

3 guaranteed ways to lose business fast

Sometimes you see stuff that makes you shake your head (or slap your forehead) and wonder how some people manage to stay afloat.



THE G.A.H. PERM FOREHEAD SLAP by happy via on Flickr

Based on personal experiences in the past week alone, here are three guaranteed ways to lose business fast:

1. If you have a website, make sure it is lacking relevant information.

Sure, every business should have a website, but not any website will do. Websites should be useful if you want them to support your business.

I was looking for a restaurant in which to grab some lunch. I found several and checked out their websites. One place had a website that did not have the following: hours of operation, location, menu. Guess what? I did not have lunch there.

2. Make it very difficult to do business with you (and easier

to do it with competitors)

How many hoops do you want your potential customers to jump through? Five? Ten? Perhaps you are putting a few too many obstacles for your customers to climb through to get to you. These obstacles can be things like too many forms to fill, rules, not providing services your competitors provide, and so forth.

I wanted to get some catering for my workshop last week. I usually order coffee and pastries from a national chain, but that place was not nearby the location last week. I thought I would patronize a local place, so I checked it out. First, it took ONE week to get an answer back. Then, I was told that coffee could be provided, but the coffee urn would have a \$100 deposit (meanwhile, almost all coffee chains have a portable cardboard coffee box that they don't have to charge a deposit for). Oh, and they do not provide plates for the pastries. Guess what? I found another place to get some coffee and pastries.

3. Ignore your social media responses and/or your emails. Take your time responding if you do get around to it.

The thing about social media and in some cases email too is that it is a quick response forum. This is not the pony express or even the USPS. I don't send a missive on social media expecting a response next week. I expect it today, or even sooner.

I wanted to refer someone some business, but did not have complete contact information. I tweeted and got no response. Even now, more than a week later, I have yet to receive any type of acknowledgement. I can't send business to someone who either doesn't care to respond or doesn't understand how social media works. And then there is the case of the coffee shop I mentioned above. One week to answer an email about doing business with you? That is unacceptable. If you can't

answer emails or tweets, then I think you don't have the time or the interest to do business with me.

Have you seen these classic business mistakes?

Are you being coy?

Someone I know posted this update on Facebook:

"A real game of yuck this week."

Who knows what she meant. I am sure you have seen similar coy or opaque statements that just beg followers to ask for more information. And that is what the poster wants...you to ask for details. This may or may not be a good tactic to get attention on Facebook. It certainly is a bad tactic to use if you are trying to get attention in your email marketing, your blog posts, and other marketing content.

Say you have an email newsletter you send to your clients. You write:

Spring is a lovely time of year. Good things happen in the spring, it is a time of renewal. Tulips are blooming and spring sales are everywhere.

Unless you want to get people upset at your opaqueness, there is little use for being coy in marketing communication. Instead, you should know what you want and ask for it. Instead of rhapsodizing about spring in your newsletter, why not figure out what action you want your target audience to take (this is your **call to action**, in marketing terms). Don't make your audience guess. Tell them, clearly and precisely. Here are a few examples:

- Spring means renewal! Time to renew your subscription to our newsletter
- Spring classes are starting. Here is how to enroll in our next class.
- Spring sales are on! Check out the reduced prices on our newest product

These are all **specific actions** you want your audience to take.

Are you being coy in your communications? Why not start being direct and asking for what you want?!

How to blog workshop on May 17

Sign up today to get your early registration discount to my next How to Blog workshop taking place on May 17. For more details and to register visit howtowriteyourblog4.eventbrite.com .

Check out my guest post at Fletcher Prince's blog

Honored to be featured on the Fletcher Prince blog, discussing business cards as a budget marketing tactic.

Have you looked at your business card lately?

Know your strengths and weaknesses

I know a scholar who is very smart and informed and yet, this scholar doesn't ever ask for or listen to marketing advice. A few years ago, this person, who had written a couple books, decided to launch a website. I met with her after she had already done it. She wanted some feedback. I thought she should have a blog. But, she couldn't add one since her site had been built in Dreamweaver. I wished she had asked my opinion before she created her site.

This scholar sends out weekly email blasts. She does not have sharing capabilities on her emails. I have advised her time and again that she could get the word out even farther if she would add the ability to share on Facebook (where she has a presence). But she either doesn't care or doesn't think my advice is worthwhile.

