

What works and what doesn't in our COVID-19 times

EDITOR'S NOTE: This post has been updated to reflect AP Stylebook guidance on how to write COVID-19.

Marketing and communications go on, but as discussed in the last blog post, not everything is the same in the world where COVID-19 has sickened many, scared more, and generally, upended what we consider normality. That said, some marketing works better than others.

Let's start with what doesn't work.

Here's an email that I received from a real estate agent (someone I met at a networking event and added me to her list without my express consent, but that is another story).

Hello.

Your health and safety are important to me. That's why I'm reaching out to let you know that we're doing what we can to provide the best service possible during this time, and that means being here for you.

Please reach out with any questions that you may have, or if I can be helpful in any way.

We will get through this together.

If you want to keep up to date on COVID-19, visit the CDC's website.

Stay well,

[Name]

Why is this so bad? First, the sender claims that my health

and safety are important, but provides no specifics about what she is doing. Second, she is placing the onus on me to contact her. And third, she says I can visit the CDC website, and she doesn't even provide a link in her email. To me, this email shows that this real estate agent does not have any type of communication strategy or understanding, and to make matter worse, she doesn't know how to use communication tools effectively.

What does work?

1. Specificity and relevance

What is your company or organization doing *specifically* because of or in response to COVID-19.

This full page ad from LIDL is exactly right: it tells you what specific actions its stores are taking to deal with the virus and the associated issues.



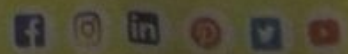
we're looking after the shelves

SO YOU CAN TAKE CARE OF YOURSELVES

Lidl is here to support you and the needs of the community. See the updates we're making to our stores and policies:

- additional cleaning in high-touch areas
- installing protective barriers in all checkout lanes
- open 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily
- social distancing signs hung in stores
- increasing product deliveries
- temporarily limiting purchases of select items

visit your local store or connect with us at [lidl.com](https://www.lidl.com)



2. Segmentation

If you have an email marketing strategy, it should include the ability to segment your list into different audience types. The idea is to not send the same email to everybody on your list, but to be more targeted. For example, Boston University (where I went to grad school) keeps sending me updates, including updates about campus being closed. Well, as an alum, this is not exactly relevant to me. I am not a parent of a student or a student, so why do I need multiple emails about campus operations?

3. News/real updates

I got an email from a local bookstore that tells me that it has established a partnership with a national service in order to be able to deliver nationwide. That's news. On the other hand, Delta has sent me the same version of an email regarding how its handling COVID-19. Nothing new, no reason to keep sending me the same email. If Delta were to add or delete flights or routes, then yes, tell me. But telling me its hard on Delta's bottom line, over and over, is really self-serving, which brings me to the next point.

4. Audience-centered

What does your audience need or want right now? My undergrad university, Brandeis, did something really smart. Brandeis figured out that its audience is probably getting a bit bored being inside, so it sent out an email with suggestions for movies and television shows to watch, all featuring an alumni connection. There was no other reason for the email but to provide some relief to its audience. That is how you put your audience first.

What have you seen that works and that doesn't work? Please share in the comments.

Marketing in times of coronavirus...do or don't?

To market or not to market, that is the question today for anybody working in marcomm.

As the novel coronavirus pandemic sickens more people around the globe while upending daily routines, businesses struggle. Should they market or not? Perhaps it is even a question of *can* they market—do they have the personnel or can they even do business? On Tuesday, I walked into a local hair salon to buy conditioner, and they had no customers. Yesterday, the hair salon announced that they are closed until the end of the month.

Advertising is still going on...somewhat

Inside my print Washington Post (yes, I still get the newspaper delivered) yesterday was a flyer advertising Kohl's spring sale. On Wednesday, there were several supermarket circulars inserted in the Food Section. A couple of days ago, there was a half-page advertisement for the Wolf Trap 2020 Summer Concerts (Wolf Trap is a concert venue in Northern Virginia). But today, there are no flyers and fewer ads overall, most for retail and a full page ad from Safeway thanking its employees (I think an image ad, portraying them as a concerned corporation).

Then, on Facebook, I was served an online promotion for the

Starz app. Also for a couple of online shopping outlets. And via email, I keep getting offers from Lands' End and Eddie Bauer (since I have shopped from them before).

It's clear that some marketing is going on *regardless* of the coronavirus, and some of it *because* of the coronavirus. But not all marketing makes sense right now.

