

Deception is not a good marketing tactic

Have you ever bought something because it was on “special” promotion pricing? Have you bought a product to get a “free” gift? Have you rented a car because of a “discount” rate? If so, you may have been a victim of deceptive marketing tactics designed to boost sales.

Some marketers seek to entice customers by offering what seem to be great deals. Usually, it’s a special “one-time only” price or a discount or a “bonus.” What they fail to mention is that you may have to pay extra for the bonus (many cosmetic brands do this) or that the special price doesn’t include something else that you are required to pay.

Recently, I fell for a “special rate” from Thrifty. I was planning a trip to Boston, and researching rental cars when I got an email from the car rental company offering a 30% discount. This made the base fare for a rental car in Boston much better than the competition. It seemed like a no-brainer.

Last Friday, after landing in Boston, I got to the counter at Thrifty to find out that in addition to my discounted rate, I would be forced to pay an \$11.99 per day toll charge for each day I rented the car. Massachusetts has joined other states in getting rid of toll booths (and jobs for tollbooth collectors, but I digress) and instituting an all-electronic system. You need an E-Z Pass to pay, or else the toll authority will take a picture of your plates and send you a bill (with an extra fee to boot).

At no point in the reservation process, nor in any confirmation email, did Thrifty tell me that Boston was a place that has all electronic tolls and that I would be required to pay an additional toll pass fee. They also did not

disclose the amount of the fee for the toll charge, which they add on for *all* Boston renters. Had I known, I could have brought my own E-Z Pass and avoided the extra charge. And had I known that tolls would be an issue, I could have researched the toll charges at other car rental companies, and may have chosen one of them instead.

This situation could and should be avoided. Thrifty has permanently damaged its reputation with me because it chose to be deceptive. It could have done the following:

Tell me the true cost of my rental—including *all* taxes and fees.

Thrifty used a special rate to entice me to use its services. The company never mentioned the additional toll pass charges, which effectively increased the total amount of my rental by \$48. Thrifty also charges much higher toll pass rates than its competitors.

Provide enough information for me to make an informed decision.

Thrifty knew I was renting in Boston, and it knew that Boston requires electronic toll collection. But Thrifty did not include that information anywhere on its website when booking. The first I learned of it was after I was already at the rental counter.

In the end, deceptive marketing tactics will backfire.

Deceiving your customers just to get them to buy from you may generate a *short-term increase in sales*, but it will create a *long-term decrease in your credibility and trustworthiness*, which will mean a loss of future sales.

It's all about being informed

If you were canvassing for a political candidate, would you place a paper brochure or flyer promoting the candidate outside in the rain? I hope you wouldn't, but that's just what happened around here today.

The forecast called for lots of rain

This morning, when I opened my front door to get my morning paper, I found a soggy brochure on my doorstep. The brochure was for a guy running for county executive in Montgomery County where I live. I couldn't tell you much about this candidate because the brochure was practically dissolving from all the rain we've been getting. I am not sure when the brochure was placed there, but I do know the forecast called for rain every single day this week, to the extent we are under a flash flood warning. And even if you didn't hear the forecast, all you had to do is step outside, feel the rain drops and look at the gray skies and know that the weather didn't look good.

But you have to care to know the forecast

A whole lot of effort and money was wasted here, seemingly because people didn't know it was raining. Or perhaps they just didn't care. I don't know which it is but if you are doing marketing, it pays to be informed.



The solution is simple: Do your research

In this case, whoever was in charge of the canvassing, should've looked at the weather and scheduled it for a day when it wouldn't be raining. Or perhaps, should have considered alternative means to get the brochure out.

If you were planning an event, you'd want to check the calendar to see if there was a holiday or other big event on the date you were considering.

If you were planning to launch a product, you'd want to make sure production is on schedule.

You have to ask the right questions

You always have to ask questions...but you have to know what to ask about. In order to do this, you may have to do some research, talk to experts, ask other people. In short, you need to gather information so that you can ask the right

questions.

