

Does PBS get the support of viewers like you?

We need your support and we will interrupt your viewing until you give us money!

This seems to be the PBS mission during its pledge drive

Currently, it's the upteenth day during the upteenth time this year that my local PBS station, WETA, is looking for support from viewers. It may not be endless, but it sure feels like it.

Pledge month (?) is the time when the station starts playing "specials" that have been played dozens of times before, and interrupting them every fifteen minutes to ask for your support. In return, you will get any number of mugs/bags/videos/books based on the size of your contribution. Also, every other show seems to get interrupted—the Newshour, Washington Week, and most egregiously, the finale of the Great British Baking Show.

Enough!

Viewers like me do not like to watch tired, old "specials." Viewers like me hate having shows interrupted multiple times by the same talking heads giving repetitious pitches on why to give to the station. Viewers like me do not want mugs or tote bags. Viewers like me click off PBS the instant this pledge madness starts.

How can this model work today?

Here's a newsflash for PBS: Times have changed.

Hundreds of viewing options

All TV channels are under intense competition—both for viewers

and for advertising dollars. This is because viewers have many more options for entertainment than ever before: There are hundreds of cable and streaming channels, and also an internet chock-full of stuff to watch, read, react to and interact with.

It's an on-demand world

With DVRs and/or access to content on demand, people can watch shows on whatever schedule they choose. They can ignore advertising (and pledge drives).

There's a streaming channel for that

It used to be that you could only watch British shows like Downton Abbey or Inspector Morse on PBS. Now, you can stream them on specialized British TV/movies channels, and even watch them on Netflix.

Watch TV wherever you are, whenever you want

Smartphones and tablets can access the internet anywhere and everywhere. And users of these devices can buy/rent/download all sorts of entertainment to watch even when there is no internet access.

Interrupting viewer with a push-message is really old school

These days, inbound marketing is in favor. That's when potential customers/supporters come to you because you are providing great content/reasons for them to interact and buy/support from you. Forcing yourself on viewers, like the pledge drive on PBS does, is the complete opposite. It assumes a static audience that does not have any option but to sit there and listen to a sales pitch. It assumes that pushing a message is the best way to get action. It's the old way of doing things. And it may help PBS shed viewers, not gain them.

Is annoying viewers for a \$60 donation the best way to keep PBS afloat?

When you are aiming for lots of small donations, you have to do a lot more work. In this case, it means interrupting viewing more times, more often. It gets annoying. It's a turn-off. And I don't believe it's effective. I think it would be far more effective to concentrate on getting and retaining big, corporate or foundation sponsorships.

I understand PBS wants community support too. Perhaps instead of asking viewers to donate, PBS could emphasize obtaining a yearly membership with (real) special benefits (currently this is not clear on the PBS website). Instead of having pledge drives, PBS could include a 15-second ad/message for membership before popular shows.

What do you think? Do you watch PBS? Do you support PBS? Why or why not?

Check for accuracy STAT

The other night, I heard a loud, scratching noise in my chimney. It sounded as if an animal had gotten in. My first thought (and fear) was that a small bat was in there and it would then come into the house. Since it was close to midnight, there was nothing I could do except check the website for the local animal trapping company that I've seen working in my neighborhood. According to Google results, their office opened at 7:00 a.m. The website listed an 800 number, and four local-area numbers. I decided to call first thing to see if they would send someone right away.

At 7:00 the next morning I called up the company. I got a message saying their offices opened at 8:00 a.m. Their Google My Business listing was wrong and their website did not list hours at all.

Sometimes companies spend more time and money on developing new marketing or on sales pitches, and they forget to check the basics. So, before you do anything else marketing-related, check your current stuff for accuracy. Do it now. Seriously.