I have stopped giving her any advice. It is clear that she thinks she knows enough about marketing herself to ask me (or anyone) for help.

In any aspect of life it is helpful to know (and acknowledge) your strengths and weaknesses. You play to your strengths and get help in the areas you are weak. For example, say you have great ideas but can't spell for your life. If you are blogging, you know you need to get an editor to read over your stuff.

In the scholar's case, her weakness is marketing (and social media). She should acknowledge that and get help (or at least listen to advice).

We may not know our strengths and weaknesses, but we should work to find out what they are and act appropriately. Get feedback (listen to feedback!).

Thoughts?

Should you solicit online reviews?

There's no doubt that online reviews are influential. There are specialized review sites like Trip Advisor and then there's the seemingly all-purpose Yelp. I admit I read reviews and have been swayed about staying at a hotel or eating a restaurant because of what other people say, and that is the point.

As a business, should part of your marketing efforts be to solicit reviews?

Let's start with the fact that reviews will happen whether you solicit them or not. Sadly, because of our passive-aggressive culture, it's become more likely that an unsatisfied customer will take to social media to complain about your service. Which is to say, that if you give bad service, you will most likely get negative reviews.

However, negative reviews are always balanced out by positive reviews. If, as a consumer, you are researching anything, you will read both the good and the bad reviews. Most people will be able to identify disgruntled employees or nit-picky reviewers. If most of the reviews are positive, you will discount the few reviews that are negative. Likewise, if most of the reviews are negative, you will discount the reviews that are positive. The lesson here is that genuine, positive reviews are important.

What generates positive reviews? Good service or product! As a business, you will need to focus most of your energy on providing positive experiences for your customers. If you don't, whether you solicit them or not, you will get negative reviews.

There is a difference between feedback and reviews

I recently had my hair cut at a salon I have gone to for a couple of years. The salon actively pursues online engagement. After my appointment, I got an email from the salon asking to provide feedback. The "feedback" was actually a link to give an online review. I was in a quandary. I had a bad experience this time: the receptionist was unhelpful and confused; I was made to wait 30 minutes; and the water was cool (on a very cold day) when they washed my hair. My stylist tried to make it better by giving me a discount and comping me a bottle of shampoo. But I thought management needed to know that things were not working well. Is the best way for me to give them a one or two-star review? Is that going to communicate to the salon something is wrong?

Businesses should actively solicit feedback AND positive reviews. They are not the same. In the hair salon's case, they are confusing feedback and online reviews.

A better way to get BOTH is to say something like:

We are committed to providing the best possible service. If we did not meet your expectations, please contact (manager). We want to know how to improve our service!

If you enjoyed the service today, we'd love if you reviewed us here (link to the site).

Thanks for your patronage.

The answer then is yes, you should solicit positive reviews, but don't think of that as feedback. You need to be aware of

what is wrong so that you can fix it.

What are your thoughts about online reviews? Is it part of your marketing to solicit them?

The one thing that will kill your marketing efforts

You may have a great offering, beautiful marketing collateral, an interactive website, a robust presence on social media and yet, you are not achieving your marketing objectives. There could be many causes for this, like a poor economy or poor pricing or too much competition, but it could also be that you are **being too aggressive**. You are turning people off.



Bullhorn by spDuchamp
from Flickr

Telemarketers are especially bad at understanding that aggressiveness does not build customer trust. Quite the opposite. It builds distrust and worse, dislike. Calling repeatedly at all times of day and night does not make a potential customer or donor enamored of your product or cause.

Perhaps this is the divide between marketing and sales. In marketing, you are trying to build interest in your product and service by using tools such as the “Four Ps” (pricing, promotion, product, placement), whereas in sales you are trying to achieve quotas, generally measured in revenue.

Say you are shopping for a new car. The marketing function will get you to consider the new XYZ hybrid sedan from the big

car manufacturer. You are intrigued by the miles per gallon or the comfort or whatever other attribute. You walk into a showroom and immediately a sales representative is there, trying to get you to buy. If he or she is too aggressive, chances are good you will walk out without making a purchase. The marketing worked but the sales pitch didn't.