For example, you may have heard that the EU's General Data Protection Regulation or GDPR is going into effect on May 25, 2018. Some questions you may have are these:

- What exactly is GDPR and does it affect me?
- What do I have to do (if anything) to be in compliance?
- Why is this important?

If you don't ask these questions, you may not be in compliance with GDPR when it goes into effect next week.

For any marketer or communicator, information is the key. So do your research and ask the right questions before you undertake any action.

No response = no business

Last week, I had an urgent need to get my roof repaired. We'd had a severe windstorm in the Washington area that blew off several shingles off my roof, and rain was in the forecast. In order to prevent further damage, I knew I had to get someone to fix this right away.

First, I contacted several friends to ask for their recommendations. This way, I got three names. Then, I went on Consumer Checkbook to check ratings and get more names. I wrote down a few names, and noticed that a couple of the names my friends had provided were on the Checkbook site, and had good ratings. First thing on Monday (I noticed the damage over the weekend), I called all the names I gathered. This is how it went:

1. Call to roofer listed as good value/good quality in

Consumer Checkbook. I spoke to an office person, who added me to a list, with no guarantee or timeline for when I would get someone to fix it. She told me that there were several other calls ahead of me, so she could not tell me when someone would be available, but she did provide me with pricing.

2. Call to another qualified roofer listed in Consumer Checkbook. I left a detailed message, which was never answered.

3. Call to roofer (who was highly rated in Consumer Checkbook), referred to by a close friend. There was no answer and the voice mailbox was full, so I had no way to contact this contractor or leave a message.

4. Call to roofer referred to by my neighbor who recently had her roof replaced. When I called, I got a message saying that they were overwhelmed with calls, to either leave a message or send an email. I sent an email, to which I received an answer more than a week later, explaining pricing, etc.

5. Call to handyman referred by a friend. He referred me to a contractor friend of his, a jack of many trades, who answered immediately. This contractor offered to come by to give me an estimate, and then was able to complete the repair the same day.

Now, this was an unusual situation. Many, many people had damage to their roofs from a strong and unusually long-lasting windstorm. Roofers were slammed. Yet, their responses showed a lot about how their businesses are run and how they deal with customers.

I am sure I will have a need for a roofer in the future. Based on my interactions here, I would contact the first and the fourth roofers because they were responsive and I got the sense of professionalism. As to the contractor who actually fixed my roof, I know I have found someone who is punctual and reliable, but he is not primarily a roofer and I would not ask

him to do more than repair shingles.

Not being responsive and not even having a mechanism to leave messages is the sign of a business that is overwhelmed and incapable of dealing with emergencies and not very professional and customer-centric. It's better to get a late reply than no reply at all.

No response leads to no business.

What can a small, one-person business do to be more responsive? There are several options.

- Have a website that explains how you respond in emergencies, and which also provides a phone number, email, and contact form to get in touch (in other words, many ways to get in touch).
- Have an online booking system. There are several paid and non paid options out there that allow your customers to book time with you, either for a consultation or a full-fledged appointment.
- Consider having an answering service, virtual assistant, or in-house administrative person so that customers can talk to a person in real time.
- Make time to answer every email, contact request or phone call that you receive, even if it is to say we can't help you at this time.

No amount of marketing or beautiful website design is going to overcome a lack of responsiveness. If you want business, you have to respond to inquiries. If you don't respond, you will not get that business now or in the future.

When your customers don't know who you are

This morning, I came across an article on EaterDC about the new Isabella Eatery food hall at Tyson's Galleria in McLean, Virginia: Gargantuan Isabella Eatery is Confusing Customers. It seems that although some of the elements of the food hall get good reviews for quality and design, customers don't know what to make of the whole thing. It seems that Isabella Eatery is offering so much that its customers no longer know what Isabella stands for. (Some background: Mike Isabella was a contestant on Top Chef. Later he went on to open up Graffiato, an Italian restaurant in Washington, DC and later a Italian sandwich shop called G by Mike Isabella. He then expanded into Greek food with three Kapnos restaurants, and then into Spanish food with Arroz. He heads up a company called Mike Isabella Concepts, which also operates a French restaurant, a Mexican restaurant and the aforementioned food hall.)

