

# Before you send that email...

In the past day alone, I have received four marketing/communications emails that are indicative of a huge amount of carelessness or ignorance or both. In each case, spending a bit more time checking the following would result in a more effective email.

## **Check you spelling without depending on spell check**

“Your invited to join us” was in the subject line of one email and in the the body of another. Depending on spell check without actually reading your email will let this type of ignorant email go through. In case you’re wondering what is wrong with that line, please read this sentence.

## **Check dates carefully**

I got an invitation for an event taking place on Monday, September 20th. Except that September 20th is a Friday. And it turns out the event is actually on Monday, September 16th.

## **Be careful with automated replies**

As you read yesterday, this blog’s feed was not appearing in Feedly. I wrote Feedly and I got an automated response (I didn’t realize it was automated at the time) telling me that it was due to a capacity issue. Feedly’s Twitter person told me this:

*it is not a capacity issue. That is an old automated email. I have asked our dev lead to look into this. Expect and answer today. -Ed*

I realize that sometimes it’s necessary for customer service to send an automated response due to volume or because of the need to acknowledge communication. But, email communications should not be misleading or just plain wrong.

**The bottom line is check and then check again!**

Email marketing may be very effective, but if you send out the wrong information, with incorrect spelling or grammar, you will not only not achieve your communications goals, you will appear ignorant and/or careless.

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## **Are you reinforcing your message?**

I had a conversation with a potential client the other day, and she was saying she wasn't sure she needed to continue advertising as most of her customers came from word of mouth/referral.

Word-of-mouth and referrals are very powerful marketing forces, but they do not operate in a vacuum. Most people take their time making a decision, even when they have a referral (or referrals) in hand. People often like to do some research themselves, even when they have glowing recommendations (just because a hair salon did wonders for straight-haired Jane does not mean they can do wonders for curly-haired Joan). This is why you need to reinforce your message.

**Often, you need to remind your potential clients/customers of why they should consider working for you.** You also need to let them know the basics: how to contact you, where you are located, who you work with, how much you charge, what your services/products are.

How do you reinforce your message? You can do it several ways:

1. Have an updated, attractive, easy-to-navigate website.
2. Have marketing materials such as ads, brochures, etc. as necessary for your target. For example, if your target audience reads specialized journals, it makes sense to advertise there. If your target walks past your store, it may make sense to have brochures or information cards available.
3. Have an updated, complete LinkedIn profile and on other social media channels as appropriate.

Relying on word of mouth without reinforcing the positive referral will not always result in business for you and could actually work against you.

What are you doing to reinforce your message?

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## **When customer service and marketing conflict**

Yesterday, I wrote about how important email marketing has become to retailers. Yesterday afternoon, I found out first-hand that email marketing has become far more important to retailers than customer service, and that is a problem.



Silos by Doc Searls on Flickr

Many large organizations have no bridge among their many departments. I remember when I was working with a large financial company back in the 1990s, and the public relations department (where I was) and the sponsorship department didn't really connect, even though both were ostensibly working on promoting the brand. It seems this way with customer service and marketing.

My experience was this: Yesterday, I went to White House Black Market to return a couple of items I had bought last week. I had the receipt, and the items were unused and had their tags on (nothing wrong with them, just didn't like them once I got home). At first, this clerk was friendly, but pretty soon she was having issues. It turns out that because I did not provide my email address to the clerk who had originally sold me the items, the clerk had put in a made up email, which apparently was connected with another customer's account.

The clerk called over another associate (let's call her Ms. Crotchety since she was a very unfriendly woman), who asked me my name, and of course, this did not match up with the customer name in the system. I explained that since I had no desire to be in their system, the original associate had put in that email address because she feared that she would be "dinged" by the company for not providing an email address with purchase. Ms. Crotchety proceeded to tell me that I needed to provide my address, and that if I were in the system, the system would just populate the fields with the

right information (read: I am at fault for not being in their system and making Ms. Crotchety's life so hard).