Brad Phillips of Phillips Media Relations had such a thing happen to him with a PR service. He discussed it yesterday on his Mr. Media Training blog, and received a lot of support (read the comments). He signed up for a service that is marketed to people like him, but then was assaulted by a too-aggressive sales person trying to sell him other products and services. The problem was not the offering as much as the aggression.

Are you being too aggressive in your pitch? Here are some instances of marketing (and sales) aggressiveness:

- Calling too much/ too often
- Sending too many emails (including newsletters)
- Invading privacy (such as asking Google or Facebook to scan private messages for keywords)
- In traditional advertising, opting for frequency over reach (have you ever watched a TV program where the same ad is shown multiple times?)
- Send newsletters out without prior opt-in, and without an easy opt-out.
- Loud (literally) advertising (even though it has been regulated, I am still hearing ads that have a higher volume than the programming)
- Bait-and-switch tactics

What results from these tactics is that people feel attacked or overwhelmed or frustrated. They can't lower the volume and they resent it. They feel that your sales pitch is invading their private space.

Can you think of other aggressive behavior? How do you react to aggressive marketing? Do you think the results justify the means?

Blogging workshop next week!

There's still time to register for my How to Blog Workshop, which takes place next Thursday, February 28 in Silver Spring, MD. Visit howtowriteyourblog3.eventbrite.com for more details and registration.

Not everything is as it seems

Yesterday, I wrote about the need to work with experts. Nobody knows everything and many times it is imperative to hire an expert to help in the areas where you are lacking in specialized skills or knowledge.



Twisted reflection in the fun house mirror by Little Koshka on Flickr

Keep in mind that not every expert has the same level of expertise. Let's take accounting. If you are someone that has few investments and a W2, you may be perfectly fine doing it yourself, using tax software or going to one of the big box tax advisers that we often see advertised around this time. However, if you are in a special situation (small business, self-employed freelancer, artist, etc.) you will NEED to find someone who understands the tax implications of your situation, and can work with you on filing the proper forms. This is an area where expertise (or lack thereof) can have tremendous financial consequences.

How do you figure out if someone has the expertise you require?

First, figure out the exact problem you are trying to solve. If you are having a slump in sales, is it fulfillment, customer service or your marketing/communications?

Second, start searching through your network first. Say you need someone to help you with a public relations issue, ask your network whom they recommend. Alternatively, use LinkedIn to search and see if you have connections in common. Ask your connections if they can give you some idea about the professional.

Third, interview the expert. Be prepared to ask a lot of questions such as “have you worked with this type of situation before?”

Fourth, see if the expert asks you questions. A real expert needs to get a handle on a situation. He or she should be asking you a lot of questions, including “why do you need an expert?” or “why have you contacted me?”

Fifth, be wary of pat answers or 100% assurances. Nobody, but nobody can solve any problem with 100% certainty.

Sixth, check with your gut. Do you like this person? Does this person seem genuine?

Unfortunately, there are great many people out there who are very good at talking themselves up. And as I said in my post yesterday, you don't know what you don't know so you are unable at times to ask the right questions.

For example, I had a client who was desperate to increase his share of the market. He had hired a “marketing expert” to help. The client knew next to nothing about marketing and neither did the “expert.” By the time I came in and asked questions like “who is your target?” and “who is your main competition?” they had already set out a marketing destination that was not aligned with BASIC MARKETING PRINCIPLES. These questions had never been asked before because the so-called expert was not a strategic thinker but was really selling a

package of tactics (put up a website, use a QR code, print a postcard, make a video) without a unifying message or idea of how success would be measured.

Could the client have avoided the situation above? Maybe yes or maybe no. He didn't know what he didn't know, but he also didn't bother to ask questions and study up on the topic.

My takeaway here is the old Ronald Reagan line: trust but verify. You should do your due diligence when hiring an expert because not everything is as it seems.

Thoughts?

What you can learn from coffee filters

As anybody who knows me (or sees the theme in this website), I like coffee. I brew a huge mugful every morning. For years, I have been using store brand (ok, cheaper) unbleached filters and thought nothing of it. However, I hosted a brunch in December, and was out of coffee and filters, so I bought premium coffee and premium filters (always want to treat my guests right). Brunch was great and who knew my cousin was such a huge coffee drinker (brewed three pots!).



