

# It's not always about the money (customer feedback part 1)

Going by the emails I receive, some companies think that I don't do business with them solely because I can't afford to.



Every few weeks, a yoga studio I used to attend until my favorite teacher left sends me a dollars-off promotion. Come back, they say, here's an \$8 discount.

Then there's the company that is always sending me discounts for handyman services.

And there's a cosmetics company that sends emails telling me how I can get a free something or other with purchase (Only today! Only friends and family!).

## **It's not about money.**

None of these companies has any idea why I am not a return customer. They've never asked me, but I'll tell you my reasons.

I haven't been back to the yoga studio because I don't like the teacher that is currently teaching during the time slot that is convenient for me. Additionally, I hurt my shoulder and I can't do yoga right now.

I haven't used the handyman company because I don't have a

current need. That's not to say I won't in the future, but there's nothing (knocking on wood here) that needs fixing right now.

The cosmetics company just yesterday was offering me a free lash-extender mascara. I wear contact lenses and I never use mascaras that extend because it bothers my eyes, so even a free mascara is not an enticement.

**But at least they are tracking.**

To their credit, these companies have noticed that I haven't been a customer for a while and they want me back. But they err in thinking that doing business is simply about money.

Here's the thing: Getting customers back is not as easy as offering a discount or a gift with purchase. You have to understand what motivates your customer.

The decision to buy something or do business with a company is often about more than just price. There are other factors, both tangible (e.g., need, convenience, timing) and intangible (e.g., trust, satisfaction, appreciation) that affect whether you shop somewhere or buy a certain product.

**Sometimes, you have to ask.**

If you've lost business or aren't getting repeat business, you have to ask why. Don't assume that everything can be fixed with a dollars-off promotion. Companies are collecting emails to do marketing or to send reminders. Well, they can also send a survey or even a personalized email.

Imagine how much more effective it would be if the yoga studio owner sent me an email saying she's noticed I haven't been there in several months and she'd like to know if I am still living in town or doing yoga.

How do you track your clients or customers? How do you entice them to come back? Let me know what works for you in the

comments.

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# How to make one of your biggest marketing decisions

Do we agree that your website is one of your largest (if not *the* largest) marketing properties? If so, then read on.

When you are a solo business owner like me, you don't have an IT department or a webmaster. And so it's up to you to deal with your website. Last week I changed web hosts for the fourth time in the more than 15 years that I've had this website. It's something I've been wanting to do for a while for many reasons (perhaps the subject of an upcoming post) and I am glad I did. Going through the process showcased exactly why it's so important to choose the right host.

## **Choosing a website host is a crucial business decision**

Since your website is your front office on the Internet and it needs to remain open and accessible at all times, choosing your web host is a critical business decision. There are dozens if not hundreds of website hosts (do a search and you will see), many offering dirt cheap hosting packages. The host you choose can have a tremendous impact on your business, and your decision should not involve price alone.

**Here's what you want from a website host:**

**Near perfect reliability.** In hosting parlance, this is called “uptime” and you want to make sure it is as close to 100% as possible. If your host’s servers go down frequently, that means your website goes down frequently, which basically means lost business for you. And when servers are down, you won’t get email either, which also means lost business.

**Fast website loading times.** Website loading is partially due to your host’s servers (capacity, whether they are shared or dedicated) and partially due to factors on your website (number of plug-ins, design). According to my current host, the closer the servers are to your customers, the faster the website loading times. Website loading times may even affect your SEO ranking (read more about it [here](#)).

**Good if not great customer service.** If there’s a problem, you want to be able to speak to someone who can (and wants) to help you. You are looking for customer service that is available 365/24/7, and if you are in the U.S., preferably based here. You may also want to look for an employee-owned company, because the people you talk to will have a real interest in solving any problems you may have.

**Clean record.** Some hosts, due to their cheap rates, attract a lot of spammy businesses, which in turn get the host blacklisted by some ISPs. This is big. Your host’s standing can affect whether your emails get delivered (my previous host was blacklisted by Yahoo and my emails to Yahoo addresses would all bounce back) and even your SEO standing.

**Ability to deal with your website specifications.** You want to make sure tech support understands your platform. For example, if you run a WordPress site, you want a host that works with WordPress; and if you run ecommerce on your website, you want a host that can handle secure transactions.