Who should market

For some businesses, it really is the perfect time to get your message to the public. Online retailers and streaming services are prime examples. If people can't get out to the physical stores or if the bricks and mortar stores are closed, it makes perfect sense to market. People may be looking to shop online instead of leaving home, and also are looking for more entertainment.

Nonprofit and advocacy organizations should also ramp up marketing now. There may be a lot more need among and it makes sense to solicit donations or other type of support.

Who should not market

It is counterproductive for airlines, hotels and other travel industry to advertise right now. Flights are being cancelled and countries are being shut down. Also, travel may be risky as it exposes people to the virus.

Likewise, any advertisement for anything that requires a future commitment, such as upcoming concerts, plays, events, is at best, too optimistic. Most people don't know when things will get back to normal, and can't commit to any type of future plans.

Gray area

Although some businesses are open, it is risky to promote right now. If say you are big box retailer, do you really want to have a great promotion that would bring in large crowds

when the CDC is asking people to practice social distancing?

Bottom line

Marketing should be responsive to what is going on. People are worried about covid-19, but they also have ongoing needs. Marketers should weigh carefully how and what they promote.

What do you think? Should marketing go on as usual? Suspend altogether? Please let me know in the comments.

All the marketing in the world won't save your brand from bad customer service

Marketing helps people to *know* brands, but it doesn't make people *like* brands. People like brands that provide quality, value, and a good experience. That good experience comes down to customer service. If the brand's customer service is bad, the experience is bad, and the brand is tainted. It is really that simple.

Why I will never shop at Ulta again

A couple of years ago, I bought some nail polish at Ulta, and I asked before I paid if it was returnable. I was told yes. It turns out I had a similar color at home, so I returned to the store, original receipt in hand, and was asked for my phone

number. I said I wasn't in their system, I had the receipt and I wasn't giving them my number. The clerk was unable to do the return. I went home and called Ulta customer service and was told I should be able to do a return with just the receipt, no problem. I ended up going to an Ulta in another county and doing the return there. I vowed never to shop at my local Ulta again. And then last week, I was in the shopping center where the Ulta is, so I decided to go in. I bought some makeup. When I got home, I realized the makeup was not what I wanted. I went back to Ulta, again with original receipt in hand, and makeup in its box, untouched, and got the exact same answer that I had gotten two years prior. They needed a phone number. Again, why? I am not in their system and a phone number will not bring up my account. I got a manager, who somehow managed to get around this "phone requirement."



What a difference

Contrast that with my experience at Sephora, another cosmetics

store, a few months ago. I had a faulty mechanical eyeliner pencil but no receipt (I was hoping they would fix the issue not take back the item). The clerk was able to look up the transaction using my credit card, and gave me a credit, no further questions asked.

Making it difficult to make a return is a huge customer service problem

Most stores will do returns quite easily if you have a receipt. Some stores will give you a store credit if you don't have a receipt. The only stores that seem to make it hard to do returns are small, local boutiques, and Ulta. Customers want to be able to like what they buy and return it if they don't. Most businesses see the benefit in customer satisfaction.

When you have to market to overcome your failings

Ulta advertises discounts all the time. Sephora never does. Perhaps Ulta needs to get people in the door with incentives because it knows that the experience is less than ideal. This is not to say Sephora is perfect (far from) but it seems geared toward a better customer experience than Ulta.

You will choose to do business where you feel less friction

Many people shop at stores like Nordstrom because its policy is to accept almost all returns without exceptions. This makes for a more relaxed shopping experience. If you know you can buy whatever it is and then return it if it doesn't suit for whatever reason, you will buy. If, however, you think there will be a problem, you will not buy because you don't want to deal with the friction.

Here's the bottom line: If your customer service is bad it doesn't matter how good your marketing is.

Stupid on repeat=marketing fail

Repeat phone calls from different numbers, same message

Around 11 a.m. my cell phone rings and the caller ID shows an 1-800 number. I don't answer. Seconds later there's a voicemail message. It is a recording of a robotic woman warning of some account suspension. I delete the message without listening to all of it. About five or ten minutes later, another call from another 1-800 number. Again, I don't answer. And again, there's the exact same voicemail message. This has happened for the past three days. That's six calls from six different 1-800 numbers and six identical robotic voicemail messages.