“I love coffee” by Kristopher Winther Balling on Flickr

After I ran out of premium coffee, I reverted back to my usual (good) coffee, but still using the premium filters. And then, two days ago, I ran out of premium filters and was back to store brand. Guess what? My coffee tasted different—and not in a good way. It was more bitter.

Being a coffee lover, I had to correct this situation and promptly ran out and bought the premium filters again. Coffee this morning tasted good. The filters make a difference.

These are tough times, and many of us need to economize. But, we choose our battles and sometimes price does not win over quality.

Let me rephrase that: quality can trump price.

Marketing lesson here is simple: price is not the best unique selling proposition (USP). This is not the same as talking about value. If you are betting that your target audience will be swayed by price alone, you will be disappointed. People may try a product because it is cheaper, but if the

quality is not there, they won't buy again. In a sense, generic brands "get" this. How often do you see a generic advertised? Never, because the only reason to buy a generic is because it often has a lower price. You don't promote generic/store brand products as being of HIGHER quality than brands, just comparable in quality but lower in price.

Find what makes your product (or service) special outside of the price. If your target values that attribute, the target will buy it very often regardless of price.

In other words, it's about showing value and not about discussing price.

What say you? Are there products you buy because you think they have a higher value?

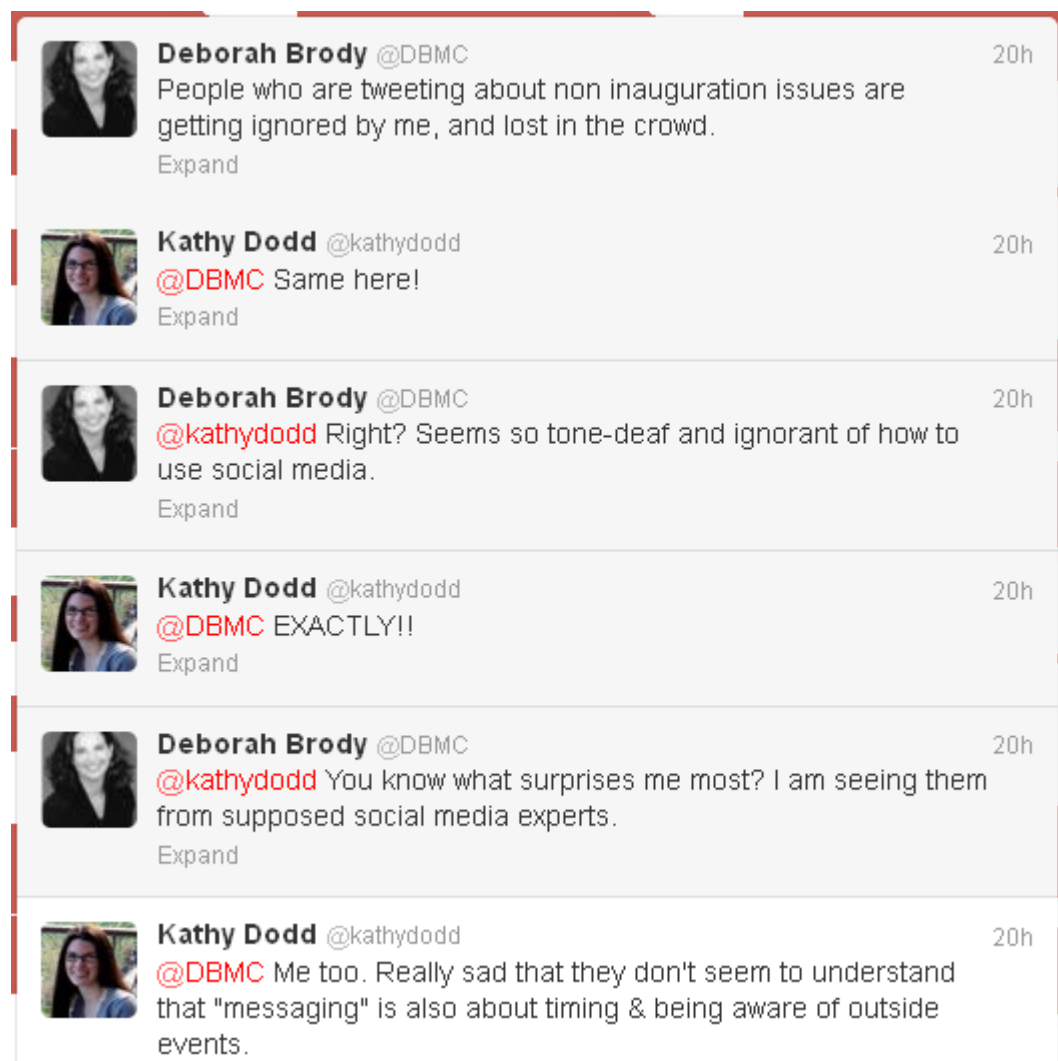
How to tweet like a marketer

Yesterday, about 1.1 million tweets were posted regarding President Barack Obama's Inauguration ceremony. That's a lot of tweets! People commented on everything from Michelle Obama's coat to Richard Blanco's poem to Beyonce's rendition of the National Anthem.

As I watched the Inauguration ceremonies and followed my Twitter stream (using the second screen), I noticed a social media "expert" tweeting out content management tips. Then I noticed another marketing/social media person promoting a blog post, which had absolutely nothing to do with politics, Martin Luther King or inauguration. It struck me as dissonant.

I tweeted out that I was ignoring anything not Inaugural-

related, and I thought anything regarding other topics would most likely get lost. This led to an exchange with Kathy Dodd, a Washington, DC-based marketer. It went like this:



So it wasn't just me. What was happening was that those tweets were not following a main tenet of marketing communications: molding your message to the audience's needs. As Kathy said, **the people putting out these messages were not being aware of outside events or of the timing involved.**

In those tweets, there was nothing wrong with the message, but the message failed to have an impact. They came off as extraneous and irrelevant.