What to check:

- Business name (is it complete, spelled correctly?)
- Address/es (accurate, current?)
- Telephone number/s (accurate, current?)
- Website URL
- Hours/days of operation
- Staff names/positions/contact information
- Email addresses
- Pricing information

Where to check:

- Your website
 - Your social media pages (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, etc.)
 - Google results/Google maps/Google My Business
 - Yelp and other review or listing sites (e.g., Angie's List) you appear in
 - Printed materials (business cards, brochures, letterhead, postcards, etc.)
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In the end, I was able to get the animal trapping company to come to my house later in the day. They checked the chimney and nothing was there (thank goodness!). They put some mesh on the chimney cap to prevent bats or birds from getting in.

This company has plenty of business around here. I've seen their trucks before as squirrels are constantly getting into attics (and bats are always in the belfry). They certainly have developed brand recognition. But you only call them when you need them and it is usually an urgent situation. Having multiple phone numbers and inaccurate hours is not helpful for anybody needing their services.

Any organization needs to consider what information potential users/customers/donors need to have, and then make sure that information is easily *available and accurate*. It just makes good marketing/communications sense.

You need more than a gut feeling

At an event last week, I met the owner of a local pizza shop. This pizza shop, which opened about a year ago, is located near me, and seems pretty busy, especially on weekends. I asked him how it's doing. The pizza shop owner immediately said it was doing poorly, and he said the parking situation was to blame. That seemed strange to me since there's plenty of garage parking, which, with validation, is free for two hours. He told me that it doesn't matter, because psychologically, people don't like to pay for parking. And here's a direct quote from him: "I have friends who can spend \$500 on dinner but they won't pay for parking."

OK. I am sure there are people who avoid going places where they have to pay for parking. But I also don't think free parking with validation, and a couple bucks an hour after is the one reason people will avoid going out to dinner.

I have been thinking about this situation for a few days, and I have concluded that this shop owner is looking for an easy excuse for what may be poor business and marketing decisions on his part.

Here are three possible mistakes he has made:

Not scouting or researching the location carefully enough.

This particular location has several other restaurants, and the parking situation has not changed in several years. He could have asked the other restaurants if they felt the parking was a challenge. He could have determined how many people walk or take public transportation to get here and how many people drive, and from where. He could have checked out if people complain about parking.

Biting off more than he can chew. This particular restaurant took over two spaces (one had been a restaurant and the other a shoe store). It is a very large place with both indoor and outdoor seating. Perhaps the space is too big with a rent that is too high to support the amount of people that will eat out here.

Not doing enough marketing (and marketing poorly). When the place opened, I joined the Facebook page for it. It seems that they are doing a few things to entice the community, like a trivia night and a pet adoption event. Now, I am not sure how having a pet adoption event at a restaurant is even a legal idea, and at best is a bit strange idea that may attract pet lovers. I have seen little to promote events in the community and very little creativity. Also, and I kid not, the sponsored Facebook ads promote their top sirloin beef burgers. This is a pizza joint and they should focus on their area of expertise.

If you want a burger while everyone else wants pizza, it's good they have alternatives for you. But if you want a really great burger, you are not going to a pizza restaurant for it.

Perhaps this pizza place owner's gut told him that parking is the real issue. But a gut feeling does not mean that it's the correct reason to explain a situation. If he truly wants to improve his situation, he'd commission market research and/or hire a restaurant marketing consultant. He needs facts and actions rather than the feeling that parking, something that will not change and he cannot control, is hurting his business.

What do you think? Does it all amount to parking or may there be other reasons?

Are you making the best business decisions for your marketing?

Yesterday, a friend and I met to have lunch at a new pupusa place in Bethesda that we'd read about. (In case you don't know, pupusas are an absolutely delicious Salvadoran specialty of stuffed thick corn tortillas that are griddled.)

When the pupusa place first opened, it was covered in Bethesda Magazine online (I don't know if it was in the print version). The article stated that the pupusa place was sharing the kitchen with a Japanese restaurant. I assumed it was next door to the Japanese restaurant, but it turns out that it is

not separate at all.

