

First, have a message

In an op-ed piece in today's Washington Post, Eugene Robinson argues that Mitt Romney, erstwhile front-runner for the GOP presidential nomination, lacks a message. Robinson writes:

Criticism of Mitt Romney for lacking a coherent message is grossly unfair. He has been forthright, consistent and even eloquent in pressing home his campaign's central theme: Mitt Romney desperately wants to be president.

He goes on to say, that in spite having many differences of opinion with the Obama administration, Romney hasn't articulated an overall message. Robinson expresses it like this:

My point is that even Romney's sharp disagreements with Obama's policies don't add up to a philosophy or a vision. They're more like what stuck after a bunch of random tough-sounding positions were thrown at the wall.

What are you fighting for?

It is not enough to be *against* something. You have to be *for* something. You have to stand for something that makes it clear who you are and what you will do. This is true for all politicians, nonprofits and even businesses.

Imagine if Coke were just the anti-Pepsi. That would not be enough. Instead, "Coke is it," Coke is the "real thing," Coke likes polar bears. You get my drift.

Having a positive (in that it not an "against" message) central unifying message cannot be underestimated. In fact, if the GOP loses in November it will be because the party has failed to articulate something other than they are against Obama.

Romney, and any other politician, would do well to take a step back and figure out what it is he wants to say, really. In his case, he needs to articulate better why his position (and the GOP's) is better for the economy, in positive terms. What exactly does Romney think the problem is, and more importantly, what is the solution.

Politicians, pandering and the shifting message

Although pander has some decidedly unsavory definitions (to act as a go-between in sexual intrigues, for example) I am using this definition: to cater or to indulge.

Politicians seem to be always pandering, saying things they think cater to the audience they are speaking to or trying to appeal to. We saw this a week ago, when President Obama gave his State of the Union speech and he most decidedly pandered to the people who think they are on the short end of the wealth stick in this country. Here's an excerpt:

We can either settle for a country where a shrinking number of people do really well, while a growing number of Americans barely get by, or we can restore an economy where everyone gets a fair shot, and everyone does their fair share, and everyone plays by the same set of rules.

And then this:

So let me put colleges and universities on notice: If you can't stop tuition from going up, the funding you get from taxpayers will go down. Higher education can't be a luxury. It is an economic imperative that every family in America should be able to afford.

To me it's clear Obama thinks he needs these people to vote for him in November.

Then there is Newt Gingrich pandering to the Jewish vote in Florida by saying that Romney voted to eliminate serving kosher food to elderly people under Medicaid.

Rick Santorum (and when they were still in the race, Rick Perry and Michelle Bachmann) panders to the homophobic vote (although he probably calls it the family values vote) by opposing same-sex marriage.

We have seen all GOP candidates this year pander to the racist vote by emphasizing that Obama is an "other" (Gingrich called him a "food stamp president" and the other candidates have called him everything from a socialist to other negative descriptors).

In short, politicians will say anything to get a vote. The problem with pandering is that it assumes the audience can't see it is being pandered to. And then there is the fact that different audiences might have conflicting needs from one another and the candidate that panders to one might necessarily offend another or end up contradicting him/herself.

In marketing, we believe in tailoring a message to the target audience. However, we also believe that messages should be clear and CONSISTENT. If a business employed a shifting message strategy, it would quickly lose customers. Why do we

tolerate this shift from politicians?

ADDENDUM: Just came across this piece on CNN.com: Latinos won't forget Romney's anti-immigrant talk. Author Ruben Navarrette says this:

the dishonest and cynical way in which the former governor of Massachusetts has dealt with the immigration issue on the campaign trail shows that he has a problem being consistent.

Navarrette goes on to discuss how Romney held a strong line against amnesty, but now has softened his approach to PANDER to the Latino vote.

Now as he competes this week for Hispanic votes in Florida – and, on Feb 4, in Nevada, where Latinos account for 26.5 percent of the population – Romney must be hoping that Latinos have bad memories.

We don't. We never forget a slight. And, in that respect, Romney has given us plenty to remember.