Perhaps the spammer's "strategy" is this:

- Use an 1-800 number since it looks official
- Use different 1-800 numbers for each call, so target won't figure out it's the same entity calling
- Scare the target with an official sounding message about "immediate account suspension" to create fear/anxiety. This fear will lead to target answering the phone five minutes after the original message and/or calling back.
- Call at the same time every day because this will make a target answer or pick up

Stupid "marketing"

What's behind this "marketing" strategy is the assumption that the target won't see that the 1-800 calls are not official,

and that they will pick up. In other words, the “strategy” is based on the idea that the target is too stupid to see that this is a scam.

Sending the same email, over and over and over and over...

There’s a guy named Steve Marriot who really wants to speak to me about my credit. He wants it so much that he sends me the same email day after day. His subject line says “Let’s grow together in 2019.” He just wants to set up me to call him to discuss my credit needs. Or better yet, just apply since his company has analyzed my company and determined I am eligible for a quarter million dollar loan at a low rate! Okay then. Oh, and there is absolutely no information about Steve’s “company” in the email. No website address, no description, no nothing but there is a link for an application. As if I am going to click that.

Putting the stupid in marketing

First, sending the same email multiple times does not make me want to open a line of credit with you. Credit and finance are trust-based transactions. I don’t know Steve, but I do know he is running a con. He knows nothing about my company or me and nobody but nobody pre-approves you for a loan without knowing anything about your finances. Second, are you really that stupid to think that I am so stupid as to respond to an email from an unknown “financial” company?

Do you assume your customers are stupid? If you do, please stop. The only marketers that bet on stupidity are spammers. And that is the bottom line.

Be a more effective writer: Think BLUF

What is BLUF?

I only recently learned about BLUF, which stands for “bottom line up front,” from a woman who works in project management at a computer/software company. In her line of work, she says, she has little time to wade through a morass of details, and needs to know the bottom line first (i.e., what is the project is going to cost).

TL, DR

It’s not much different in any type of writing. I am sure you’ve seen people post articles with the disclaimer “TL, DR,” which stands for “too long, didn’t read.” People don’t have time to read long, detailed articles or emails, *especially if they are reading them on a mobile device*. People want to know what it’s about, and then read it slowly when they have time. This is why subject lines and headlines are so crucial—that’s your BLUF for emails and articles. Say what it’s about.

Don’t bury the lede!

With news releases, it is imperative that the first paragraph carry the important information. The rest of the release is filled with the details and quotes. The same holds for news articles. In journalism, when you don’t provide the crucial information up front, it’s called “burying the lede.”

Take this article from Eater DC: “HipCityVeg Brings its Vegan Versions of Fast Food Favorites to Dupont Circle.” It’s about the opening of the restaurant’s second location in Washington, DC, and yet, I have to read through **NINE** paragraphs about how and why HipCityVeg does what it does before I find out the exact address of the new location. The address should have

been in the first paragraph, so that somebody who want to actually visit the restaurant, knows where to find it.

What does the reader *need* to know?

When writing a marketing piece, a blog post, an email, do yourself a favor and think BLUF: What is the most important thing your reader has to know? Being bottom line-oriented and putting the important stuff up front, will make you a better, more effective writer.

The amateur effect

It seems to me that there are fewer experienced professionals working in day-to-day marketing. Instead, we're seeing more and more amateurs, or inexperienced people, "managing" or running things, especially digital marketing efforts. There are consequences to a lack of experience: amateur mistakes.

The amateur effect can be seen in the explosion of typos, missing information, missing links, poorly designed websites, hard-to-understand copy, and a myriad other maladies that makes your marketing look unprofessional at best, and be ineffective at worst.

Did anyone double-check this?

This is part of full-page ad in the *Washington Business Journal*:



Can you spot the issue? It's the extra space in the word finger. How could this happen? Probably because nobody proofread the laid-out copy.

And then there are typos

There are typos galore in newspapers, books, and magazines. This is partially due to cut-backs in editorial staff, but it is also due to having amateurs in charge.

And misused words

Affect and effect do not mean the same thing. Enough said.

And missing information, and missing links

A few weeks ago I got a promotional email from a day spa promoting the spa's outdoor pool opening for the summer. There was a link to click for more information. The link didn't

work. I went to the website because I wanted to find out if you could get a day pass for the pool, and if so, how much it would cost. Well, there was no information about the pool. None. The website was a mess, and if the information was there, it was buried so deep you'd need to hire an archaeologist to find it.

Why all the problems?

Amateurs don't believe in double-checking stuff, because they don't know what they are checking for.