In the end, I was forced to give them my address in order to get credited (in spite of having a receipt and the original credit card). To make matters worse, at no point were these associates helpful, apologetic or accommodating. I had originally thought I would browse the sales racks, instead, I walked out angry and with no desire to shop at this store.

As many people do when they have a grievance, I took to Twitter to air my dissatisfaction with the store. Let's just say that @WHBM were far more apologetic and understanding than the clerks at the store. I bet that the folks behind @WHBM are customer service folks and not marketing folks. The marketing folks probably have nothing to do with customer service. And there, in a nutshell, lies the problem. **Marketing is operating independently of customer service, with goals that do not take customer service needs into account.**

This is an example of a marketing imperative trumping good customer service. The imperative at White House Black Market seems to be that clerks must obtain email addresses no matter what. This means that the email address itself is more valuable than the customer. That's a flawed concept. Although email can be a very powerful marketing tool, it only is effective if the customer wants to receive those emails. There is a difference between asking for an email address and making it impossible to buy something unless you provide an email address.

What do you think? Should marketing goals (grow email list in this case) be more important than customer service goals? Can the two co-exist?

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# Email addresses have become more valuable

Email addresses have become so valuable to marketers that they are now offering discounts and other incentives to get them. Case in point: Ann Taylor is offering a 40% discount off your entire purchase simply for furnishing them with (any) email address. Another retailer, White House/Black Market makes it practically impossible to buy anything without getting an email address (which, the salesperson says, will be used to send you special offers only available via email).

Why are email addresses so important? Simple. It's because there are so many channels out there that it has become increasingly harder (and thus, more valuable) to target people. For retailers, fewer people are reading printed anything, a traditional place for special offers and sale notices. In general, media has become increasingly segmented. With DVRs, most people are fast-forwarding the commercials.

Email reaches people somewhere where they are likely to be—on their computer or other Internet-connected device. And because people can easily opt-out of receiving emails, marketers have to work harder to make it worth their while. And then there is the added benefit of not having to pay postage or printing costs, making email marketing a lot cheaper to produce.

**What does this mean for marketing communications? It means that messaging has to be more targeted, more concise and centered around providing a very tangible benefit to the consumer.** Email marketing maybe cheaper to snail mail marketing, but it also easier to stop.

The bottom line is that marketers want email addresses and

consumers want real value for the intrusion.

Have you noticed more retailers asking for email addresses? What incentives have you seen?

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## Why Uber is successful

Have you heard about Uber? Basically, it's an on-demand a car service that you "hail" via app, web or text message. The service is available in major cities in the US, including San Francisco, Boston, New York and Washington, DC, some European capitals and a few cities in Asia, including Singapore.

I started hearing about Uber on Twitter, but had never experienced it personally until recently. My friend Barb Jump had invited me to join her at the Kennedy Center. After the performance, *in the elevator*, Barb said she would get a car service to pick us up.

Barb texted Uber, Uber sent back a confirmation, and nine minutes later, Kareem (the driver) was pulling up to pick up in a town car, complete with bottled water, tissues and mints. Apparently nine minutes is a long wait time, because Barb says they are usually there in about four minutes, which if you live in Washington, means it is much quicker than

waiting for the Metro.

What turned Barb on to Uber were two basic issues: she doesn't carry cash and she doesn't feel safe hailing a cab at night as a woman alone in the city. Uber solves these two issues. Since you must set up an account beforehand, the payment is charged to your credit card on file, thus there is no need for cash (or figuring out the tip, since there is no tipping). And, since you are directly ordering a car from Uber, you are not getting some random cabby. Uber also sends you the name of the driver and his/her picture so you know who to expect.

### **Fill a need and differentiate from the competition**

Uber is successful because it found some very specific needs that were not being met by traditional taxis or car services. As its website says quite succinctly, these three needs are: request from anywhere, ride with style and convenience, and hassle-free payment. These could also be called DIFFERENTIATORS. As a plus, for Barb (and for other women), these also translate to added safety.

The bottom line is that for a business to succeed it has to meet a need that is not being adequately met by others in the marketplace. And to be uber-successful (jeez, aren't I clever?) it has to meet those needs while differentiating itself from any competition.