**Ease of use.** My last hosting provider had two different accounts for me. One was a billing account, with a separate

user name and password, and a “cPanel” account, for handling website administration. If I needed to update credit card information, I had to log in to billing, and to change website parameters, to cPanel. To make it worse, you couldn’t access cPanel from the the main hosting website, but rather through an obscure URL you had received when you signed up. Needless to say, this was not easy or simple. It wasted a lot of my time too.

**Here are three other important tips:**

- 1. Don’t rely on your developer/designer’s recommendation.** Many website developers have reseller accounts with a website host, so it’s in their own interest to sell you that. Do your own research. There are several resources to help you identify a good host. I like SiteGeek. Check out reviews and see what people are saying. Are many people having the same issue? What is the main complaint? Are more people leaving a host than transferring in?
- 2. NEVER register your domain with your website hosting company.** If there’s a problem, they will be able to hold your website hostage. Instead, choose a separate registrar. It may not be the cheapest option, but it will save you hassle in the long run, and let you maintain control of your website.
- 3. Have a separate email account on Gmail or something similar.** Use this for the administrative emails that you get from your website hosting company and domain registrar. If your website and email are down you will still be able to access your stuff, particularly if you forgot your user name and/or password, or need to respond to a work ticket.

Remember your website is an integral part of your business and marketing efforts. Money you spend on your website—whether it be on design and development, hosting, listing—is a business/marketing expense that I can assure you will provide

you a return on your investment. Cheaper, especially in website hosting, is just cheaper, not better.

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# How to alienate customers and lose business forever

## I needed pizza and water STAT

Last week, I was enjoying one perfect sunny day on the beach in Hollywood, Florida (it rained a lot in South Florida last week!). After going for a run along the boardwalk, I stopped into a pizza shop to get a bottle of water and a slice of pizza for lunch. There was an older man milling about waiting but nobody seemed to be at the counter. Finally, a guy appeared at the other end of the counter. I signaled him. He ignored me. I said “excuse me” and he ignored me. Then I said “Could we get some service down here?” and he said something like this: “in a moment, I am taking care of something else.”

What else could be more important to him than paying customers who wanted to buy something? Apparently, anything was more important. Right after that, this guy picked up something and went outside to put it in storage or something. He was not helping other customers and he was avoiding helping me.

Luckily for me, there are several pizza joints along the Hollywood boardwalk, and so I walked out of this one and on to next one. There, I was served a slice of pizza and a bottle of water in a flash, and with a smile.

## We all have tasks galore

Here's the thing: we all have things to do. We all have

endless lists of tasks to do daily, weekly and even monthly. Since we have limited hours every day, we prioritize those tasks. For example, if you need to invoice your customers, that task comes before choosing sandwiches for the holiday party. Perhaps party planning is more fun, but invoicing brings in the money that will pay for the party.

If we want to stay in business, we need to prioritize our *current* clients and customers. We need to prioritize the work that pays, and the people that pay us. And yet, we see businesses who are so busy chasing potential customers that they ignore current ones.

### **Losing sales**

Or worse, we see salespeople who are too busy with tasks (to put it kindly) to focus on the potential sales that are right in their store. That scenario happened to me a few weeks ago when I was shopping for some furniture. I walked into a mega furniture store whose name rhymes with Carlo, and *nobody* approached me. There were plenty of salespeople around but none of them even greeted me. Then I went up to a salesperson who was busy not doing anything and asked her where I could find medium sized media cabinets (I described a very specific need). She shrugged. She didn't seem know but what was worse is that she didn't seem care to help me. Do you think I bought anything at that store? Do you think I am ever going back there again?

In the pizza place scenario, there was absolutely no reason that guy behind the counter couldn't have come over or sent someone to take my order right away. What he "had" to do could wait an extra two minutes, but as a thirsty, hungry customer, I couldn't wait. That pizza place lost my business, not only on that day, but at any other time I happen to be in Hollywood Beach and have a hankering for pizza.

### **Priorities, priorities**

Current business pays us now. And if we do a good job, it continues to pay in the future. Potential business must also be cultivated so we can continue to grow, but not at the expense of our current customers.

In the end, it's all about priorities.

**What are your business priorities? How do you communicate to your customers or clients that they are important to you?**

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## **Why giving thanks is a marketing win**

During this season, and especially during Thanksgiving week, we see a lot of talk of gratitude. At least one DC-area TV channel is asking people to post what they are grateful for (and hashtag it, of course).



