

Guest post on Habla Blog

Hi all, please read an article I wrote about translation on Habla Blog. Thanks!

Yeah, it's personal

I have written before that marketing communications goes beyond nice brochures, great ads and a fabulous website. There is an element of marketing that is more personal—it is how each and every customer, or potential customer, views your company or organization. With the rise of social media and the ability of posters such as myself to critique anything and everything, this has become even more important.

Last week I had my hair cut at a salon in DC. I went there because a friend recommended it. Check. However, I got there, and waited for my appointment. This in spite of the fact that they charge YOU if you are late for your appointment. The hairdresser never apologized. She was neither good nor bad, but she did tell me, weirdly enough, that she had been written up “on one of those sites on the Internet” and she hated the Internet for this reason. My answer is that if more than one person is saying the same thing, there is a problem. I checked on the salon and indeed lots of people had mixed reviews of the place, some worse and some better. However, many of the complaints had to do with attitude. Things like the receptionist was rude or was not very accomodating. Now listen to me—these things MATTER. More today than ever.

Similarly, in everyday interactions with businesses, businesses should really take care with details. Here are a couple of examples from my experiences. I went on a long trip

back in February, and used a travel agent because of the complexity of the trip. She was not very good and since I wasn't spending the type of money she is used to dealing with, she barely gave me the time of day. Additionally, she gave bad advice! I wrote a letter to the travel agency owner. And guess what—I never heard from her. Not one word of acknowledgment or apology. So PORTFOLIO TRAVEL on Wisconsin Avenue in Washington, DC, you will never see my business again, and certainly I will never recommend you.

Last week, someone asked me for a proposal. I sent it to her by COB, the same day. She claimed she would get back to me by the end of last week. She did not. I followed up on Monday and she did not even have the courtesy to respond to my email. Why would I ever want to work with someone like that?

So in summary, every personal interaction with a member of the public has the potential to get you good or bad publicity. Every. Single. Interaction. When people are upset these days, they make their voices heard through a very public forum, the Internet. There are dozens of sites like Yelp.com devoted to rating businesses and products. Some health care insurers are now allowing you to rate your doctor too. No one is immune. There is an expression, "mind your ps and qs." Or "cross your ts and dot your is." Whatever it takes, remember that every time you interact with the public you are representing your company. You are a marketing ambassador. Act like it.

When perception can be dangerous

According to an article in the New York Times, people perceive

diabetes as a disease that is not as serious as heart disease or cancer. Apparently this perception is wrong and can be deadly. Diabetes is very serious and has many ill effects on the body.

The story illustrates just how important communication can be in educating people about disease and treatment. But it also shows that some diseases face a branding problem. Diabetes has not been properly “branded” as a deadly disease. We all know cancer is serious, but we don’t feel the same about diabetes. I will be interested to see what the American Diabetes Association does, from a communications standpoint to communicate the seriousness and change this misperception.

Bags Fly Free

Yes they do—on Southwest. What a great campaign for them. As the “legacy” carriers tack on more and more fees, cut flights, increase fares and generally screw the passenger, Southwest is going gangbusters (relatively speaking). They are actually adding routes and eschewing bag fees. Who do you think will keep or increase its customer base?

On the other hand, American cut all flights to Albany, NY and is charging \$30 roundtrip for the first checked bag, \$50 for the second. Additionally, they have added many fees and surcharges for everything from checking odd-sized bags, flying with a pet and changing your ticket.

I fail to see the marketing sense in what the large carriers are doing. If you are hurting for money, do you do everything you can to make sure your customers think twice about doing business with you? If what you are doing is ridiculed by many, and fodder for anger, is this not a public relations

nightmare? What good news are you hearing about the airlines? Is there any additional perk that is being given to passengers who are paying through the nose? Why would you fly if you can drive for less money? Bottom line is that Southwest seems to get it and American, et al just don't. All you have to do is look at JetBlue. They started flying as the other airlines had started cutting back on the perks of travel. JetBlue gave passengers a real alternative, that cost less and get this: was more comfortable and had more amenities. This made JetBlue an extremely popular airline. In fact, the only reason JetBlue is not the biggest airline, in my opinion, is that they travel to secondary airports.

I just read an article on CNN regarding the fees and cutbacks. The article also quotes travel experts who think the fares will keep climbing. I wonder if the airlines will be forced to slow down fare increases and nickel and dime if enough customers say no way. Southwest is definitely capitalizing on these sentiments and running an enticing campaign plus putting in place some smart operational plans.

Do you buy celebrity?

If a celebrity you admire is touting a product, do you buy it? Apparently, you do. Today, the New York Times has a very interesting article about celebrity endorsements. It discusses among other items, Totes' (umbrella makers) decision to use Rihanna (pop singer) as a celebrity endorser. Rihanna had a hit song called, aptly enough, Umbrella, which made Totes' executive think this was a good match.

I think celebrity endorsements are overrated. The article talks about Nicole Kidman appearing for Chanel #5 and Ellen

Degeneres appearing for American Express. I like both these actresses yet I would not get either product. I happen to think the AmEx ads are great—always entertaining. It boils down to relevance and need. I don't need another credit card, so it is irrelevant that Ellen hawks AmEx. Sometimes, I just don't believe the celebrity actually uses the product. You are going to tell me that Queen Latifah uses Cover Girl? Or that Jennifer Love Hewitt uses Hanes? Please! One of the most annoying ads on TV today, in my opinion, is the Jamie Lee Curtis ad for Danon Activia. Why on earth is this a good idea?