### **Fulfill your brand promise**

Everybody knows that saying something and doing it are two different things. If you do what you say you do, you are, in effect, fulfilling your brand promise. Uber's tagline is Everyone's Private Driver. I think Uber certainly lives up to that tagline's promise—anyone can set up account, "hail" an Uber from their smartphone (anywhere they may be) and get a driver whom they will recognize because Uber provides this information beforehand.

Have you experienced Uber or other companies that are succeeding by differentiating well and living up to their promise?

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## About that special offer...just how special is it?

Many businesses use special offers to try to lure customers in or to retain existing customers. Whether it is a discount for new customers, a gift with purchase or buy-one-get-one free, special offers are all over. The question is are these offers working for the business AND are they working for the customer?



Special by Dave Cobb on Flickr

I have been going to a massage clinic for a while, and through

the years, its rates have climbed steadily, which makes it harder to get massages regularly. The clinic started offering a deal to holders of a local rewards card, which you buy for \$25 and which provides a variety of discounts with local businesses. The deal was that you would get a 75-minute massage for the price of a 60-minute massage, or 15 minutes free. There is very little cost to the clinic for this deal, and the value is only about \$15.

Since I was booking a 60-minute massage anyway, why not get an extra 15 minutes, right? I did so back in February, and then I booked it again for this week. Well, I got an email back from the massage therapist telling me the deal had expired and that she would be happy to give me a 75-minute massage for the regular price. Needless to say, I was not happy. I wrote back that it was disappointing that they would have this offer on their website scheduler and then not honor it. Then, the clinic's owner wrote me to tell me that no, the offer hadn't expired, it simply was valid for a ONE-TIME USE, and since I had used it in February, I was no longer entitled to it. BUT, because I was a "loyal" customer, she would pay the massage therapist the difference (words designed to make me feel guilty...but that is a subject for another post).

Nowhere on the clinic's website does it say anything about the offer being a one-time deal. In fact, the only place referencing this is the website for the rewards card (in fairly small print). Nobody else on the rewards program has a one-time deal. It is all discounts for first time customers or ongoing discounts such as a 10% discount at a dry cleaner's and so forth.

What we have here is a special offer that a) has no clear purpose and b) does not have clear (and common) rules for usage. The result is little gain to the business and disappointment to the customer.

When deciding on a special offer, businesses need to do a bit

of strategic thinking and planning. Here are some guidelines before you issue any type of special offer.

1) **Have a clear marketing goal in mind.** Are you training to attract new customers? Are you trying to build loyalty? What do you hope to accomplish with this offer?

2) **Have a real offer (with real value).** A special offer should be special, that is, a customer should be getting something that he or she really wants and that incentivizes the customer with the goal in mind. That is, if you want a new customer, then make it worthwhile for a new customer to try your service or product (hint—10% off is usually not a great offer for first-time users).

3) **Have clear rules** that are communicated to the customer BEFORE he/she attempts to use your special offer.

4) **Be prepared to honor your special offer.** When you don't honor an offer you risk alienating the customer.

5) **Have a way of tracking the offer.** If your goal was to get new customers, how many came because the offer? Have regular customers been taking advantage of the offer and is it translating to an overall increase in sales?

**Whatever your special offer is, make sure it really is special, both for your business and for your customer.**

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**Do you know what your**

# customer's experience is really like?

It's painfully obvious that in many companies, marketing is completely separate from customer service and on another planet from company operations. This is why we often see marketing communications that have nothing in common with the actual experience of using a product or service.

I have written about this several times before, but **as long as marketing is divorced from customer experience, companies will cultivate poor relationships with their customers.**

Recently, I stayed at a Holiday Inn Express. You know, where the marketing says that you will be smarter just by staying there. In reality, the walls were paper thin, making sleeping a challenge; the bathroom was cramped, making getting ready a challenge; and to top it off, I could smell breakfast cooking in my room, half-way down the hall on the second floor at 6:30 in the morning. Oh, and if this weren't enough, when I tried to work out in the fitness closet, I was greeted by an overheated room, with no temperature controls, and outdated, hard-to-use equipment. It didn't help that the front desk seem disinterested, and not once greeted me when I walked in the door.