Marcomm takeaways from the Iowa Caucus

Last night, FINALLY, the results of the Iowa Caucus gave us a more real sense of where people are headed in the GOP race. You can read about the results in this Karen Tumulty story for the Washington Post.

As you have probably heard *ad nauseum* the results may or may not indicate who the eventual GOP nominee will be. That said,

I think we can draw the following three marketing communications lessons from the caucus:

1. **Advertising works.** Furthermore, negative advertising is VERY powerful. Mitt Romney spent the most and won the caucus (OK, Romney's Super PAC spent the most...but that is another discussion).

2. **It's the message AND the messenger.** The message is important, but perhaps not as important as the messenger. People vote for people they like, explaining why Santorum did so well. Santorum comes across as a sincere, committed and caring person. And he rocks a sweater vest (and sweater vests are what grandads and jolly uncles wear, right?). Gingrich, who came in at a distant fourth, comes across as pedantic and angry. Even his post-caucus speech was angry (I didn't watch it, but read commentary like this analysis from Mr. Media Training).

3. **Be present.** Jon Huntsman made the decision to skip Iowa, and the numbers show it. He came in with 0.6% of the vote. People like to see something they want to buy, not just hear about it. Lots of pundits describe the Iowa caucus as true retail politics, where politicians meet and greet (in person) their potential supporters. You have to be the bricks and mortar in the case, and not just the virtual.

What did you think? Any marketing lessons you took away?

Grover: You don't know

marketing

Last night, I watched Steve Kroft on 60 Minutes attempt to get Grover Norquist to be thoughtful about his no taxes pledge. In case you don't know, Norquist, the founder of the misleadingly named "Americans for Tax Reform" is the reason the GOP will not vote for any tax increase regardless of anything.

I could say a lot about Norquist's smarmy demeanor, lack of ethics and sad attempts at humor, but I want to concentrate on one particular aspect of the interview. Norquist said that what American for Tax Reform is trying to accomplish is **to brand the Republican Party as the party of no taxes**. Here is the exchange, taken from CBS News/60 Minutes website:

Norquist claims he got the idea to brand the Republican Party as the party that would never raise your taxes, when he was just 12 years old and volunteering for the Nixon campaign. He says it came to him one day while he was riding home on the school bus.

Norquist: If the parties would brand themselves the way Coke and Pepsi and other products do so that you knew what you were buying, it had quality control. I vote for the Republican. He or she will not raise my taxes. I'll buy one. I'll take that one home.

Kroft: So this is about marketing?

Norquist: Yes. It's a part of that. Yeah, very much so.

But Norquist says the success of any product requires relentless monitoring and diligent quality control to protect the brand, whether it's Coca Cola or the Republican Party.

The problem with this scenario is that Norquist seems to think that branding is achieved by threat. Basically, if a GOP candidate does not sign the no-taxes pledge, Norquist will

fund his demise. The deal is that pols will sign the pledge and then get money for their campaigns. If they refuse to sign the pledge, American for Tax Reform will do everything it can to discredit them and will fund any opposing pol who does sign the pledge. Furthermore, if the pol votes for a tax increase after having signed the pledge (no matter how long ago), Norquist will work to make sure the pol loses his/her seat.

Norquist is *not* a marketer—he is a politician who is using power and money to influence (and some would say corrupt) the political process. To really “market” the GOP, Norquist would have to do some research. He would have to listen to the average citizen/consumer. He would have to explore what the GOP brand means to people inside and outside the GOP.

Finally, Norquist is not really trying to REFORM taxes or make them more equitable or fair. He is working to reduce the size of government, as this article in Politico points out.

Why not make the GOP the party of “we don’t want to be a part of government.” Many of us could support that.

Your thoughts?

The source matters

Unless you are very young, inexperienced or just plain naive, you probably have a healthy degree of skepticism about whatever a politician says, or for that matter, what is reported in the news. You have to—there are too many

instances of misrepresentation, faulty reporting or just plain lies. Of course, this is why the source matters. If it is a source that has proven trustworthy, you accept what it says. If the source is unreliable, then you do have to question it more.

