

Appearance matters

If you work in any aspect of marketing, you know that appearance matters. We look at various marketing materials and we judge whether they look professional, or home-made, cutting-edge or stuck in time. We advise our clients to re-do logos, update brochures, set up Facebook pages. Our goal is to make sure that their appearance is up to par with the expectations in the marketplace.

Recently, I wrote a post saying that you CAN judge a book by its cover. After all, designers spend a lot of time designing that cover to entice you to read it. Perhaps the book won't be up to your literary standards, but as a marketing piece you know the book accomplished its mission (getting you to buy it if not to read it).

In personal marketing, appearance matters even more. Again, I have written about this before, but I want to revisit it. If you are in the market for a job, say, then you are ALWAYS job hunting. If you are going to a networking meeting, you must look professional. If you look sloppy or like you just rolled out of bed then you will be perceived as someone who doesn't care.

Last Friday, I was indulging a guilty pleasure and watching What Not to Wear on TLC. The episode was about a 38-year old professor of non-verbal communication who dressed frumpily. She actually looked at least 20 years older than her age. Stacy and Clinton (the show's hosts, in case you haven't seen it) kept telling her that she was communicating to her students that she just didn't care about her appearance, and thus did not care about herself. She had a hard time understanding that what she wore, how she wore it, indeed her appearance, was undermining her message that we send out all sorts of nonverbal cues. It was fascinating to watch because here is a case of someone who understands that everything you

put out there (clothing, etc.) is communication. In the end, she came around and by the end of the show she looked much closer to her age than when she started. She also looked far more professional and modern.

It is hard to judge how we appear. We see ourselves day after day and we lose perspective. Same can be said for our marketing materials. This is why we often need to get a third-party opinion. And we need to listen carefully to that third-party. Perhaps they are saying something we don't want to hear. For your graphics and marketing pieces, an expert can do wonders. Sometimes an update makes the difference. For personal appearance, start with trusted friends or associates, and if you are very serious, hire an image consultant.

We are judged by our appearance. And our appearance contributes to how people perceive us. Take control of your appearance. Make sure people perceive you the way you want to be perceived.



How are you perceived?

“Quick, acute, and intuitive cognition.” That is how Merriam-Webster defines perception. It is a quick assessment of what is before us. It is how we form impressions and judgments.

Have you ever considered how you are perceived by a potential client? Potential friend? Man/woman on the street? Obviously,

we may not care how a complete stranger perceives us, but in business we should definitely be concerned with the image we are giving potential customers, clients or partners (a partner can be anyone who we do business with—from someone we network with, to someone who refers business to us or an acquaintance we run into occasionally).

There are many angles from which you are perceived:

- Personal appearance and demeanor
- How you sound
- Online presence, which includes your websites, what is written about you, your blog, and your social media presence
- Articles about you
- Articles you've written
- Your marketing materials (brochures, postcards, reports, etc)
- Your behavior and actions
- Your associations

If people have a positive perception of you it will help get business. A negative perception on the other hand will impede your success.

How to assess

Start with a simple Google search on yourself to see what comes up. Negative, positive or neutral?

Turn a critical eye on your website and/or blog. Would a visitor to your site know what you do and why you are qualified to do what you do? What would he/she think of your services?

How are people responding to you on social media? How many followers do you have? More importantly, who is following you? Quality is important here. How about on Linked In—do people accept your requests for connection? Are you giving them

enough for them to want to connect with you?

When you go to an event, do you feel confident? Do you ever feel unprepared or frazzled? If so, what aspects of your appearance and demeanor need work?

It is hard to self-assess from all these angles so it may be best to ask a trusted friend or colleague to give you some feedback. A marketing consultant (such as me!) can help assess your marketing materials.

Have you assessed how you are perceived? Please let me know how you did it and what helped.

Again with public perception

In today's *Washington Post*, Steven Pearlstein writes about Wall Street executives (more specifically AIG executives) who are so blind to public perception that they keep stumbling and looking worse. In case you have been avoiding the news, AIG gave some of its top executives millions of dollars in bonuses, while on the receiving end of government/taxpayer money. Nobody but AIG is happy about this. Currently and mostly due to the economic crisis, there is a tremendous amount of populist rage and ill will toward Wall Street and "fat cats" such as Bernie Madoff, who seem to be living the high life while many people are down in the dumps.

Yesterday I wrote about the Facebook redesign and many others have been writing/complaining across the blogosphere and in real life.