I did not feel smarter by staying at the Holiday Inn. In fact, I felt taken. Their pricing for this location is on par with a hotel, not the motel they truly are.

While I was staying at this hotel I kept thinking that the hotel manager and the front desk people had never spent a night at their own motel. Or perhaps they had, which is why they were rarely to be seen and seemed so unenthusiastic about their jobs. What I know for certain is that whoever does the marketing for Holiday Inn Express wants you to believe that

this place is tops. But, you will only believe it if you have a positive customer experience. **If you, like me, have a negative customer experience, not only will you scoff at the marketing, but you will likely become a vampire instead of brand ambassador. That is, you will take away customers rather than bring business.**

If you want to have marketing communications that work LONG TERM, then you must learn about your customer's experiences with your product or service. You want to know the unvarnished truth. **If the experience is consistently bad, you have to fix the experience, not the marketing.**

**Ultimately, the most amazing communications/marketing campaign can't sell a bad product or service.**

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## **Why you need to be extra careful with your email marketing**

Regardless of all the stories about email being dead, it is still around and it is still used for marketing purposes. Think about the amount of email you get every day. How much of it is personal (and by that I mean addressed to you from a real live person, whether it be to discuss weekend plans or the latest changes to the document you are working on)? I bet only a small fraction falls in the latter category.

What makes email marketing so effective is that it targets people directly and sends the messages into a place they are likely to be every day—their email inbox. **Successful email marketing is personalized and customized.** Email marketing

gives you the ability to address email to individuals by name and send them the news, offers or other information that is relevant to them.

And yet, today I got an email with the following subject line: David, connect with [name of marketer]. Yes, you are personalizing, but you screwed up my name. I could have deleted it had I not recognized the sender.


And yet, on Friday, I got this email from Thrifty:

The screenshot shows an email from Thrifty.com. At the top, it says "You've earned a free day!" and "Trouble Viewing? [View Web page.](#)". Below this is a navigation bar with "RESERVATIONS", "DEALS", and "MY BLUE CHIP" links, and the Thrifty.com logo. The main content features a "Blue Chip" logo, a red car, and the text: "You've earned a FREE day! Look for it in the mail." Below this, it says "Congratulations! You've earned a FREE rental day through Blue Chip Rewards!" and "You'll receive your Blue Chip Rewards certificate in three to four weeks at the address listed in your [profile](#)." It also provides instructions: "To redeem your free day, book online at [Thrifty.com](#) or call 1-800-THRIFTY and present your certificate at the counter." and "Keep earning free days! You'll earn another free day certificate after 16 more rental days." On the right side, there is a "Help & Info" section with "Member Number: \*\*\*\*\*", "[Blue Chip help](#)", and "888-400-8877, option 3".

Then, on Saturday I got this one:

Please accept our sincerest apology. [Trouble Viewing? View Web page.](#)

RESERVATIONS DEALS **Thrifty.com**



**Please accept our apology.**

Dear Valued Customer,

This morning you received an email from us offering you a coupon for a free rental day through Blue Chip Rewards. **Unfortunately, this offer is not valid.** You will not be able to book this offer online and you will not be receiving a coupon in the mail. Please disregard the email you received. We're very sorry for any confusion our eagerness may have caused.

If you have any questions regarding this email, please contact Customer Service at [bluechip@thrifty.com](mailto:bluechip@thrifty.com). We sincerely appreciate your understanding in this matter. We value you as a customer and we look forward to saving you money down the road.

Thank you for choosing Thrifty.

I am not sure how many people got this email, but since I happen to rent a few times a year, I thought the first email was for real and an offer for me personally, even though I don't have a Blue Chip account. The second email—addressed to “Dear Valued Customer”—did not make me feel valued at all. Thrifty is now telling me that it screwed up and that the offer it sent is not valid, without doing anything to compensate for the mistake.