Something for every one?

And then there's the local pizza chain with the catchy jingle that says it offers "something for every one." The place is called [name] Pizza, and its current TV commercials show pictures of a burger and fries. Because, of course, if you want a burger and fries you'd call a pizza delivery place, right?

Jack of all trades, master (brander) of none

When you seek to please everyone by offering tons of choices, you end up pleasing no one.

In terms of branding and marketing, when you offer so many choices (and in Isabella's case, cuisines and restaurants) you are violating the first two of *The 22 Immutable Laws of*

Branding by Al Ries and Laura Ries. The first law says that your brand loses its power when you expand your scope, and the second, which really is the inverse of the first, is that having more focus strengthens your brand.

A strong brand is focused, a weak brand is not. It seems to me that Mike Isabella is expanding at the expense of his brand. And the pizza place? Well I don't think it would be anyone's first choice for pizza *or* for burgers.

Your brand is your mark of distinction. How well are you communicating it? If you need help with your branding, check out my new Brand Identity Kit.

How do you view your target audience?

This is not the Spam that comes in a can

On the telephone

Have you received multiple calls on your landline and/or cell phone that are in the same area code and start with the same three digits as your phone number? Chances are high that you have. Spammers are hoping that you will think that this a local number and therefore will answer. However, when they

keep using this technique over and over and over again, and when caller ID shows you names of people you don't know, you learn pretty quickly that this is a spam call and you don't answer.

On email

If you are a website owner, have you received emails telling you that you have problems on your website and that the emailer can fix these "fatal" errors so that your website can function? After the second or third one, chances are good you figured out that this is a scam and you deleted the email and/or added it to your junk list and/or reported it.

or

Have you gotten an email like this one I have already received twice (word for word) from "Tina Richardson:"

Hello Deborah,

I just came across the Mad Mimi piece, "Dyscalculia and MLD Newsletter." Nice job! As a heads up, your site is not WC3 accessible for people with physical disabilities related to dyscalculia. I get it: your website can't be accessibility compliant without sacrificing design, interactivity and general user experience for visitors without disabilities (paying 50% more for designers and coders might help, but would still fall short).

The very red flag here is that there is no "Mad Mimi" piece that I wrote about dyscalculia.

These are real examples. I get these calls and emails, several times a day. Apparently, the idea here is that I am going to believe that the call is from someone I know, or that my website has a ton of problems, or even that I wrote something that I didn't. In short, all these "marketing" pieces depend on my naivete or stupidity or lack of common sense. They are

designed so that a trusting or uninformed person falls for them.

What differentiates spam marketing from real marketing

How you view your target audience determines what kind of marketer you are. If you view your audience as naive, easily swayed or just plain stupid, chances are you are a spammer/scammer. If, on the other hand, you view your audience as knowledge-seeking and perhaps even sophisticated, chances you are a real marketer (and therefore probably more successful).

Real marketing seeks to give potential customers fact-based information on which to base a buying decision. Spam/scam marketing often uses fear-mongering or the assumption that the target does not have enough information.

If you want to be taken seriously, do not view your target audience as stupid, gullible, uniformed, unsophisticated. Instead, view your target as smart and then your marketing will also be smart and successful.

4-step plan to achieve marketing success in 2018

We are only four days into the new year, and there is plenty of time ahead to re-calibrate or re-focus your marketing efforts to achieve maximum success in 2018. You can also use this time and planning to create a completely new marketing strategy. To help you make the most of this opportunity, I am

offering you four steps to get you on the right track.

Step 1: REVIEW

Look back at your marketing efforts in 2017. What did you do? Social media marketing? Content marketing? List all your marketing activities, such as newsletters, blog posts, video, social media promotions, advertising, etc. Be sure to include specifics, such as what vendors and technology you used (e.g., Constant Contact or MailChimp, Hootsuite or Tweetdeck, etc.) You may also want to incorporate how much these activities cost you, for example, how much you spent on subscription-based services, video production, content production, and so forth.