Amateurs don't ask questions, because they don't know what questions to ask or to whom.

The bottom line is that amateurs don't know what they don't know, and they don't know enough to ask.

The solution is experience

There is no substitute for experience. If you don't want your marketing to be rife with mistakes, and just be plain ineffective, you need to hire experienced people to run your programs, and to mentor the less experienced staff. People can learn to be great marketers, but they need guidance.

What do you think? Have you seen or experienced the amateur effect?

It's not all about you, nor should it be

As I was driving in today's heavy rain, I noticed whether cars had headlights on. Most did, but there were several that didn't. What reasoning would possess anyone to not turn on their headlights in the pouring rain (and I think it may actually be a driving rule here in Maryland)? Sure, some people forget. But when you look around and everyone else has theirs on, does that not remind you to do it too? I mentioned this to a friend, and she said she believes it's because the drivers think they only need lights on when they themselves can't see. They fail to think about the fact that the lights help others to see them.



Photo by Louis from Pexels

The marketing communications angle here is that whenever you produce any marketing materials, you can't just think about yourself (your company or organization) but about the people

who will be using/reading/accessing those materials. When you fail to think about what they need, like the cars without headlights in the pouring rain, you are making it harder for them to see you.

Events happening sometime during St. Patrick's weekend

Take for example the Facebook event posting from a local Irish pub for its St. Patrick's Day celebration. It listed the following information, verbatim:

Saturday and Sunday Outdoor Festival. Live Music, Pipes & Drums, Irish Dancers, Bouncy Castle Face Painting and so much more!

Do you notice anything missing (other than the comma between castle and face painting)? How about times? Is it all day? When and where is the live music? What bands will be performing? Where does this all take place? In the pub? On the street outside the pub? Is this free? Or is there a fee?

Since I was interested in attending (come on, they had a bouncy castle!), I had to message the pub and ask. They responded telling me they were opening early for brunch at 10 a.m., and that the outdoor activities would also start then, and the live music would go on at 2 p.m. I thanked them and suggested they include that information in their event page, you know, to make it clearer for anyone interested in possibly attending.

The devil really is in the details

Having seen many marketing pieces, whether it be websites, brochures or press releases, with a similar lack of salient detail, I know it is common to forget that your audience does not know everything you do about whatever you are promoting. There are the restaurant websites that fail to list their location or their operating hours. Or the product sales sheet

that doesn't list the size of the product or its cost. And on and on.

In order to produce effective, useful marketing materials, you *must* consider your audience. What details does the audience need to know? What information is relevant and is it included in your marketing piece?

It's all about the Ws

A way to gauge whether you are including the information your audience needs is to follow the journalist's guideline of asking the "5 Ws + H": who, what, where, when, why, and how. If your marketing piece answers those questions, you will have provided the most relevant information. For events, the what, where, and when are crucial. Clearly, the pub's marketing folks do not have a journalistic or events planning background. I will chalk up their poorly thought out event invitation to it being produced by an amateur. One would hope no professional marketing person would fail to include the when and where information on an event listing.

Don't be so centered on your own needs that you forget what your audience needs to know. In other words:

Turn on your headlights so others can see you.

Simple reminders help market doctor's offices

Doctors don't seem to do much marketing. Most doctors' offices have websites, but besides that, they don't actively engage in marketing. The communications they have is generally one on

one, although the more savvy medical offices send out health alerts (e.g., it's flu season and you should get a flu shot) and maybe even health newsletters.

Since most people go to a doctor only when they are sick, it would be better for public and individual health for medical professionals to encourage annual visits. Annual visits would catch potential issues before they become critical. And of course, having a relationship with a doctor makes emergency situations easier to deal with.



Some doctor's offices do encourage annual visits, and they do it by sending reminders. Some reminders are phone calls, some are emails, and I have even seen printed and mailed letters.

Bad (no contact at all, ever)

One doctor's office I used to go to never sent any reminders at all. Even though they had my email address, I never once got an email from them regarding anything. No calls about

annual appointments. No reminder to get an annual flu vaccine. Nothing. Ever. I no longer go to that doctor.

Better (well after the year passed)

An eye doctor I went to for several years called to remind me that I had not had my annual eye exam since November of 2016. It took them more than eight months to realize that I had not been there for more than a year. Of course they had no idea that I had changed eye doctors because of staffing issues.

Best (before the year is up)

The new eye doctor I went to called me in early September to remind that in October it would be a year since my last appointment, and did I want to schedule one now.