This leads me to the latest in the Herman Cain sexual harassment scandal. Now, Cain is parading his up-to-now reticent wife Gloria in an effort to shore up his female trustworthiness bona-fides. Gloria says that Herman “totally respects women.” It is reported via the AP on WJLA.com and on Politico.com . Gloria gives an interview to Fox News’ On The Record with Greta Van Susteren (already, you start to see that source matters), which is set to air tonight. Gloria says among other things “I’m thinking he would have to have a split personality to do the things that were said.”

The source matters. Anyone will question Gloria Cain’s agenda—and recognize that she is trying to protect her husband. Why else would she suddenly be dragged out of her family home, where she has been hiding out these last few months of the campaign? Is she suddenly relishing the spotlight?

Always question the source, and act accordingly.

Is it a communications or a leadership problem?

No doubt you have heard about Rick Perry’s “oops” moment during the GOP debate on Wednesday night. The 53 second piece, where Perry forgets the third federal agency he would

cut if elected president, has been replayed to death. Now, Perry is in full salvaging-his-election-chances mode, as Politico reports in "GOP debate gaffe rocks Rick Perry rescue mission."

In my opinion, this is not a communications problem. It is a leadership problem. Any human being can be forgiven for blanking out or misspeaking. We make mistakes and we correct them. But Rick Perry is not trying to fix one communications misstep. He is trying to resuscitate his campaign. I think most people would be willing to overlook Perry's brain freeze moment (although the media certainly wasn't going to let go of a golden opportunity to make fun of him). However, most people see through Perry's swagger and sense that there is not much substance there. It was not that he forgot that he wanted to cut the Department of Energy, but that he thinks that cutting cabinet positions is the way to fix this country. If we focus on what he did say—that he wants to cut the Department of Education—we can see that he doesn't have a communications problem. His message is that getting rid of government will solve the USA's problems.

Perry, like Joe Paterno of Penn State, is someone dealing with a leadership problem. If both these men were true leaders, they would take responsibility for their mistakes and then make a hard decision to exit the national stage. In Perry's case, he should realize that he is not yet cut out for national office, and that his lack of debating ability speaks volumes about his preparedness to deal with off-the-cuff moments that will inevitably crop up in a US president's daily life.

In Paterno's case, the fact that Paterno KNEW about Sandusky being involved in child molestation and still did not report it, speaks to a failure of leadership. When Sandusky was indicted, and it became apparent that Paterno was aware of what had happened, Paterno should have offered to step down immediately (take responsibility). Instead, he offered to

resign at the END of football season. Penn State's trustees fired him instead. Then Penn State burst into chaos, and Paterno said nothing. He could have been a true leader and coach and told the students that what the trustees did was the right thing, and that rioting was not what they should be doing.

Both men may have made communications mistakes, but that was not the problem. In fact, good communications would have only come after they both exercised LEADERSHIP. **Great communicators don't always make great leaders, but certainly, great leaders must be great communicators.**

What we can learn from the budget “negotiations”

Last week, our elected officials took the whole country to the brink. Whether you think it was ideology, intransigence, real economic crisis or plain circus, we all got a painfully clear view of what kind of government we have, and it was not a pretty picture.

But not all is bad. We can derive some lessons from this latest governmental crisis that can be applied to marketing:

- At some point, spin does not compensate for the reality on the ground so stop spinning already!
- Repeating the same phrase over and over becomes meaningless (e.g. “we are fighting for the American people,” “we do not want to shut down the government.”)
- Innuendo and doublespeak are not substitutes for clear

communication.

- Say what you want unequivocally. You want cuts to Planned Parenthood—say that. Don't make it a “rider” so that you can sneak it in under the radar.
- Don't underestimate your audience...they can see through your antics.
- Be prepared for people to question you, your motives and your goals.
- There is a difference between justifying your actions and explaining your actions.

Politicians, like PR or advertising professionals, are in the business of persuasion. And like PR or ad people, they are beholden to special interests (or as we call them “clients”).

What did you learn about marketing from our government's game of chicken?



WaPo: Carney hopes and Pepco failures

Two items from today's Washington Post caught my eye. One was about Jay Carney, the new White House press secretary and the other was a letter to the editor regarding Pepco.