Step 2: BENCHMARK

How do you know how far you've come if you don't know where you started? Benchmarking at specific intervals or times of the year is a great way to measure your progress (or lack thereof). To do this, create a simple table in Excel or in Word. The first column will list the indicators you want to track. Input the numbers for the indicators you are tracking under a second column headed with the date you collected the information. Add another column for the next date you will revisit these numbers. You could do this on a quarterly, semi-annual, or annual basis, depending on your business plan.

To figure out what to benchmark, think about the different components of your marketing plan you reviewed in the first step: content marketing, digital/social media marketing, print, etc. What are some key performance indicators (KPIs) within those components?

Some possible indicators are:

- Revenue
- Social media likes/followers (broken down by channel)
- Newsletter subscribers/open rates

- Website conversion rate
- Number of visitors to the website
- Number of customers/clients served

Step 3: ANALYZE AND ASSESS

Looking back at your efforts in 2017, where did you spend the most time and effort? What worked the best? What worked the least? Where was the biggest return on investment (ROI)? What vendors were worth it? Did you have trouble using certain technology? Is there a better way to do what you have been doing? In terms of social media/digital strategy, what tactics earned the most attention/engagement?

Your aim here is to recognize patterns, successes, and failures.

Step 4: CREATE YOUR 2018 ROADMAP

Now that you know what you did and whether it worked or not, you can decide what to continue and what to eliminate. Perhaps you want to add more budget/time to your email marketing. Perhaps you want to scale back your efforts on social media channels. Looking at your benchmarks, what numbers do you want to change? How will you get there? Perhaps you want to increase your website conversion rate. What activities will achieve the results you want? Are there areas you want to explore? Perhaps you've heard that voice search will be big in 2018 (it will). What do you need to do to make your SEO responsive to these new challenges?

I'd love to hear what you are planning for 2018 and where you will be spending your marketing dollars. Please share in the comments or email me. I may include your responses in a future blog post.

Happy New Year and good luck with your 2018 planning!

Decisions with unintended consequences

This is a post about unintended and negative consequences, based on two separate experiences yesterday.

Last minute deal—get in at no cost!

Last night, I attended an event on trends in digital marketing. I signed up for it a couple of days ago, and paid \$11.84. Yesterday, about two hours before the event was due to start, there was an email from the organizer to a listserv I am on saying that she didn't have enough attendees, so if anyone wanted to attend *for free*, they could.

I felt like a sucker. Why had I bothered to pay anything at all for an event that wasn't garnering enough attention to the point that the organizer was begging people to come by offering free admission?

And the real question is, why would I ever pay this organizer for any event when it may be more advantageous to wait until the last minute?

The unintended consequence of this poor decision is to effectively make people decide to not sign up in advance, to not pay at all, because there's a likelihood that if too few people sign up in advance, the organizer will be desperate enough for warm bodies and offer free admission to all.

Ask and ask and ask again—until they don't want to be asked again

Unless you were not online, or checking email, you know yesterday was Giving Tuesday. Giving Tuesday was developed (supposedly) as an “antidote” to Cyber Monday/Black Friday. In theory, Giving Tuesday is a chance to support charities instead of, or in addition to, shopping like mad for the holidays.

A lot of hoopla has developed around this “holiday.” Case in point: Every organization that I have ever supported sent me emails the week before, the day before and the day of, to beg me to give them money on Giving Tuesday. Some organizations sent multiple emails on Tuesday in addition to multiple emails on the days before. My inbox was flooded with requests, and then so were my social media feeds.

Some organizations were getting matching funds on Giving Tuesday, so giving on this day automatically meant more money in the coffers. But the level of pushiness these organizations reached around Giving Tuesday in order to get these extra funds may have had the unintended consequence of reducing the number of people opting in to newsletters. I unsubscribed to at least two, and was seriously considering unsubscribing from all of them.