Celebrity endorsements are almost a way to get rid of advertising creativity. Here, look, this celebrity uses the product, and so should you. So the adoring masses go and buy the product. That is the thought process the marketing execs are using. Instead, a creative team would have to think of all the great product attributes and come up with an interesting/funny/smart way to promote the product. Hmm...which is more labor intensive?

The branding that goes beyond

We may tend to think of branding as limited to logos, ads, boilerplates in press releases, corporate identity kits that define colors on websites, or any number of marketing tools that are used to create a cohesive image. Of course, that is the part of branding that a marketing communications person would be involved with. But there is a part of branding that is more elusive but I think as important: the front lines of your organization or company. What do I mean by front lines? I mean the first impression that your company gives a visitor when he or she is visiting in person. The front line is the receptionist, the waiting area or lobby, the building, the

office, whatever the visitor sees first. You can learn a lot about a company from observing this space. Recently, I went to an office where the receptionist greeted me coldly, the waiting area was cold in feel and by design. It was all marble, with nary a magazine or any other reading material in sight. There company logo had a cold, stark look to it. In short, it was not very welcoming. I sat there (because the person I was waiting for was running late...another bad impression) and thought about what they were trying to convey. Perhaps they were aiming for efficiency? Or they didn't want anyone to linger? Or most likely, they did not give a thought to the image they are giving off. In my experience, this is a very weak link in most organizations' image creation "plans." Last year, I had a client that was trying to promote high end, expensive products. You would think that the store would be rich and comfortable. it was not. I tried to convince the client that no matter how brilliant our marketing plan was, potential customers would be turned off when walking in to the store. In other words, we could get people there but we couldn't make people buy. It would be in lots of companies' best interest to take a tour of their reception areas with new eyes. Is the receptionist courteous? Presenting the company image (whatever that may be—professional or casual)? How would a visitor feel in the waiting area? How do you look to an outsider? Is that look in line with your mission/vision?

First impressions count, right?

A fine journalist

Tim Russert died today at 58. He was too young and he was too wise. In TV news, where too often people talk nonsense, he did not. I started watching Russert when he became moderator of

Meet the Press. I watched the show almost religiously for many years. I always enjoyed his questions and his guests. From what I have heard through the years, and especially in tributes tonight, Russert was a family oriented person, who really seemed to care about those he worked with. I can only say he was a fine journalist, and I am sad the he will no longer be on the air. My condolences to his family. I think many political junkies are sharing in your sadness.

Communication is important. No, really?

Sometimes it takes crisis for companies to understand that communicating (actually, communicating effectively) is important. Washington's Metro has been having a really bad couple of weeks. First, the tracks at one station were blocked by a freak storm. Then there was a derailment, then a kink in the tracks and today, they have a fire in one of the tunnels. (All of which begs the question how safe is Metro, but that is another story). Metro has been repeatedly criticized for not communicating effectively with its customers. The problem starts with really bad PA systems, which make it impossible to understand what is being said. Then, they have internal communications issues, where headquarters knows something that people on the ground don't or vice versa. In fact, the general manager of Metro was on the air this week saying that they can always improve their communications. Of course they can. They have to! When there is a bad situation, people want to know about it so they can make a decision on how they will respond. If there is a delay on Metro of over an hour, maybe it is worth it to take a cab or walk or whatever. Same thing happens on the airlines. It is frustrating when you are sitting in a

gate area seeing the minutes tick by and not knowing why you haven't boarded yet.

Clear and real communications are important in all situations, but more so in a crisis situation. In Metro's case, they need a complete overhaul of their communications systems. In other cases, it is almost common sense. Tell people what is happening. Don't misinform or propagandize. People see through that or will resent it. You know the drill—nothing is happening, just a minor delay. Instead say, there is a delay and we do not yet know the extent of it. We will get you more information as we get it.

So simple and so effective?

Sometimes due to budget constraints or sometimes due to plan, advertisers choose to go the simple and cheap route. I noticed one such attempt yesterday. I saw a simple lawn sign, by the side of busy road here in Bethesda, that said simply Single? and then the advertisers URL. It was in black and white, and I didn't see another sign around. This is cheaper than cheap, so any return on investment has got to be high. But does this work? Is a small sign enough to drive traffic to a website? There are several advantages to this approach. Clearly, the headline says it all. And there is no clutter around it. Geographically targeted. The disadvantages are that since there is no frequency, perhaps the URL does not get across. Is it measurable?

Politicians have been using lawn signs for years. But those are more a sign of solidarity than a call to action. It does prove however, that sometimes simple is all you need (as a start) when your message is simple. When you have to explain

attributes or compare your product or service, you will need a bigger forum than a lawn sign. Of course, that is where the URL comes in. Certainly a website gives you the space to make your case.

Getting religious about branding

Seriously. This isn't about working all night on the re-branding project, it's about what certain words connote in a religious context. Apparently, the Alexandria, VA-based Baptist Temple was suffering from dwindling membership. What did they resolve to do? Hold a membership drive? No! Re-brand the church. See, apparently the name "Baptist Temple" carries bad or unclear connotations. Baptist is tied to the far right conservative movement, and this church is progressive. And temple? Well, apparently that made this place sound hippy-dippy. So, the pastor begged his flock to rename the church and the new name is...Commonwealth Baptist Church. They didn't stop there. With true branding and marketing savvy, they will add a tagline, which has not been chosen yet but may be something like "A Progressive Community of Faith."

Read the whole Washington Post article for more information. This is such a great example of how a name can make all the difference. It goes back to what I was saying before about perception. I find it interesting that the pastor in this church thought that by changing their name, they would literally save their church. I will be interested to see if it does make a difference.