### **Those that do**

I have been getting several email thank you notes—from airlines, rewards programs and organizations that I have supported in the past. It's nice to get an email that is simply expressing thanks and not trying to sell or promote or convince.

And every end of year, I get a couple "Season's Greetings and Thank You for your Business" holiday cards in the mail. I generally get one from my accountant and one from a company that painted the exterior of my house three years ago. I get so few actual printed holiday cards, especially from vendors, that I really notice them.

### **And those that don't**

On the other hand, I don't get anything from the painting company that painted the interior of my house, or from the company that installed the hardwood floors in my house (a much bigger job than the house painting) or from the company with which I had a multi-year service contract.

Perhaps these companies don't send any thank yous at all. Or perhaps they don't value my patronage.

I have been thinking about this because I just had a new HVAC unit installed. It is the largest purchase I have made this year, and it was a hard decision to make. The company that

sold and installed the unit was very professional. The salesperson followed up and answered a ton of my questions and concerns. The installers were on time and worked diligently, leaving everything clean and tidy. All the paperwork was in order.

But a week later, I have not heard a word from this company. No follow up to see how the system is working, no inquiry about my experience with the installation, and most surprisingly, no thank you for buying the product/service.

### **Polite, and meeting expectations**

We don't expect thank you notes from the grocery store (even though we probably spend money there more consistently and frequently than almost anywhere else) or for the vast number of regular transactions we all make during the year. But when we buy something big—a car, a house, a time share—we do expect a thank you.

Writing (or emailing) thank you notes is what polite people do when they've received a gift. And it is what companies should do when you've made a big purchase or done business with them. Because so few companies do it, sending a thank you is what differentiates them. It also shows, in a tangible way, that a company values your patronage. It's a marketing win.

Do you send thank you notes to your customers or clients? If not, why not? If so, how do you do it—electronically or with a printed card?

**And with that, let me say thank you for reading this post, and this blog. Have a very happy Thanksgiving!**

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# How to sell 1000s of cupcakes

You've heard of Georgetown Cupcake, right? In case you haven't (seriously?), the company started in a small space in Georgetown back in 2008 and has now expanded to six locations, including stores in New York City, Los Angeles, Boston, and Atlanta, plus a thriving mail order business. The founders—sisters Katherine Kallinis Berman and Sophie Kallinis Lamontagne—even starred in a reality TV show for TLC called “DC Cupcake.”

But getting to a point where Georgetown Cupcake sells 25,000 cupcakes a day on average did not happen overnight. It took a lot of hard work. Katherine and Sophie shared how they did it at the Inc. Magazine/Capital One Founders Forum last week in Washington, DC, which I attended (it was free and yes, they served cupcakes).

The Georgetown Cupcake ladies shared a lot of information about what it really takes to get a business off the ground (working all hours, every day, and incurring a lot of debt for starters). Their success seems to be tied to how hands-on they are and how personal their motivation is (they learned to make cakes from the grandmother and wanted to recreate that).

They also shared some very interesting marketing insights. From my notes, following are six marketing and communications takeaways:

## **Use data to drive your business processes and collect data wherever you can**

Everyone keeps talking about metrics and analytics. Well, here's why: data can fuel your bottom line. In Georgetown Cupcake's case, they used shipping data to choose the locations where they have opened stores. The sisters say you need to ask yourself what information you need, and then collect it.

## **Prove your business model and have a good product before getting marketing help**

You have to have something people want to buy before you market it. The sisters got great publicity early on because lines were forming out the door at the first (and at the time, only) Georgetown location. They were able to get stories in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* without public relations assistance.

## **Word of mouth is the best advertising**

You haven't seen ads for Georgetown Cupcake because they don't advertise. Instead, they rely on word of mouth. Which is how they got those lines out the door in the first place. Which is what led to the major newspaper coverage. Which is what led to the TV show. Which has led to their success.

## **Use social media (and do it well)**

From the start, Georgetown Cupcake has been on social media. First they had a Facebook page, then Twitter, and now Instagram and Pinterest. One of their early social media innovations was to announce a special flavor of the day which you could mention at the store to get a free cupcake. They are still doing it—in fact, I just checked and today's free flavor is Apple Caramel. Why this works is that it gives people a tangible reason to follow, giving them “inside” knowledge. Katherine says she PERSONALLY handles their Twitter feed, which has 101,000 followers.