Speaking for the White House

Jay Carney is taking over from Robert Gibbs as White House press secretary. Carney was a journalist, and many people think he will bring a journalist's viewpoint to the White

House briefing room. Dana Milbank wonders “Can Jay Carney Hack it as a Flack” in an op-ed in today’s Washington Post. Few people will miss Gibbs, so maybe by comparison, Carney will already do better. I wrote about Gibbs snark here. If one thing Carney can learn from Gibbs is how not to act. I think the press corps are looking for information without sarcasm.

Proving advertising doesn’t turn the lights back on

Another hot topic this week (other than the ongoing protests in Egypt) is Pepco. If you live in the DC area you know that Pepco failed, once again, to restore power in a timely fashion following a weird snow storm last week. At one point, they had 300,000 customers without power and in many cases, it took them three or four days to restore power to all of them. Witness how people felt about it, and more importantly, about how Pepco mishandled communications by reading letters to the editor in today’s Post. Notice the title of the piece includes the word “outrage.”

This latest episode in Pepco’s ongoing reliability struggle proves my point that no matter how many nice ads and promising assertions you make, you have to back them up with real action. As you recall, Pepco started running an ad campaign talking about all the stuff they are doing to make themselves more reliable and responsive. Well, sadly, it was just words. No one believed it then, and certainly, no one believes it now. Instead of spending lots of ad dollars on an image campaign, Pepco should spend some money figuring out how to increase its reliability, responsiveness and communications with customers.

The bottom line for both these stories is that communications matter a whole lot. How you handle communications, what you say, when you say it, can truly impact public opinion and your image.

It's never "just words"

Those of us who work in communications appreciate the power of choosing words well. We sweat it out over how to phrase a headline or a tagline because we know words matter. Different words carry different meanings, connotations, appeal and can sway your audience one way or another.

In the aftermath of the Arizona shooting of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords and the murder of six people by a deranged Jared Lee Loughner there has been A LOT of discussion over whether political discourse contributed to this heinous act. In truth, the only person who can answer if there is a direct correlation is Loughner, but I doubt we will be getting a sane answer from him. And many people on both sides of the political spectrum are pointing fingers at each other, at the heated rhetoric, etc. In my opinion, words do matter. They may not have been the cause in this particular instance, but when you are continually demonizing the other by labeling (job-killing, un-American, etc.) you create chasm and you create distrust. You create or stoke hatred. You reinforce the idea that those you attack are different than you, that they cannot be trusted, that they are out to get you.

So, although Sarah Palin's rhetoric and demagoguery are not what made Loughner go into a store to buy a gun and then shoot innocent people, and she is right to claim she is being wrong accused, that does not make it right for her to accuse the media of a "blood libel." First, because Palin (and her communications crew) clearly do not understand the meaning of phrase and second, as my friend Daria Steigman pointed out, using the word "blood" in the aftermath of a bloody tragedy is just plain poor choice of words.

Here are a few articles to read about Palin's word choice:

David Frum on what she should have said.

New York Times' The Caucus

Palin seems to be a master manipulator of words, and making herself the victim of a conspiracy against her (which is what I believe she meant to say with blood libel) is no error. She should be taken to task. I will be waiting to see what she says next now that the criticism is mounting.

The bottom line is that what we say and how we say it does matter and it does influence perception. Advertising and public relations people know this better than most.

And President Obama agrees

In an interview to 60 Minutes (which is excerpted in this CBS News piece and which will air on Sunday, November 7), President Obama says:

"I think that's a fair argument. I think that, over the course of two years we were so busy and so focused on getting a bunch of stuff done that, we stopped paying attention to the fact that leadership isn't just legislation. That it's a matter of persuading people. And giving them confidence and bringing them together. And setting a tone,"

Leadership is about inspiring people to follow you. Inspiration requires that you have an ability to communicate.

I will be interested to see if the White House changes how it communicates. And to see what the Democratic leadership

does—will Harry Reid still be Majority Leader in the Senate?
Perhaps not such a great idea, since his failure to
communicate nearly lost him his seat to an extreme candidate.