Twitter has often been described as one big cocktail party. Can you imagine if you were at a party where everyone was talking about the how much fun they were having at this event,

and somebody crashed the party and announced that bananas were on sale across town. Everyone would shake their heads and continue talking about the party, *no matter how much they liked bananas* because it was a message that wasn't suited to the occasion.

Perhaps the non-Inaugural tweets from yesterday were previously scheduled, we can't really know. But what we do know is that they failed to achieve their goal (selling bananas if they were the party-crashers above) for one simple reason: the people tweeting were not thinking like marketers. **Marketers want to make sure their messages get to the right people at the right time.**

Here are some tips to tweet like a marketer:

- Be aware of major events (some are scheduled and some are not) that will hold a majority of your target audience's attention.
- Time your tweets for when they are most likely to be well received. For example, if you are promoting your lunch specials, don't do it at dinner time.
- Be human, not an automaton. Remember it is *social* media.
- Don't talk at people; have a conversation with them.

What are your thoughts? Agree or disagree?

6 marketing and communications lessons from

2012

1. Understand the basics (who you are and what you do) before doing anything else. I worked with one client this year who had launched a website, hired a marketing person and even commissioned a video without ever having examined what the company's main message was, defined a target audience or main competitors and certainly hadn't thought out its USP.

2. You don't have to market everywhere, just where you are likely to find your target audience. There's no need to spread your marketing message far and wide. You can have success by focusing your efforts where you are likely to find your audience.

3. There is only one content strategy (getting your target audience to read your content). Everything else is a TACTIC. I have read many articles about content marketing, all claiming to have new "strategies." In most, if not all, cases, these strategies were really tactics.



School Blackboard in Ghana by H20Alchemist on Flickr

4. Acknowledge the reality on the ground. This year we have seen several advertisers (and a politician or two) who just did not get it. Like Pepco, who continued patting itself on its back about “reliability” when hundreds of thousands of customers were without power during extreme heat for several days.

5. Depending on Facebook (or any free, third-party service) as a marketing platform will cost you. Sure, you can have a Facebook page for free, but figuring out its ever changing policies will cost you in time and effort.

6. Stop scheduling your tweets! Tweeting about your fun weekend ahead while people are mourning 20 dead children is tacky and preventable. Twitter is about immediacy, engagement and responsiveness. Scheduled tweets are just the opposite.

What lessons did you draw from the year that was? Anything jump out at you? If so, please share in the comments.