The intensity of the effort made it seem as if this was your one chance to give, as if you couldn't give any time of the year, and *as if giving at any other time was just not as good*. The other unintended consequence of this extreme focus on Giving Tuesday, I believe, is to reduce year-round giving.

Organizations make lots of decisions to fulfill short-term goals (get lots of donors on Tuesday), but which neglect to take into consideration long-term goals (develop good relationships and donor opportunities year-round). In other words, before you make a snap decision that only affects one event/day, think about what your overall goals are, and whether this decision furthers those goals or not.

To gift or not to gift...a marketing question

As has happened every November for the six years I've lived in my current home, I received this on my doorstep:



It is given by a local real estate agent who also sends a magnetic calendar in the mail and places quarterly sales updates on my doorknob. He includes a card with his contact information along with the jar of apple butter.

Here's the problem: I don't really eat apple butter. I am not opposed to it, but it is not something I eat regularly. I have three unused jars from the past few years, and I don't really know what to do with them. It's a shame to throw them out, but it's not something I feel counts as food to be taken to the food pantry. In other words, it has become clutter and something that puts the burden on me. For me, this is not a welcome gift.

I am not sure why this real estate agent keeps doing this.

Perhaps he has found there is a return on investment, or he wants to be known as the apple butter guy. I am not sure, but in my opinion, his is an example of how not to do corporate gift giving.

Gift giving can be a good marketing tactic, as long as there is some thought and strategy behind it.

Many large companies regularly give customers a gift that costs them very little but is very effective in getting people to the door: a free visit, a \$25 coupon toward your purchase, discount cards, VIP seating, and so on. Others send Christmas gifts to ongoing customers. Some take hold monthly birthday lunches for clients. These companies and organizations have budgeted a certain/set amount toward corporate gifts, and have instituted these as regular marketing effort.

In order to have a *successful* gift giving campaign. you should think about the following two things:

1. What are you trying to accomplish?

Perhaps you are thanking customers for their business during the year, or perhaps you want to entice new customers. Either way, if you don't know why you are giving, there is absolutely no point to doing it.

2. Who are you giving to?

This is crucial information. If you are giving to a client you've known for years versus giving to a potential customer, you will be spending different amounts of time and effort. For a long-term client, you probably will need to find a personalized gift, and for a potential customer, you want to encourage them to check you out.

But not just any gift will do.

Once you've decided what you are trying to do and to whom you are giving, you can choose the gifts that make the most sense.

Some attributes that you may want to consider are these:

- Memorable
- Useful
- Linked to your brand identity
- Stand out from the crowd

Remember: what makes a a good gift is something the recipient appreciates or wants.

What are your thoughts on gifts as a marketing tactic? Have you received or given a particularly good or bad gift? Please let me know.

When you want to be found

Yesterday, I was browsing through books in my favorite used bookstore (where you can get most soft cover books for \$2 each, a real bargain, and most books are in great shape to boot). As I was making my way through the Fiction section, I came across Diane Ackerman's *The Zookeeper's Wife*, which is the *real* life story of a Polish woman who saved Jews during World War II, thus making it a non-fiction book. I came across a Denise Mina book that should've been housed in the Mystery section. I came across memoirs and biographies. In short, there were a lot of books that were not classified correctly and therefore shelved in the wrong place.



Bookstore picture courtesy of Kaboompics

Being in the wrong place makes it hard to be found.

The used bookstore is volunteer-run, and it may be too much to ask volunteers to know what each book is or where it belongs. Since books are donated, there is no inventory. On the other hand, in a regular bookstore, books are shelved by ISBN numbers and inventories are computerized. It'd be rare that book was shelved in the wrong place, unless a customer put it back where it didn't belong. If you were looking for a particular book, you could ask someone to look it up to see if it is available and if so, where it is located.

Classification is important, especially on the internet.