## **Stay true to your brand experience and mission**

It was important to the sisters that each new store reflect exactly the brand experience that the first store embodied. They wanted customers to feel a certain way when they walked through the doors, whether in New York or Atlanta. Because brand experience is not easy to replicate, the sisters are not rushing to expand nationwide (although you can order the

cupcakes to be shipped anywhere in the U.S.).

### **Focus on employee communications**

Because the sisters cannot be at all the locations every day, they keep in touch with their employees constantly. They have a weekly internal newsletter, and they email each store several times a day. All employees are trained to understand the company's mission.

In a world where cupcakes chains have come and gone, it is interesting to see that Georgetown Cupcake is still doing well. Perhaps it's because the sisters are so involved and committed to their business. In any case, it was fascinating to hear them talk about their business.

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## **You are competing for attention with attention itself**

Last night, I happily attended the latest Kalb Report at the National Press Club. The topic was the Sunday morning public affairs shows and the guests were Chuck Todd of Meet the Press and John Dickerson of Face the Nation (and in case you didn't know, moderator Marvin Kalb was moderator of Meet the Press in the 80s). As is usually the case, the program was very interesting, especially to someone like me, who always watches Meet the Press or Face the Nation on Sunday and has been doing so for decades.



Chuck Todd and John Dickerson at Kalb Report, November 9, 2015

### **Not paying attention**

But apparently, not everybody else was as interested or at least, not everybody was giving the program their full attention. Next to me, two women were whispering to each other during most of the program. On my other side, a woman was busy on her iPhone. I wasn't sure what she was doing—maybe texting or maybe taking notes—but she was at it the whole time. Behind me, a gentleman kept fiddling with his camera. In front of me, two women were whispering to each other every few minutes. An official-seeming photographer (although I am not sure he was there officially) kept photographing the stage (and annoyingly, had his camera set to make clicking noises as though it were an old-fashioned camera).

### **Distracting others**

Even though I was very interested in the program, I was getting distracted by what was going on around me. Other people's lack of attention (or perhaps, it was lack of manners) was attracting my attention!

### **Lack of manners or short attention span?**

I have been seeing this lack of attention a lot and in many different types of venues. Just last week, I took an email

marketing class along with about 15 other people. Two women were busy whispering for a good portion of the class, while the instructor was explaining something. These women showed a complete disregard for the instructor, and also for the rest of the class. Were they just completely unaware of how distracting they were being? Were they bored? Was something else more important happening that had to be discussed right there and then? I don't know, but again, their rudeness (because talking while someone else is presenting is just plain rude) was distracting me.

More and more, short attention spans are making it hard for anybody or anything to retain attention for any length of time. If people watch live television, they start fiddling with their tablet or phone during the commercials. If people are at the movies, they fiddle with their phone during the trailers (and sometimes, during the movie too).

## **A real challenge for marketers**

People seem more restless and less able to focus and that's a real challenge for communicators and marketers. We've seen an increase in image-based marketing precisely because people are not reading text. Marketing materials must grab attention quickly and only hope to hold on to it for seconds.

## **The impact**

1. Shorter messages. Marketers have to keep in mind that their messages are competing with thousands of other messages and with a shortened attention span. This means we really have to know what we are selling (or advocating), and how to distill it into as few words as possible.

2. Customization. We also need to realize that people are living in little bubbles, where they choose to pay attention to only what they want to pay attention to. Mass messaging doesn't work anymore. People are demanding to get only what they want to get.

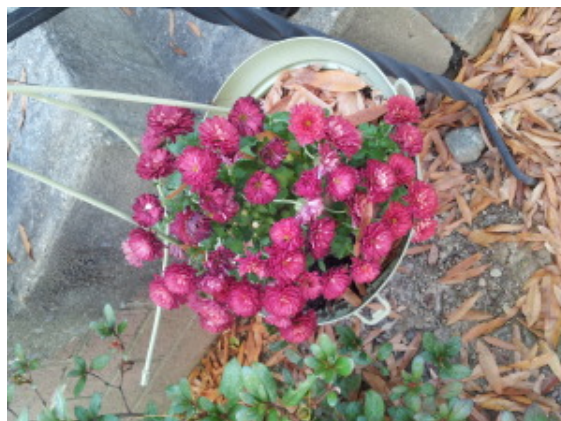
3. Becoming part of the discussion. Messages alone don't do it. Now, you have to become part of the conversation. Take the REI announcement a couple weeks ago that it was closing on Black Friday "to let associates be outside." Everyone got in on this conversation. REI used the hashtag #OptOutside in the announcement. Discussions on social media and mass media ensued. Brilliant!

