' intelligence, thus, alienate them.

Here are a few tips to avoid alienating your customers

- If you must take a negative action, explain it from your

own perspective before the media/others do it for you.

- Don't underestimate your audience's intelligence: they can usually see right through a bad explanation.
- When you communicate, avoid being too self-promoting or too self-serving. Your customers and supporters are more interested in what you can do for them than in what you did for yourself.
- Be forthright and say what you mean.
- Research! It is amazing how many organizations and companies don't understand who their audiences are and what they want.
- Offer good-will gestures. If you've done something that is bad (cancelled a concert for instance), give your customers a carrot (make it easy to get money back, give an additional discount, etc.).

How do you think companies can avoid alienating customers?



What the Facebook fracas can teach us about marketing

As you have no doubt read elsewhere, Facebook keeps changing privacy settings. It has created marketing partnerships with other sites, that now have access to your preferences and can customize their offerings to you. And just yesterday Facebook unilaterally decided that only Facebook Fan Pages with more than 10,000 fans can have customized landing pages, only to apparently back down today.

All these changes have a few things in common:

- They are surreptitious, behind-the-scenes changes that are not well communicated
- They assume what the consumer wants.
- They are difficult to understand and have no clear rationale
- The advantage may be wholly for Facebook with little if no benefit to consumers.

There has been a growing backlash against Facebook, although the site is in no danger of going under.

There are some marketing take-aways:

- Customers want upfront communications.
- Customers do not want to be taken for granted.
- Customers want to feel as if they have some level of control, especially over their personal information.
- Customers do not want to feel excessively marketed to.

Facebook is one of the few companies that could actually survive this type of backlash. Why? Because people like what it offers, and it is free. If people paid for services, then this would definitely not fly.

Next time you are planning a big marketing change or push, think of Facebook. Are you going to raise concerns? Will you have to backtrack and explain yourself?



Missing opportunities

Are you truly making the best use of the many marketing opportunities out there? Probably not. This is understandable since there are so many things we can do and only a finite

amount of time and staff to do it in. However, there are some opportunities that you SHOULD NOT be missing out on. These are:

- Responding to your emails
- Tracking your mentions on the Web and social media
- Responding to social media mentions
- Following up when necessary

Let me provide you with one example of a really big missed opportunity. A couple of weeks ago, I wanted to visit a coworking space in Baltimore. I sent an email to see if I could just drop by. It took someone there more than 24 hours to respond (the answer was yes, just come on by). With that in mind, I did just that. I was welcomed and given a spot to sit. I tweeted about it. No one responded, even a week later. No one asked me for my card or information. In fact, no one said much of anything. There was absolutely no follow up. Even though I believe the coworking space offers a great convenience and is a wonderful concept, I think this particular one won't survive. They are missing opportunities to engage with potential customers, and they are doing nothing to market themselves.

If we've learned anything about social media and the Internet, it is that people expect a response (most expect an immediate response). My website host is on Twitter, and if I tweet them, they certainly respond. Why? Because they realize that it is giving them an opportunity to engage with a customer and try to fix any problem that is happening.

When you don't respond to what is being asked of you or being said about you, you are truly missing an opportunity. Social media makes it easy to find out when people are talking about you. Perhaps you can't monitor it all day, but do it once a day and make sure to engage.

If you want to make the most of easy opportunities, track and

respond, and do so sooner rather than later. What are you doing to make sure you are responsive?



Beyond marketing

Although marketing communications can help brand your business, differentiate you from the crowd and even increase sales, it cannot make your business succeed. To succeed in business, you have to provide something useful or necessary—a product or service people want or need. And you have to provide that something consistently. You can have great advertising, but if your product is not available or is not of good quality, guess what? You are going to get nowhere fast.

Lots of people spend time on their marketing strategies. And they develop great websites and fabulous collateral materials. Some people spend lots of time coming up with fancy names and lovely logos. But what they fail at is defining AND providing their product/service.

This morning I read an article from the Philadelphia Business Journal about two local small businesses: a gas/service station and a dry cleaner. Both business owners work very hard and show up every day to run their businesses. People can count on them. Neither business does much in the way of marketing because they don't need to. If you need your car fixed, you go to one, and if you need some shirts cleaned, you go to the other.

Yesterday, I came across this post over on Copyblogger. It is about how it doesn't matter whether you have a beautiful website if you don't have a message. I would go further—you

have to know what you are doing, and to quote Nike, just do it.

Time and again I meet successful business people. You know why they are successful? Because they provide the goods. On the other hand, how many times have you seen a restaurant fail? Probably dozens of times. You know why restaurants fail? Because people didn't go there to eat. And why didn't they go? Probably because the food was bad or the service was bad.

Basically, it boils down to having the product or the service. Of course, if you want to increase your market presence and/or let people know you are there, you are going to have to engage in marketing. But marketing alone will not get you business.



Looking for the magic bullet...

Are you looking for the magic bullet? The one solution to your marketing problems? Well, I can't help you. That's right—I can't help you find the magic bullet because there is no magic bullet!