The internet is more like the used bookstore than it is like the organized world of Barnes & Noble. The internet is pretty much volunteer-run and the volunteers are each website's owners. In other words, on the internet you self-classify—you put yourself on the right (or wrong) shelf.

As the website owner or manager, you choose how you want your site to look, what content to include, and what keywords to use. You choose whether you will optimize your site to be found on search engines (SEO) and whether you will do it well (use the right tools, or hire a professional) or not.

When you want to be found, especially online, you have to know how to describe yourself and where people would look for you. You have to know how you are classified and what keywords people use to find you.

You must understand yourself and your market.

In the used bookstore, there are some volunteers who are avid readers, some who are aces at alphabetization and organization, and some who just want to help but have no clues. The volunteers who can alphabetize, organize *and* know books well are the ones who know the right place to shelve a book.

You have to understand exactly what to do, and how the world

classifies you. You may think that you do one thing (like Mattress Firm thinks it sells “sleep solutions”) while most customers see you differently (customers shop for mattresses not sleep solutions). It may be tempting to figure out some fancy description to help you stand out, but unless you classify yourself correctly and use the more common keywords searchers would use, you will not be found.

Don't be the memoir languishing in the fiction section. Classify your website correctly and use the right keywords.

Care matters more than marketing

A few weeks ago, I dropped my old Samsung smartphone, rendering it useless. Panicked at the thought of not being able to check Facebook on the fly (kidding), I ran over to the ATT store nearest me. There, a very young person pretending to be a customer service agent, did *not* help me get a phone.

Here's why care matters

First, I had a contact lens emergency. I asked to use the restroom to deal with it. The young lady said no restroom was available. Evidently, ATT does not care about the well being and comfort of visitors to its stores.

Second, I asked her to see a Galaxy S7. She told me they don't have them in stock. Only the more expensive Galaxy S8s. I don't want to spend the extra money I told her. She then said maybe it could be shipped to me, but that it would take a week. A week? Without a phone? I asked her if she could check availability at nearby retailers. No, she said, she couldn't

possibly do that. Could she expedite shipping then? No, she couldn't do that either.

Third, and finally, I said: "What if I go over to the Sprint or T-Mobile store then? I am not under contract with ATT." She shrugged. She didn't care. I left.

Another young person without a clue

I drove up the street to BestBuy. There, the store did have some Galaxy S7s in stock. However, the young (notice a theme here) "sales" person was not super helpful. He did get me a phone, but only after telling me several times that I should get the S8. He also tried to scare me into getting GeekSquad protection. And into getting a screen protector, case, charger, etc. In short, he was being a real pain. And to boot, he would not even try to get my contacts and other information off my old phone. I am not even going into the whole story but suffice it to say that the 24-year-old had a horrible attitude.

Being helpful and trying to resolve problems goes a very long way

I ended up speaking to the kid's manager, who promised to speak to him and to help me out. The next day, the much nicer (and older) manager spent nearly two hours with me, getting the stuff off the old phone and transferring it to my new phone and to a flash drive. He saved the day for me, and gave me a much more positive view of BestBuy.

Complaining to ATT garnered zero action

I called ATT and after dealing with the most annoying robot, I got through to a customer care agent. I told her I had a complaint about the store I went to. She put me through to a manager who didn't see a problem, didn't even ask what store it was or the name of the employee. I then tweeted the wrongly named @attcares. No care there either.

Is all well that ends well?

In the end, I have a working phone. I have my contacts. I have my photos. I don't have voice mail but that is the subject for another day.

ATT can market all they want but unless they start showing some care, I will not stick with them as a customer. Their Twitter "customer service" is slow to respond, and that makes it nearly useless. Their customer service via phone has gone down hill. If you have a problem with ATT, it seems you are on your own.

We are fine with any company until there is a problem that the company will not *try* to solve. If a company shows genuine care (like the BestBuy manager did), you are willing to overlook the problem. If a company does not show care (like ATT), you are not willing to give it a second chance.

What do you think? Do you stick with companies that treat you poorly? How important for you is it to get good customer service?