

Why Scaramucci failed

I was going to write a post about how Anthony Scaramucci, the shortest-lived White House Communications Director in history, embodies the problem at the core of the Trump administration's communications failures, and then the "Mooch" got fired after 10 days on the job.

Basically, Scaramucci got fired because he failed at Communications 101. He was bound to fail also because he was not the right person for the job. He had no experience in communications, and his actions showed it. As the wrong person for the job, he got hired by a boss and an administration that don't understand communications fundamentals.

The communications person is never the story

First, Scaramucci failed because he broke the cardinal rule for communications pros: he became the story. As anybody who has worked in public relations/communications knows, the comms person is there to help get the story out. Under no circumstances are you to become the story.

You have to know how news reporters work

Second, Scaramucci did not seem to understand that unless you explicitly state otherwise, everything you say can be quoted. If you have not said something is off the record, it's on the record. Period. Reporters are always looking for quotes. That's what they do.

Just because you feel that you are simpatico, does not mean you are pals hanging out at a bar

Third, Scaramucci made himself look extremely crass and stupid by using obscenities where none were needed. We all curse, but we know that in certain circumstances we don't. Scaramucci also seems to lack imagination—and here it is—an ability to

communicate, in order to convey his thoughts without resorting to obscenities.

But the larger problem is a White House that doesn't get it

In TrumpWorld, it seems communications is *all* about marketing. It's *all* about persuasion. And it's not about sharing information and facts. I don't think this country has ever seen such a fact-averse White House ever.

When you practice communications you are aiming to inform, and yes, to persuade. But persuasion is not something to be done with threats and alternative facts. As I have written before, Sean Spicer (the former communications director/press secretary) thought he was in a fight with the White House press corps. He berated them and belittled them and even refused to provide them with information they requested. He turned the cameras off for briefings, thinking that by cutting off video he would be able to control the narrative. He cherry-picked media outlets to respond to that were sympathetic to the president and would not ask any hard questions.

Communications is not a one-way street

To communicate, you must inform. You can't simply try to force your viewpoint on everyone. We see Trump using Twitter to talk directly to the people. What you don't see is Trump using Twitter to respond to questions from the people. To Trump, communication is a one-way street (sort of how he views loyalty too): push your message out and steamroll anyone who questions it.

Scaramucci's failure is indicative of a much larger problem that does not seem to have a solution: a White House that does not value real communication.

How to be better at communication than Sean Spicer

THIS POST HAS BEEN UPDATED.

What is good communication? In essence, it's getting your point across to the people who need to hear it. It's having those people (your audience) understand what you are saying, and be able to act on that information if necessary. Also, the information you pass on must be credible. Good communication, therefore, is built on clarity and trust.

If anything, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer has shown us that some people are better communicators than others. Spicer is not example of how to do communications well, but rather, of what not to do. Thankfully, we can draw lessons from his ineptitude. Following are five points to being a better communicator.

Understand your subject matter very well

If you don't understand something yourself, you have zero chance of explaining it (well) to someone else. Yes, this means you have to do some studying (or cramming). It means you have to ask people who know more about the subject to explain it to you. It may even mean looking at charts and graphs.

If you don't know what you are talking about, someone will be quick to point it out to you. Recently, this happened to Sean Spicer. During a press conference last week, Spicer showcased his ignorance about Hitler and the Holocaust by saying that Hitler didn't use chemical weapons (he did), and then when

questioned, corrected himself by saying Hitler only used gas at “holocaust centers” but not against his own people (they are called concentration camps and many Germans were killed there). When his errors were pointed out, Spicer had to apologize often and profusely. The Anti-Defamation League even sent him a letter offering to conduct a private Holocaust education training for him and his staff. I don’t know if Spicer took the ADL up on its offer, but I think he would greatly benefit from it and/or a visit to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

Use only words that you completely understand and can define

Spicer regularly uses the wrong words. He recently said something couldn’t be *quantified*, when he meant that it couldn’t be *qualified*. In his defense, this is a common mistake, especially in speaking. When you write, you have a bit more time to figure out the words you are using. The bottom line is this: If you *think* you know what a word means, but you can’t define it, don’t use it. Also, remember that using big words, especially incorrectly, will make you appear to be trying too hard, and being ignorant too boot.

Check your facts and statistics

If you are going to use any numbers or other facts that can be easily looked up, make sure that they are accurate and correct. Sean Spicer famously trotted out some made up statistics about Trump’s inauguration crowds. Those things can be verified, and if you are using incorrect numbers, you are threatening your own credibility.

Don’t exaggerate

With a boss who is fond of hyperbole, Spicer also tends to exaggerate. Everything is the best or the worst, terrible or fantastic. As any communicator knows, exaggeration also threatens credibility.

Be likeable

Sean Spicer is a very combative person. This may have served him well when he was the spokesperson for the party out of power, but it is making him unlikeable. By constantly fighting with the White House press corps, or by belittling their questions, or by refusing to answer questions, or by mocking people, Spicer is ensuring that his attitude becomes the story.

It's really important.

Trustworthy and reliable communications have become even more important and necessary in this world of fake news, where bots and fringe political groups are working hard to muck up the information that is available. Taking the time to study your subject and work on your credibility will go a long way to making you a better communicator than our current White House press secretary.

Is there anything you would add to the five points I have listed above? Please share in the comments.

UPDATE:

I am not the only one who thinks Spicer is bad at what he does. Today, New York Magazine had this post: [By Being Bad at His Job, Sean Spicer Nearly Causes Market Panic](#). Because Spicer does not bother to learn his subject well, he says inaccurate things, and in his role, his statements have consequences.

Are we seeing more media crises?

This week featured two highly publicized and far-reaching media crises. One was the United Airlines situation, where a passenger was forcibly removed (and hurt in the process) from the plane, after he had been seated and had not agreed to “voluntarily” leave the aircraft. And the other involved White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer, who clumsily compared Syria’s Bashar al-Assad to Adolf Hitler, and then showed great ignorance about just what Hitler did during World War II.

Twitter outrage

I saw both these situations unfold on social media (specifically, Twitter), and was able to add my observations to many others, both using hashtags and Twitter handles. Social media outrage appears to have caused both United and Sean Spicer to apologize profusely for their mistakes. In today’s *Washington Post*, Kathleen Parker argues that in the United case, the Twitter outrage (or “mob” as she calls it) was able to bring the situation to light and make change happen.

It seems that we have more media crises these days than before—but like Parker argues, what has changed is the ability to get these situations in front of more people, more quickly, through social media. So, in fact, we may not be having more crises, but rather more exposure for and to these crises.

Changes...

It seems that United, and to some degree Sean Spicer, have

still not adapted or recognized that the media landscape has changed dramatically. Anyone with internet access and a social media account can share their ideas, opinions, facts and more damning, their video. Also, anyone with a smartphone has the ability to create video on the spot, and then share it immediately.

Ten years ago, if a passenger had been dragged off a plane, there would have been no record of it outside of the memories of the other passengers on the plane. Similarly, Sean Spicer's words would have received criticism later (if at all), not during his press briefing. Fewer people would've been exposed to these situations.

More “eyeballs” available

Today's media crises are happening not because spokespeople and companies are screwing up more, but because more people are seeing it happen. It would behoove any public relations/communications practitioner to internalize that most everything can be publicized very quickly, and may even have incontrovertible visual proof with it.