**Have you noticed the drop in attention? What are you doing to counter it? Can you? Please let me know in the comments.**

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## What does the customer have to know?

This weekend I noticed the mums in front of my house were looking a bit sad...all droopy and discolored. Apparently, they were in dire need of watering.



Sad mums

What do dying mums have to do with marketing communications?  
Let me tell you.

A couple of weeks ago, I bought these mums at my local farmer's market . I asked the farmer/vendor how long they would last. She told me that mums are hardy and should last through Thanksgiving, providing some color as the flowering annuals die.

But at the rate my mums were going, they wouldn't make it to Halloween. So this past Saturday during my weekly visit to the farmer's market I asked the vendor about the mums: Should I water them or would it be OK to wait until it rained on Sunday? She told me that I should most definitely water them as soon as I got home, *because mums need a lot of water.*

Well, then. I had made the incorrect assumption that because mums are hardy plants, it meant they needed little water. If, when I bought them, she had mentioned that mums should be watered frequently, I would have done so. But she hadn't and this is exactly the type of information I needed to know to help my plants survive.

**Customers don't know what they don't know. Period.**

It's your job as a marketing/communications person (let's include sales under marketing here) to make sure they have the information they need to use your product or service appropriately and get the most out of it.

**You are the expert...not the customer**

Customers don't know your product or service as well as you do. You are the real-life expert on your product or service. You know what it does, how it does it and why.

**So, ask yourself this one simple question:**

*What does the customer/ client have to know about my product  
or service?*

Once you have the answer to this question, your content marketing, copywriting, and especially your customer/client interaction, will all be easier.

If you need help figuring out what your customers should know about your product or service, get in touch! I can help.

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## Guilty appeal

A couple of weeks ago I went into a small local specialty store that does not get a lot of foot traffic. The store sells lots of expensive gift items, and a few lower cost items such as cards and candles. I needed to buy a greeting card and like this store's small but unique selection. I found what I wanted and when I went to pay the store owner, she asked me, quite pointedly, "that's it?" Then she started asking whether I wanted to look at the handcrafted candlesticks and other gift items. Her remarks made it clear that she needed more business and that my one \$3 card was not going to cut it.

**She was trying to give me a guilt trip.**

If you look up the term "guilt trip" you will come up with several psychology-based articles such as "7 ways to get out of guilt trips", which define what a guilt trip is and why

people use it. Basically, people use guilt trips in *an effort to control behavior*. Although guilt trips may reach their mark, they often cause resentment and anger toward the “guilt tripper.”

And I definitely felt resentment when I left the store. On the one hand, I felt bad for the store owner and wondered how she was going to stay in business. On the other hand, I felt angry since I had specifically gone to this store to buy a special card and this woman seemed to think that it was my responsibility to spend more than a few dollars to help save her business.

### **But is the guilt trip an effective strategy?**

This got me thinking about how some charities –specifically those dealing with hunger, homelessness, and disaster relief– use guilt as an appeal for donors. These charities generally intend to appeal to your feelings of guilt for having access to comfort and food while others, who are much less fortunate, starve and suffer.

I am sure you remember the TV commercial for a children’s charity that would show pictures of starving children in Africa, often focusing on their distended stomachs and the horrible conditions around them. We were told that we could ease the suffering simply by sponsoring one child for the price of a cup of coffee a day. The underlying message was clear: you should feel guilty buying your daily coffee when that money could save a child’s life.

Do you feel manipulated by these type of appeals? Or is this appeal to your feelings of guilt an effective way to break through the clutter and inspire action (a donation)?

### **Guilt trips have consequences**

Guilt trips *are* effective in *forcing* action (after all, how many parents have used the line about starving children in

Africa to get kids to finish eating their meals) but they may have negative consequences. Perhaps you **stop feeling guilty** once you've made a donation and then never donate again. Or perhaps, you **resent** being made to feel guilty and you **ignore the appeal** altogether. In some cases, an appeal to guilt has been so many times that the **audience has become jaded**.