Reminders are an opportunity to touch base with patients. They can be a way to schedule an appointment right there and then. There is no down side to medical reminders. They also serve to show patients that doctors want to see them, and that they are not just one more person in a database.

If doctors are not going to do any other marketing, they should at the very least, have a process to remind patients about annual visits.

How to go on vacation and not lose customers

Vacation time!

Here we are in the last few days of August. Summer is waning, and perhaps you want to go to the beach or go visit your family or travel to Alaska to see the glaciers while we have them. And why not? You've worked hard the rest of the year, and you should be able to take time off.



But...

But before you take off, think about your customers. What do they need to know about your schedule and availability? If they need something, can it wait until you get back or is there somebody else who can help them?

You could lose business by failing to communicate

It seems fairly obvious to me, but some people just don't think they need to communicate. For example, I was trying to make an appointment. I texted, and several days later, no answer. I left a message, and several hours later, no return phone call. I decided to look for a different provider, and I found one. I got a belated message from the first provider telling me she was in West Virginia with poor cellphone connectivity. Apparently, she has never heard of changing her outgoing message or updating her website.

It's your responsibility to communicate your availability to your customers.

If you are an employee, you might email your contacts telling them you will be unavailable on certain dates, and tell them

who to contact instead. You may create an auto-responder on your email saying that you are not currently checking email.

If you are a business owner and have a website and/or online booking, you can update those to reflect your schedule. You can make note that your office is closed and you are not taking appointments. On your phone or answering service, you can update your outgoing message to reflect your situation.

Here's a template:

Thanks for contacting [name]. If you need to [reach me/make an appointment/other business], please be advised that our office is closed from [insert date] to [insert date]. We look forward to [seeing/serving/talking to] you then. If you need immediate assistance, please contact [insert name and number].

So go on, take your vacation, relax and enjoy. Just make sure you've communicated with your customers.

True marketing gold that guarantees results

What is the one thing in marketing that guarantees results?

Is it your website? Your social media marketing? Your strategic, forward-thinking marketing plan? Your market research? Your promotions?

While all of the above help you to generate leads and close

sales, there is one thing that you have that will guarantee those leads convert and make those sales happen.

It's your credibility.

If I can't believe what you are selling, then I am not going to buy it. In other words, without credibility, you are nothing.

Credibility means trust. If you are credible, your product or service is trustworthy. It's really that simple.

Let me illustrate with the tale of an unnecessary car repair:

A couple of months ago, I took my car in for a tire rotation and alignment to the tire shop where I had bought my tires. The rotation is free for the life of the vehicle, and the alignment costs \$99. After a few minutes, one of the salespeople came out to tell me there was a problem. The shop could not do the alignment because the front end arms needed to be replaced. This repair would cost \$600 (or six times what I had been planning on). The mechanic showed me what he was talking about, but my instinct (and pocketbook) said to decline this expensive repair.

When I walked out of the shop, I felt highly uneasy about what had happened. I felt that the salesperson was trying to upsell me and I did not trust her or the mechanic's assessment. Also, there had been a change in both the appearance and atmosphere of the shop. Previously, it had a homey (and more trustworthy) appearance. The people were friendly, and seemed honest. Now, things had been spiffed up, and the front desk was manned by two fairly surly people that barely had a smile for me. I got the sense the shop had been sold and was under new management, and that the management was looking to squeeze more profits from its customers. After all you are not going to make a lot of money off free rotations, are you?

This week, I took my car in for routine maintenance to my regular (trustworthy) repair shop. I asked them to check out this front end problem. And, no surprise really, they said it did not need the repair. So either the mechanic at the tire shop did not know what he was talking about, or the salesperson was indeed upselling me something just to generate more money. Either way, the credibility of the tire shop has completely evaporated for me. I can't think of taking my car there, because I don't believe they will act in my best interest. I don't believe anymore in what they are selling.

You can't manufacture credibility.

You have it or you don't. Credibility derives from your actions, from the substance of your product or service. However, you *can promote* your credibility. You can highlight what makes you credible. When you communicate with your audience, you show credibility by your honesty. You can use customer testimonials and ratings. If you've gotten third-party reviews (like a product review in magazine), these are earned media mentions that help promote credibility.

The bottom line is that you can only promote your credibility if you act credibly. Otherwise, all your marketing efforts will be for naught.

Thoughts? Drop me a line in the comments.