I looked up the address online, and set out. Once I got to the block the restaurant was supposed to be on, I walked up and down the street not seeing sign for it anywhere. I noticed a Japanese place, but there was no indication that they served pupusas there. I called the number listed on the pupusa place's Facebook page. I said I was on their street but couldn't find them. The guy who answered told me he was INSIDE the Japanese restaurant, and that they normally only do take out, but that we could sit inside the restaurant.

My friend and I went in, and told the hostess that we wanted to eat pupusas. She told us that it was take out only, but when I told her I had spoken to the pupusa guy and he'd told me we could sit inside, she let us sit in the bar area, and even took our order.

When the pupusas came out, the waitress realized we needed forks and knives since it's kind of hard to eat stuffed tortillas with chopsticks. It took her another few minutes to reappear with forks for us.

Even with all the hoops to jump through, these pupusas were absolutely delicious, and we both really enjoyed our lunch. We decided that the next time we'd call it in as a takeout order, that is, if this place manages to stay in business.

This pupusa place faces many marketing challenges that are related to its business decision to be inside of a Japanese restaurant. Here are the top issues:

- No signage whatsoever
- No clarity on its Facebook page indicating their physical location inside the Japanese restaurant
- Not a natural fit in cuisines
- No menu or any printed materials
- No clarity on being a takeout business

I am not sure how this place can surmount these difficulties. An article in Bethesda Magazine, and one Yelp review are not sufficient publicity. This place has to rely on word of mouth and even more, on people specifically searching for pupusas in Bethesda.

I'd recommend that the "restaurant" seek out it's own space, even if only a food truck. Failing that, I would recommend it figure out a way of having a sign and a menu available within the Japanese restaurant. And definitely make it perfectly clear on its Facebook page that it's take out only.

The danger of letting junior staff handle your communications

Holiday marketing goes wrong

This past weekend, I got an email from retailer Eddie Bauer with the subject line "Happy Memorial Day." Now, last time I checked, Memorial Day is a holiday that commemorates and honors soldiers who have died in battle. It's a solemn day, meant for reflection, gratitude, and mourning. It is not meant to be a happy occasion.

And Eddie Bauer was hardly alone. Grammarly, purportedly a website/app about proper word usage, also wished its readers a "happy Memorial Day." And Walgreens, the drugstore, had a TV commercial that wished viewers a happy Memorial Day and sent

regards and gratitude to the troops. Again, Memorial Day is not about those currently serving, it is about those who died while serving.

Ivanka Trump's company got a bit of negative publicity because it tweeted how to make champagne popsicles to "celebrate" Memorial Day. You do not celebrate Memorial Day, you observe it.

These are mistakes and missteps that come from *assuming* you know something rather than actually knowing it.

These sad examples of holiday marketing show a deep lack of knowledge and understanding. They are mistakes that seem to come from people who have little breadth and depth. That's what I mean by junior staff. Junior staff members are not necessarily young, but they are inexperienced, have little knowledge, don't always understand context, and may make poorly thought out decisions. Junior staff may be aces at the tactics, like posting to social media, but they aren't versed on strategy and communications goals.

When grownups handle communications

Over the Memorial Day weekend, Budweiser was running a promotion in which a portion of beer sales proceeds would be given to Folds of Honor, a charity that provides educational scholarships to families of fallen service members. In all aspects, this is a smarter and much more appropriate marketing tactic than the Memorial Day greetings listed above. It shows an understanding of the meaning of the holiday, and does something to give back (and thus, honors). Budweiser gets that people like to have cookouts and drink beer over the long holiday weekend, so it is taking advantage of a behavior and making it be worthwhile both for the bottom line and for what the holiday stands for.

Understand what it means and how it's best acknowledged

Holidays make easy marketing markers. Every store in this country uses the different holidays to sell something. If it's Fourth of July, get your flag themed whatever (t-shirts, cakes). If it's Thanksgiving buy some Pilgrim/turkey themed stuff. There are pastel colors and rabbits to celebrate Easter.