What do AIG and Facebook have in common? Not understanding how

they are perceived and that perception matters. Both companies have proceeded with business as usual without so much a look in the rear view mirror. Perception is currency, in the most real, dollar sense, which is why the practice of public relations exists. Companies hire PR agencies to help them manage and in most cases improve the public perception of them.

Sometimes, as in the case of Facebook, there seems to be a complete disregard for how core audiences will react to news and changes. There are simple ways to prevent this: testing in the form of focus groups or surveys or even simple conversations with current users. It's about getting outside the bubble. Come to think of it, don't bubbles always burst? Soap bubbles, housing bubbles, tech bubbles to name a few.

In the case of AIG, it has much to do with Wall Street culture, in which greed is good (as the movie Wall Street pointed out) and money is king. The more money, the better. After all, Wall Street is not some nonprofit organization with some altruistic purpose in mind. The whole *raison d'être* for it is to make money. So it stands to reason that the only thing AIG execs understand is money. Something soft and unmeasurable like public anger is a small price to pay. Except when it isn't. I think the fat cat era may be nearing its end (at least until the next bubble forms).



Online reputations

A few months back I wrote about companies that check on what is being said about them online. I had written a post about Comcast and their lack of customer service and I myself got a

comment from Comcast. I theorized that this was a new outreach program for them, and today's New York Times has a story confirming this. They compare it to a sort of outbound customer service department, trying to fix things before they get out of hand. I will give kudos to Comcast simply for acknowledging how important blogs, social media and other online forums have become and how they can affect reputations.

Reputations are perceptions and thus changeable. We've all heard of sterling reputations, and we should all aim for that. Bad reputations can be damaging in a very real, economic way. This blog will always deal with companies and never with individual reputations. However, this new online world order can damage individual reputations as well. I saw a story on TV not long ago (I can't remember which TV news show or I would link to it) where an individual had the same name as a famous rock star. Clearly, his online reputation would be somewhat buried because 99% of mentions referred to the rock star. He went to create an online reputation agency that charges lots of money to clean up companies' (and individuals) images. In any case, this is an ongoing issue and one that more companies will be expending effort to deal with.

Perception, perception, perception.

Marketing is all about creating perception. We use ads, public relations, coupons, whatever, to shape the public's perception of our product or service. Take for instance Geico. How do you perceive the insurer, which started life as a the Government Employees Insurance Company? Chances are you think of them as cheap insurance. Why? Because for years they have been using

the tagline “15 minutes could save you 15% or more.” They also use a humorous approach to make them seem accessible. (I do love the new James Lipton commercial, where he “interviews” a “real” Geico customer.)

OK. So not all perception is accurate. Giant, a supermarket here in the mid-Atlantic, runs an ad campaign that makes it seem that Giant is the place to get everything you need and save money. So not true. Many products at Giant are more expensive than elsewhere. This is where marketers can get into trouble, or where we see a disconnect between a marketing department and an operations department. The marketers are being told go out and make it look like we offer great deals on a great selection of food. Yet price points are really high for many items.

In Washington, yesterday and today, the hoopla is all about Scott McClellan’s new book, “What Happened.” Why? Because McClellan, who was press secretary for Bush, and who was in charge of shaping the public’s perception about issues such as the Iraq war, has turned. The book is highly critical of Bush and his advisers, and claims they actively used him to deceive the American public. There is a perception problem though—why should we believe McClellan now? What is motivating him to come out against Bush (to whom he was loyal for years) NOW? In fact, the press does not seem to know what to make of this. I saw Martha Raddatz interview McClellan last night on ABC News and she asked him point blank if he thought the Bush White House were liars. He stopped short of saying that. What McClellan has to contend with is that he is perceived as a spinner. In fact, Martha called him on it—telling him he was spinning! It was unbelievable. Read the transcript [here](#).

So there is often a gap to bridge between the truth and perception. In public affairs, if the bridge is shaky, the public will find out eventually. I think this is the case here. All governments spin the facts. That is a fact. But not all governments take the country to war. The truth is yet to

be told, and the perception about the Iraq war has been crumbling for a while. Will Scott McClellan's book bring this bridge down completely? I am not sure. Like I said before, he has a perception problem himself. Reporters don't trust him. Dana Milbank (whose commentary I think is somewhat juvenile) pokes fun at McClellan in today's Washington Post. It will play out eventually. Stay tuned.