

How do you figure out what to write about?

Many people like the idea of blogging, but are stymied when actually wanting to start writing. What to write about? How to write it? What if no one reads it? If this is you—and you live in the Metro DC area—come to a workshop I am leading next Tuesday, July 31 in Silver Spring. I will teach you how to write your blog. You will leave the session with several blog post ideas, a completely written blog post, and lots of information to get you blogging.

All the details and registration are available here:

<http://learntowriteyourblog.eventbrite.com/>

I hope to see you Tuesday! If you can't make it next week, and you are interested in the workshop, please drop me a line or a comment.

Blog is moving...please update your RSS feeds

After three years and eight months blogging at WordPress.com, Caffeinated Views is moving! I am now going to host the blog right on my website at www.deborahbrody.com. The change-over is happening this weekend.

I am very excited to finally be able to integrate this blog into my website, although it does mean some growing pains, since those of you who subscribe will have to change your feeds. The blog will also lose its title and look a bit

different. However, I will keep providing the same type of insights into marketing communications, and much appreciate your readership.

The new feed will be found here as of next week. Please update your readers.

<http://deborahbrody.com/blog/feed/rss/>

I would love your feedback on the new website/blog.

And many thanks for sticking with me!

Questions?

Do you have specific questions about a marketing issue? Just post here and I will attempt an answer.

Hello world!

Welcome to WordPress. This is your first post. Edit or delete it, then start blogging!

Connecting in person

Shashi Bellamkonda from Network Solutions gave the keynote yesterday at Washington Women in PR's annual luncheon. Here is a link to his presentation, which is well worth a read if you work in PR and/or social media. He spoke about the importance of establishing connections, in person when possible. He's absolutely right. Too many people substitute an email or my least favorite, a text, for a phone conversation or an in-person meeting. I have said it before on this blog but it bears repeating: people do business with people.

Recently, I met David Heyman in person. Up to that time, I knew him on Twitter only as @dcborn61. We have had breakfast together and chatted. We've also done business. That is the power of connection.

I first met Shashi as @shashib on Twitter too. I met him in person at a casual Tweet up and have had the fortune of seeing him at many other events since.

Get to know someone better. Go for coffee or a beer. Try to connect in person—you will get to know each other better.

How do you connect?

Tips to improve your customer communication

How do you communicate with your present or potential customers or clients? Whether you do it successfully can mean a difference to your bottom line.

Provide the information requested. Yes it sounds self evident, but so many times businesses dance around a question without an answer. For instance, I recently requested costs to create a pdf form from a virtual assistant. There was a whole lot of emails back and forth: just what type of form, how long, with logo or without, etc. And never a quote. I can't do business with someone who can't provide an estimate for me.

Be realistic. Often, people think that if they say something is going to take a couple of days when it really takes a week the customer will sign up. But if the job actually takes longer you will risk angering your customer. For instance, if you are a service provider and you can't fit someone for two weeks, say so. Don't say that you can possibly squeeze a customer in just because that is his/her timetable. If you can't accommodate something, you will end up with an unhappy customer

Don't sugarcoat bad news. If you need to cancel or the price has gone up, say it quickly and directly.

Apologize if warranted, but say what you will do to fix it. Apologies are all fine and good, but not sufficient. Most people don't care if you are sorry that you screwed up, they want to know how you are going to make it better.

Don't make excuses. The dog ate my homework didn't fly in grade school and will certainly not fly in the face of a customer relationship and yet how many times do you hear excuses from service providers? I am having my floors done and the service provider underestimated the time it would take his crew, but he keeps telling me it is because they weren't able to work on the weekend. That is an excuse and it doesn't fly.

Be timely. If you say you are going to call a customer, call! If there is going to be a problem, call your customer sooner rather than later. Don't let your customer call you with something you said you would get.

Be pleasant. Again, it seems self-evident. Just today I called my auto insurance company. I had a change to make, and the woman who helped me was really pleasant. It made the transaction easy. It left a good impression.

Anything you would add? What works best for you?

Happy Holidays!

Wishing all Caffeinated readers a very happy holiday, and all the best for a prosperous, peaceful, and HAPPY NEW YEAR!

[youtube=http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1c8wCD0rk8&fs=1&hl=en_US&rel=0]

Labor Day thoughts

Here we go into the last “official” summer weekend of the year. It is September and soon enough, the bustle of Fall, back-to-school, holidays will be upon us.

On a long weekend, the best thing you can do is chill out, relax, take it easy. Too many people today are busy working all the time, or at least being connected all the time. Believe me, as of next week, everything will accelerate and you will wish for some breathing room.

We celebrate Labor Day by taking the day off—seems ironic. And we celebrate Labor Day by having sales. Shopping is how we celebrate in the United States.