### **What's the alternative?**

For charities, an alternative is to emphasize how *helping is a benefit* to the donor. This way, the potential donor is not doing something out of guilt, and therefore feels good about his or her act. As a bonus, there's no chance that the donor will feel resentment afterward.

Have you used the guilt trip as a marketing tool? Why or why not? And if yes, how did it work for you?

P.S. As I was writing this post, I got an email donation appeal that started with these words (emphasis mine):

*In this moment when we are bombarded by **shocking images of refugees risking their lives in search of safety**, we must do all we can to help.*

*I know this because **I have seen the fear in the eyes of refugees as they describe fleeing their homes in the dark of night**.*

*I have sat with refugees as they shared their stories of being resettled in my home state of Ohio, and elsewhere in the U.S., overcoming language and cultural barriers to live their lives with freedom and security.*

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# Why you should pay attention to user reviews

From Yelp to Google to TripAdvisor, user reviews can be found easily when you search online for anything, whether it be hotels, services, restaurants and so on. In our social media age, everyone is a critic and has a forum. People are keen to share their experiences, whether it be to warn others about bad service or to express great satisfaction at how a product works.

It's important for business owners (and for organizations) to pay attention to reviews. Here are four main reasons every business should be actively tracking and soliciting reviews:

## **1. User reviews identify weaknesses that businesses should address.**

Essentially, reviews are customer satisfaction surveys. Perhaps it's because we've become passive-aggressive as a culture, but people are more likely to air their complaints to a third party. So instead of contacting management, people will go on Yelp and talk about their experience. For example, if you run a hotel, and every reviewer on TripAdvisor complains about the air conditioning, that tells you that you need to address the problem ASAP.

## **2. User reviews help businesses appear higher in search results.**

Reviews are content, and the more fresh content, the better the search engines like it.

## **3. User reviews give businesses a specific reason to interact**

**with customers.**

Whether responding to a negative review or thanking a customer for a positive one, a review gives a business a way to talk to customers beyond the initial interaction or transaction.

#### **4. User reviews can tell businesses more about what customers consider important.**

What people choose to highlight when reviewing a business can provide invaluable consumer insight. What types of things are most users praising or complaining about? What makes a user be enthusiastic about a business?

#### **In sum:**

Businesses that don't track customer reviews are losing valuable insights about how they are perceived. Business that don't respond to reviews are stating that what customers say doesn't matter, and will miss the chance to improve.

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How do you handle reviews? Have you designated a specific person or department to track reviews? Does that same person or department respond to reviews? Please let me know in the comments how your business or organization deals with reviews, and what you have learned (if anything) from them.

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# Do this one thing!

You have to do PR if you want to get new clients!

You have to have an optimized website if you want to get new customers!



number 1 by Jon Jordan on Flickr

You have to do content marketing if you want to get new leads!

And most recently,

You have to try Periscope to get some exposure!

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In the new world of marketing communications, there is a growing array of standard and innovative possibilities for getting the word out about your business.

From the pre-Internet era we have good old advertising/public relations/marketing, including the use of print materials, broadcast, outdoor, direct mail, etc.

From the Internet-era, we have websites and email marketing.

From the social media-era, we have content marketing, and a seemingly endless stream of networks (Twitter, Pinterest,

Instagram, and so forth) and video in short format (Vine) and in long format (Periscope). And I am sure as I write this, something else is bubbling up to capture our short-attention span.

Here's the thing: all of these work. They work differently, with different audiences and with different levels of "engagement." But the uncomfortable truth is that no one thing will get you leads/customers.

Back in the old days, we had a concept called "integrated marketing communications." It posited that in order to be successful, you had to use a variety of marcomm tools and make sure they were playing nice with each other. For example, if you were using sponsorship and public relations, the PR folks would know what you were sponsoring and the sponsorship folks might in turn get a bit of PR for the sponsorship. You know, everybody working together toward a common goal.

Now it seems that people want a shortcut. They want to try the one thing that will "guarantee" results. Everybody seems to be lurching from one platform to the next, one tactic to another.

If you want to achieve results from your marketing communications efforts you are going to have **to stop being tactical and start being strategic**. Stop thinking in terms of doing one thing to get audiences interested today and start thinking in terms of objectives and actions you want from said audience.

**You can't do just one thing.**

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**If you need help figuring out what your communications efforts should be, contact me today! Let's talk.**