Yet, not all holidays are the same. Some are religious, some are patriotic, some are celebratory and some are solemn. Understanding what the meaning of a holiday is, and how people celebrate or commemorate it, goes a long way in ensuring that you won't be making a junior-level, major marketing mistake.

Did you notice any Memorial Day marketing missteps? How do you feel about using a solemn holiday like Memorial Day for marketing purposes? Let me know in the comments.

Doing too much marketing?

There's a real estate guy who specializes in selling homes in my neighborhood. He is very eager to work with me. I know this because I receive marketing stuff from him constantly. I get a jar of (branded) apple butter on my doorstep every fall. I get a property report, hung on my doorknob on a quarterly basis. I get a magnetic calendar every December. All told, I get at least six direct marketing pieces from this guy every year. As does everyone in my community.

As a communications consultant, I understand what his rationale and motivations may be:

- Gain/retain name recognition
- Stand out from the crowd
- Appear neighborly

- Show he is local and understands the community.

On a personal basis, I feel this guy is making way too much of an effort to get my business. And I feel his marketing efforts are intrusive.

But is this real estate guy doing too much marketing? The answer comes down to doing some calculations (yes, there's math involved).

The true test of whether you are doing too much marketing has to do with the value of a customer and how much you are willing to spend to acquire said customer.

The value of a customer

Your first calculation will be to determine the value of a customer. To do this, you, will have to calculate how much money a customer's business generates for you, in terms of current transaction, future transactions, and also including the potential value of any referred business.

Your marketing costs

The second calculation you will have to do is to figure out how much you are spending on marketing. To do this tally up all marketing related costs such as printing, advertising spending, distribution, consulting/design fees, website, memberships, and so forth. You may also want to include your time.

Cost per acquisition

Your final calculation is to figure out your acquisition cost per customer. So say you spent \$10,000 on marketing in a year. You obtained five customers from that marketing effort. That means you spent \$2,000 per customer acquired.

Which means

If the spending to acquire each customer exceeds the value of the customer to your business, your acquisition cost may be too high.

I don't know how much the real estate guy spends on his marketing, nor do I know what value his customers generate, but I sure hope he has done this calculation. If not, he may be doing too much marketing.

Can they read it?

Perhaps you have a great tagline or you have a fantastic, limited time offer, and yet you are getting no response. It could be that few people are enticed by your offer, or that there is little demand for your product, or, maybe, just maybe, it is that they (quite literally) *can't* see it.

What is it that you do?

Yesterday, I was in my car driving behind a commercial SUV, which had the name of the company written in green letters on the back of the truck. But for the life of me, I couldn't, make out what this company did because I could not read the line below the company name. I kept trying to figure out as I was driving a car length or so behind the truck. I finally came to a stop right behind this SUV, and it was only then that I was able to read the line saying it did plumbing. This company probably spent some money to have their company name, telephone and website painted on the back of their company SUV, and yet, it was done with such small letters that it was

practically useless. Unless you were stopped right behind it, you would not know what it was.

If you've driven around during the day, you will have seen any number of commercial trucks and cars, each with the name of the company painted on the side of the vehicle. If the name and service are prominent, and easy to read from a distance, there can be big benefits. It creates brand recognition. It can also be free advertising. Say your heating system is on the fritz, and you see a truck for a heating company, you may make note of the name, and even the website and/or telephone number.

Crammed with content, harder to read

Verizon FIOS recently redesigned its On Demand screen. Everything is now more compact (about half of the previous iteration), and all sorts of information is crammed on the screen. To be able to fit all this stuff on the screen, the font size was reduced. The result is that it is hard to read the titles of the movies. And they also added the extra step of making you click on each title to see more information, including cost. It has become very frustrating for me to deal with this new On Demand screen, and as a result, I am no longer going there to see what movies are available.