### **Are you screwing up the goodwill?**

How many times can you screw up and keep goodwill? The difference between screwing up in a mass advertising campaign is that it is impersonal. When you screw up on email you have addressed a client/customer/prospect directly and personally, you have to be more contrite. Since you have the ability to be personal, then be personal! And be more careful.

### **It is about opting-in. Don't give them a reason to opt-out.**

The reason that we use email marketing is because, generally,

it is opt-in. That is, people have signed up to receive our messages and want to get them. There is goodwill. But if you fail to personalize, send out erroneous offers, or the wrong offers, you are jeopardizing that goodwill and giving your list a reason to opt out.

Thoughts?

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## What your latest hotel stay can teach you about marketing

Have you stayed at a hotel recently? Did you enjoy your stay? If you didn't, what was it that you had issues with? Towels not fluffy enough? Housekeeping didn't clean properly? Or my pet peeve, too much noise? If you did enjoy your stay, what made it good? Helpful staff? Location? Great amenities?



Motel in Livingston , MT by

## Beyond Neon on Flickr

Your experience with the hotel is what makes you like it or not. Not the advertising and probably not the rate you paid.

Last year, I stayed at a chain hotel where the price was right, but nothing else was. I could hear the alarm of the guy next door to me (and his TV and everything else). The coffee in the “free” breakfast was terrible. When I complained and asked for a different room, they did accommodate me. But the problem wasn’t the room itself, it was the hotel’s cheap construction. I will never stay there again. On the other hand, over New Year’s I stayed at a boutique hotel. There were only a few rooms per floor. The building was old and solidly built. Plus, it was in a great location, quiet and comfortable. I would go back.

Marketing can get you to book a stay, but you won’t be coming back if you had a bad experience. And in this social media age, you most likely will share your experiences on a rating site like Trip Advisor or Yelp. If you have questions or concerns, you may go on Twitter or Facebook.

**Marketing is important, but so is the customer experience.** You can’t succeed in business if you don’t work on both. Too many companies spend extraordinary amounts of money trying to get you to buy something, but then don’t expend any effort once you’ve made your purchase.

With service products, like hotel stays and air travel, experience matters even more because there is no tangible item that you have bought. All you will be taking home are the memories of the experience. The flight went smoothly and you got to your destination on time? That is either a good memory or something that you don’t think about again. But if you got to your hotel and there were dirty linens on the bed and a non-functioning air conditioning unit, not only is that a bad experience, you will remember it.

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# Wishing is not a marketing tactic

Several weeks ago, I started getting a weekly newspaper in the mail. It was supposed to be a four-week free subscription to thank me for some volunteering I had done. The enclosed note said that they hoped I would consider subscribing.

I would consider subscribing, but I haven't been given the chance. I keep getting this newspaper, even though it has been more than eight weeks (twice what was originally offered) and never once has a subscription card come along with it. I guess they are wishing I call them and say "please charge me for the paper you are already sending me for free!"

**Wishing is not a good marketing tactic.**



Gran blows out her candles on her 80th

birthday cake by Ben Sutherland on Flickr

**Instead, ask for what you want** or give potential customers a pathway to becoming paying customers. In this case, the newspaper could send me a card saying that they hope I have enjoyed my free trial subscription, and if I would like to continue getting this newspaper, then please send a check in the enclosed envelope or call some phone number with my credit card information.

We see this with many other situations. Another common example is failing to ask for referrals. Does your hair or beauty salon ever ask you specifically to refer people? They probably wish you did, but they don't make it easy or worth your while. Say they said to you when you were checking out: We hope you like your new hair do. Perhaps you know someone else who wants a new haircut. If you do, we have a referral program. Just tell your friend to call us the number on this card, and we will give you a discount on your next service.

Sometimes you have to ask very specifically for what you want. A few days ago, I read that the tweets that get the most traction are the ones that have an ask in them: please retweet, please help, please donate, etc. You can't wish for things to happen...you have to make them happen!

Thoughts?