As you think about the back to work and busy season that is Fall and the end of the year, how will you make the most of the remaining third of 2010? What steps will you take to get more business? Will you revamp your marketing strategy? Redesign your website? Blog more? Get on social media? Learn something new? Attend more networking events? I will be doing all of the above!

With that said, I wish you a great, relaxing and re-charging Labor Day Weekend. When we meet here again next, we can get back to the business of marketing!



Is the lack of crisis PR to blame for brand failure?

Yesterday, I talked about nightmare CEOs. And today, I came across two very good business articles, one about the biggest brand disasters of the year, and the other about the decline in crisis PR. It seems to me that perhaps the lack of good crisis communications strategy is directly to blame for these brand failures.

Daily Finance lists a top ten list of brand disasters, which include:

- BP
- Goldman Sachs

- Toyota
- Google

Each of these companies had plenty of headlines this year, most of them negative. But what made each of their particular situations worse was the inappropriate reactions from their CEOs, and their response to the situation.

It seems fairly clear to me that although the situations that each company faced were bad, the public response to the situations made the situations even worse. In Toyota's case, the first response to reports of accidents tied to flaws in their vehicles was DENIAL. Toyota insisted for some time that there was nothing wrong with their vehicles, that the people were somehow to blame. Then, they insisted that small fixes were needed—like with the floor rugs (come on, the floor rugs cause sudden acceleration?). Finally, they had to face the music as the government stepped in with all sorts of evidence, but the damage was already done.

According to Matthew DeBord, writing in Big Money, the problem may lie in the 24-7 Internet news cycle, and the inability of PR firms to adapt to the new realities. He writes:

But now, the new crisis paradigm is spinning hopelessly in the dark. By mid-2010, the stories were changing too rapidly to control, much less revise. Like a violent postmodern vortex, the bad news sucked down all who struggled to escape it. Unsurprisingly, the Internet is to blame. But it goes beyond the 24/7 news-and-comment cycle, and forces the PR world to confront something far more disruptive—and something that will undercut its \$700-per-hour fees.

The lesson now for companies that screw up is that you really have no chance: The currents are against you from the get-go. The courts of Twitter and online video sharing and the forming of Facebook groups to deplore the transgressions of an enterprise will overwhelm even the most crafted crisis

battle plan. The profession, quite simply, is at a crossroads. And it isn't in a position to ride out the bumps, because it's up against the kind of high-altitude turbulence that can shred the airframe.

There is no doubt that with Twitter, YouTube, blogs and the rest, bad news travels fast, faster than good news for sure! No news is not good news—it is an opportunity for bad news to stay at the top of people's minds.

Companies and organizations who want to avoid first-class meltdowns must invest in crisis planning and strategizing. If the big names like Toyota and BP can suffer the erosion from bad news, what makes smaller companies think they will survive a crisis?



When your CEO is giving you PR nightmares

What do you do when your CEO is giving you lots of PR problems? We've been seeing a slew of PR missteps by CEOs, from Tony Hayward of BP to Ben Baldanza of Spirit Airlines.

Ben Baldanza seems to be quite the character. He recently said that luggage is not essential when traveling, and this is why Spirit is now charging for bringing carry-ons on board. BudgetTravel just wrote a post about it here (and please read the comments, which is where we can start to see the PR dimensions).

When the charge was announced earlier this year (it will start being implemented in August), Baldanza set out an letter to his email subscribers describing how carry-on fees actually make flying cheaper. Anybody who has a half-brain and has flown anywhere before knows that this is simply spin. When you have to pay to check baggage and you have to pay to check carry-ons, it doesn't matter how cheap airline tickets seem because you will end up paying more.

Steve Jobs recently showed a considerable degree of hubris when telling journalists that the way people were holding the iPhone 4 was responsible for the loss of signal. Huh? Inc. Magazine has a great article about this misstep here.

I am not even going to discuss Tony Hayward.

Unfortunately, many people in leadership positions do not have leadership qualities. These folks tend to be arrogant, often believe that they know best and that underlings should remain quiet. It is not easy to deal with this situation professionally, but it is nearly impossible to rectify from a public relations perspective.

These cases illustrate a real conundrum for marketers. The CEO is the public face of any company, and if he or she is saying things that hurt the company, what do you do? Chances are the CEO is the one with the ultimate power to hire or fire PR counsel. Or the person who refuses to listen to counsel.

As PR counsel in this type of case, you are in a delicate position. The best thing to do is to point out how the CEO may be affecting the bottom line. You may need statistics, like sales or stock prices. Make a case as to what should be done, and why it will be better. If your CEO refuses to listen to you, he/she may listen to outside counsel.

There is a chance your CEO will not listen to anyone and he/she may bring the ship down. Is there a recourse? Probably stockholders or your board of directors are interested in

remaining profitable and keeping the public happy. If no one seems to think bad PR is a problem, well then you really have a problem!

What do you think?