I am pretty certain that Verizon embarked on this redesign without consulting its users. I wonder if the company has seen any change in the amount of On Demand content users rent/buy now. Based on my experience, I would bet fewer people are getting stuff On Demand.

Can your audience see it? Can they read it?

You must keep **readability and visibility** top of mind when you design or redesign any marketing material. If your audience cannot read your material, or cannot see it properly, then they cannot interact with it.

Two common marketing #fails (and pet peeves)

When you see the same mistake done over and over again, you have to wonder how people manage to keep jobs or their business afloat.

Marketing fail #1: Not sending emails from an organizational address

If you get an email, as I did this morning, from a certain Ellyn Fisher, whom I have never met, would you open it? I bet, like I did, that if you did, you would hesitate to open it if not delete it completely. However, I get so many emails from individuals in organizations, that I decided to open it up and it turned out to be from the Ad Council. So the email was legitimate, but this organization does not seem to understand how email appears in your inbox and why sending it from a staffer's email address is a bad idea.

The best practice would be to send the email from the name of the organization. This is easily done in your email sending options, especially when you are using a email provider such a Constant Contact or MailChimp.

The second-best practice is to use an individual's name followed by the organization's name. For example, I get emails from Janine Wampler, ACES Communications. Those always come from the same individual, and they identify the organization so I know that it's OK to open.

If you don't understand that we are living in an age where each of us gets hundreds of emails a day, we have limited attention spans, and we have a fear of being cyber attacked,

you should not be doing any email communication.

Marketing #fail #2: Not having a complete website (or not having one at all)

Last Friday, I was meeting some friends for dinner. There's a new place that I had heard about and I did some searches to see if I could find a menu. The only thing available was a one page website with absolutely no useful information and a Facebook page, with even less useful information. We did end up meeting at this restaurant. We got there and were asked if we had reservations. Since we did not (by the way, it was 6:30 p.m. and the place was not full), the hostess told us our only option was to eat outside on the patio. Normally that would have been fine, but it was abnormally hot and humid and the patio did not even have ceiling fans. We took a look at the menu, which remember, was not available anywhere online, and we were very underwhelmed. The offerings did not make us want to brave the heat and we decided to go elsewhere. A couple showed up right after us and they too were offered the patio, and they also left.

A restaurant website should include all the information that diners need. This includes: hours, reservation policy, menu, special considerations (for example, in this case, the website could indicate diners without a reservation would be seated in the outdoor patio).

These days, there is no excuse for not having a working, attractive website. There are so many providers of build-it-yourself websites, from Wix to Squarespace. And there are providers that specialize in industries, such as restaurants.

What are marketing fails that you see over and over? Share them in the comments.

Does your audience get you?

An exponential mistake?

Several years ago, when I was just starting out, I was hired by a new client to write a sales pitch letter. The letter would promote a hotel reservations software that the client was selling to small (non-chain, independent) hotels.

The client hated the letter I wrote. He didn't even want to pay me for it! His main complaint was that I used language the hotel owners wouldn't understand. Specifically, I had used the term "exponential growth," and the client thought most people would not understand the word "exponential." I was completely taken aback. To me, "exponential growth" sounded good. You'd want your business to experience it by simply buying a new software, right?

Whether this client was right or not about "exponential," the takeaway is that you have to use the language that your audience will get. If your audience talks at a sixth-grade level, you can't use university-level language and hope they understand what you are saying.

Trump gets it (or maybe doesn't know better)

According to the article "Donald Trump Speaks Like a Sixth Grader. All Politicians Should," by Allison Jane Smith and published this past Sunday in the *Washington Post*, part of Trump's success in the presidential primaries can be attributed to his ability to communicate with the swath of Americans who have low literacy skills. As you probably have heard, Trump always uses simple words, and repeats them constantly.

Smith writes:

When speaking to or writing for a broad audience, it's a best practice to speak at an eighth-grade reading level. More than 40 percent of Americans have only basic literary skills, according to a 2003 assessment. And even highly educated people prefer to read below their formal education level.