A while back I had a client who was trying to re-grow his dwindling business. So he launched a social responsibility program. And when that failed to work as planned, he tried a new product and used postcards to sell it. And then that didn't work, so he tried doing do-good projects and used press releases to promote them. And then that didn't quite work either. You know why? Because all of these are tactics and there was no overall strategy or vision. One tactic, whatever it may be, will not result in sustained and increased sales.

When I was in grad school, we learned all about a new concept at the time: Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC). The concept was that your marketing efforts should integrate various tools, such as advertising, public relations, sponsorships, other one umbrella. I have always believed in this view.

Today, people seem to believe that the magic bullet is social media. Build a Facebook Fan Page and you will get clients! Be on Twitter and you will get clients! Write a blog and you will get clients! No, no, no!!! You certainly should consider social media, but one or all of these tools will not guarantee marketing success, especially if you are pursuing each of them haphazardly without an overarching strategy.

There really is no magic bullet. Marketing communications is about strategy and also about trial and error. Some things will work better than others. Something close to a magic bullet may be measurement. If you measure success, you will find out what works best for you. If you don't measure, how will you know your impact?

Have you been looking for a magic bullet? What have you found?



Ads are powerful; differentiation is important

This morning's Washington Post is full of interesting media/marketing news. First is the announcement that the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) has enacted tough new rules on cigarette/tobacco advertising as part of the agency's new

authority to regulate the industry.

According the Post, tobacco companies will be banned from sponsoring sports and entertainment events and from offering free samples, among other restrictions. The FDA also tried to limit advertising to text only (banning color and graphics) but a judge has ruled in favor of the tobacco companies, which the FDA is appealing.

Tobacco advertising and the federal response to it has always been fascinating. Tobacco is a legal product, sold and taxed in stores like any other product, but when used as directed, causes wide-ranging health problems (cancer, heart disease) not only to smokers but those exposed to smoke. The Feds have tried to curb the appeal of smoking by restricting advertising and putting warnings on cigarette packs. This has always raised the question of first amendment rights—after all, the companies that manufacture cigarettes are trying to sell a legal product. But the government is concerned that increased sales of tobacco mean increased health risks.

The point here is that advertising and marketing efforts, when done right, are powerful. They can steer consumer behavior. Personally, I abhor smoking and I applaud the FDA for stepping up regulation of tobacco marketing. To me, marketing tobacco is marketing death, yet the issue of free speech remains. The real issue may well be why we allow companies continue to produce and market a product that kills.

Another piece of news that is fascinating is that Christiane Amanpour, the famed CNN war reporter, will move over to ABC, to host This Week. If ever there was a least likely candidate for this position it was Amanpour, who is more comfortable confronting dictators and dodging bullets in war-torn areas. I think David Brinkley would turn over in his grave! Will the round table with George Will, Cokie Roberts and the rest continue? I doubt it. And I doubt that with Amanpour at the helm, This Week will be able to compete with Meet the Press on

domestic political coverage. But that seems to be the point—hiring Amanpour is meant to change This Week into a program with a more international focus. And differentiate it will, but will that also result in increased viewership? That is the question.



Where marketing ends

Obviously, as a marketing communications person, I believe that marketing is helpful and mostly necessary if you want to promote an event, sell a product or service or obtain support. If people don't know you are there, they can't buy from you or support your cause. However, at some point marketing ends and customer service starts.

Let me share a story with you. I have been going to a hair salon in DC for a bit over a year. It doesn't advertise much and really depends on word of mouth. They have my business solely based on my experience. My last visit was last week. I had to wait and then the hairdresser, who has been cutting my hair for a year, did not remember me. It was as if I had never been there. She was unfriendly and she made me late for my next appointment. My hair did not look good. I felt upset and in general, the experience was bad. Would I go back? Absolutely not. Would I recommend the place to anyone? Not a chance. So Fiddleheads on 17th Street, NW in Washington, DC, not only have you lost a customer but you have lost my word-of-mouth marketing on your behalf.

Could this situation be averted? Yes. Communication would have

helped, as would a system where the salon keeps track of its customers, their preferences, when they've visited, etc. Can it be fixed retroactively? No. There is nothing that can fix a bad experience once it has happened. I would never trust my hair to this nasty woman who clearly does not care who she is working with.

My point is that marketing, including word-of-mouth marketing can only go so far. **The service/product/cause has to live up to the expectation or else you won't buy it or use it or support it.** I want to point you also to this article on Adweek, by Joseph Jaffe, "Customer Service is Key Strategy." Give it a read. Jaffe's point is that customers are lifeblood to a business and serving them should be one of your marketing strategies (interestingly, the article changed names from when I read it earlier today, when it said Customer Service is a Key Differentiator).

What are your experiences? Have you ever been turned off by a service experience to such an extent that you never bought from the vendor? Heck, let me do a poll:

[polldaddy poll=2827189]



Improve your email marketing!

Our inboxes are cluttered with hundreds of email messages—some from friends asking us to join for dinner and most from companies looking to sell us something. We may have signed up for a few newsletters. We may have met some people at networking events. Regardless, our inboxes are overwhelmed with email.