Adjust your language

In other words, speakers (and writers) who want to communicate more widely would do better to simplify. Using big words when most people don't get them will only hurt your cause, perhaps exponentially.

Of course, if you are trying to communicate more narrowly, or to a very sophisticated audience, you will have to adjust your language accordingly.

Your job as a communicator is to make sure your audience gets you.

Have you ever read marketing material that you didn't understand? Do you think it was a language choice issue? Let me know in the comments.

Feedback is not a synonym for review (customer feedback

part 2)

Is asking for feedback the same as asking for a review? Nope. Not even close.

There's a huge difference between feedback and reviews: First of all, each targets a different audience. And second, each serves a different purpose.

Feedback is about you (service/product/offering)

If you ask for feedback, you want to know what works and what doesn't, (presumably) in order to improve the offering. Do you want to know what customers/supporters really think about you? Then ask for feedback.

Reviews are about your customers/supporters (potential and current)

If you ask for reviews, you are asking customers to *share* their thoughts, both good and bad, about your product or service *with other customers*.

Many organizations make the mistake of asking for a review when what they want is feedback and some ask for feedback when all they want is a review.



You need both, but for different reasons

Organizations should try to get both feedback and reviews from their customers, but not at the same time or using the same method.

Feedback benefits the organization, because it provides honest insights meant to correct any issues.

Reviews are important too. They help with SEO, they can entice new customers, and they add credibility. Of course, not all reviews are positive, but negative reviews can serve as a red flag to businesses.

Do you want feedback or just an inflated review?

I am taking a course on Udemy (an online “school”). The course is super long, and I am almost finished with it. About half-way through, Udemy asked me to rate the course. I rated it three stars out of five, mainly because the course is too long, repetitive and somewhat disorganized.

And then I got this email from the course’s instructor (in full below, except I removed the instructor’s name):

Hey Deborah,

Thank you for enrolling in my course.

I noticed you left a 3 star review. Was there something specifically wrong with the course that I can help you with? If the course simply isn’t for you, I can surely help you get a refund.

Teaching on Udemy is part of my livelihood, and as you can see from the thoroughness of the course, I put a huge amount of effort into making it as useful as possible. I know the course could get boring from time to time, but I tried my best to be as thorough as possible for the beginner.

Udemy reacts very negatively toward 3 star reviews, and it

tells them not to give my course as much visibility. It also hurts my livelihood generated from course sales.

If you can modify your review, that would be very much appreciated and it will go a long way toward helping me continue to teach on Udemy.

Once again, please let me know what was wrong with the course, and if you need me to get a refund processed for you, please let me know.

Thank you very much for your consideration,

Basically, the Udemy instructor wants me to give him a five-star review, *because it benefits him*, not because it benefits his potential customers. By the way, in my book, a three-star review is not negative, but fair/middling.

It occurs to me that if reviewers are pressured to change their reviews, and provide glowing reviews for something that is not five-star worthy, it can create problems down the road. Say this instructor gets all five-star reviews for a non-five-star course. People sign up based on those reviews and they are then disappointed because the course does not live up to the reviews. In turn, they provide not-so-glowing reviews. The instructor contacts them and offers to negotiate a refund, like he did for me. In the end, he will make less money.

If instead, the instructor asked for specific feedback and disassociated it from the review or from the money I paid for the course, I would provide a critique. And if he were interested in actually improving his course rather than just improving the reviews, he would weigh it carefully and maybe

consider incorporating my feedback.

So, ask for both

Businesses and organizations who want to improve, should always ask for *private, anonymous* feedback.

Businesses who want to build up credibility and SEO should ask for reviews. However, businesses need to be prepared for negative comments, and they need to have a way to deal with them.

What are your thoughts? Do you use reviews and feedback interchangeably? Do you solicit either feedback or reviews or both? How do you do it? Let me know in the comments.