In the past week, my company sent out its enewsletter. It got two unsubscribes, one report for spam (the person who did it may have had some sort of personal vendetta, not sure) and a fairly good open rate. I am going to call it a moderate success. The newsletter did not have a call to action, so it is hard to measure its effectiveness.

In the past couple of day, I got two emails from two sources. Both caught my eye for different reasons. The first was from someone I met a while back who just started a new business venture. The subject line said "Hi Deborah." The body was the following (with identifying info cut out):

Dear Mr. Sample:

Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is XXXX, Director of Media Services for XXXX and XXXX— two truly groundbreaking companies that have recently joined together to become one of Washington's newest and most innovative full-service production resources. If you're in the neighborhood, I hope you'll stop by for a tour of our facility, just off XX here in downtown D.C.

Our owner-operators are award-winning media professionals with more than 25 years of experience, and our list of long-term clients include companies like X, Y and Z, together with advertising and public relations agencies, corporations, associations and government agencies, both local and nationwide.

We'd like to show you exactly what we can do. By addressing your creatitve and technical needs with our deep expertise in all forms of broadcast and corporate production, creative editorial, 2-D and 3-D graphics, sound design and audio mixing. With our detailed approach to client service, we can easily guide your next project from concept through completion.

Feel free to look through our demo reels and check out the

bios of our skilled artists, editors and producers. Just go to (website) and (website) to find out more. Or give me a call personally, at 999-999-9999 I'll be happy to answer your questions or set up a convenient time when you can pay us a visit. I look forward to the opportunity to meet you in person.

Warm Regards,

What is wrong with this email? First, the personalization is not working. Second, the formatting was off. Third, there are several grammatical mistakes (and at least one typo). The first paragraph is a waste. The sender could have mentioned a reason that I would be interested in this email and new venture. Instead it is an “introduction” to someone I met already. The email was sent out in plain format—and this is a multimedia production company? Why not make it look pretty and professional? There is no signature from the sender. No way of opting out of the email. No permission. I could go on and on.

The other email I got was announcing a group trip. But guess what? No dates were listed for the trip on the email, forcing me to go to the website. Maybe this was on purpose, to get a click-through to the website. In my opinion, when you don't give people some basic information, you lose them at hello.

Lessons about email marketing:

- Have a call to action.
- Mind your ps and qs—details like grammar are important.
- Include relevant information: dates, locations, contact information, pricing (don't make me work so hard to figure it out).
- If possible, personalize.
- Make it look nice (there are many enewsletter/email marketing companies out there at various price points).
- Be careful with SPAM laws. Give people a way to opt-out.

Explain why they are receiving your email.

What drives you crazy when you get an email?

Yep, you can judge a book (or your oatmeal) by its cover

You can judge a book by its cover because it is what initially attracts you to even pick it up. In a bookstore with thousands if not millions of titles vying for your attention, a boring cover will make you pass it over. But the cover is also the title, and this is also why titles (and headlines) that grab your attention are so important.

However, I am not here to write about books today. What I want to talk about is packaging and how important it is. Packaging helps sell a product, and yet, I bet, nine out of ten times, packaging design is NOT handled by the marketing department.

Sometimes, product packaging needs a redesign. Much has been written about Tropicana's redesign (last year) where the familiar Tropicana interface was replaced with a minimalist approach, which some thought looked generic. Redesign is important, but companies need to be careful not to alienate their core buyers.

I am a huge McCann's Irish Oatmeal fan. I have been eating it for years, and thus buying the boxes for a long time. This is what I have always bought:



McCann's Irish Oatmeal
Before Redesign

The other day, I was getting my supply of oatmeal, and I was momentarily confused when I saw this:



McCann's Irish Oatmeal
Redesigned Packaging

Is this what I have always bought? It doesn't look the same, nor does it tell me that it is a new packaging design anywhere. In fact, I think McCann's not only redesigned the package but changed the contents slightly. And they did not bother to tell me. As I mentioned, I am a long time consumer of McCann's and there was no indication of whether this was the same Quick Cooking Irish Oatmeal.

In any case, the moral is definitely, redesigns can be good, but tread carefully. Don't confuse your customers or you may lose them.

Personal marketing goals for 2010

Although I am not a fan of New Year's resolutions, I think January is a great time to set goals for oneself. You have a whole year ahead of you to meet those goals. And goals are tangible. You either meet them or not, whereas resolutions like "I want to be healthier" are vague.

Here are some personal marketing goals:

- Upload a headshot to LinkedIn
- Answer at least one question a month on LinkedIn
- Refine your LinkedIn headline
- Increase your LinkedIn contacts by 25% (minimum)
- Get business cards if you don't have them
- Update and polish your elevator speech and then practice it!
- Attend networking events at least twice a month
- Join a professional association
- Join a committee or volunteer group
- Start a blog if you don't have one (Posterous is easy!) or post regularly on your existing blog

What goals are you setting for yourself?