

To Build Credibility, Stop the Nonsense

Don't you just love it when the basics of effective business practices win out over marketing ploys?

One basic is credibility. Every company needs it to build trust with potential and current clients, but few do a great job achieving it.

To me, credibility is saying what you mean and meaning what you say. For effective business-to-business brand advocacy, you need a credible product or service. You also need written material that reinforces it.

Companies cannot risk losing customers by telling them "it depends on the meaning of the word 'is'" as politicians do with voters. (I dare say that if ObamaCare were offered by the private sector, there would be a ton of lawsuits, but I digress.)

Developing quality content comes down to this: write only what you would want to read. Like your readers, you are busy. You don't want waste precious time wading through marketing hype to get your questions answered.

If your text is has more words than meaning or does not help the customer be ruthless and cut it.

This is really all you need to know and you probably already knew it.

Yet amazingly, too many companies still serve up marketing nonsense for reader consumption. Even worse, the so-called experts advocate disingenuous tactics for building readership. Don't let them distract you from your goal of writing truly useful text.

***Dictionaries offer definitions of credibility,
but to me, it means saying what you mean and meaning what you say.***

Call me old fashioned, but I never practiced or advocated for so-called strategies like using Google analytics to find key words and then stuffing them into copy. This was never worthwhile because words are for people, not machines! (And as any English teacher will tell you, redundant use of words is just bad writing).

The ultimate goal of web text, and any marketing material, is to gain satisfied customers. Back in the day when webmasters were the ultimate purveyors of content, they argued it was better to boost hits to attract people to the content.

I would insist it was other way around: awesome content — which is informative, helpful or interesting — attracts and retains readers. Who cares how many hits you get if the content does not build brand credibility or help sell products or services? My blog does not reach millions but it does reach enough of my potential customer base to keep me busy.

Thankfully, Google's recent algorithm changes are doing a much better job at discouraging marketing hype. Google is also rewarding longer content as well. This means that organizations can no longer get away with producing cheap, generic content to the ever-growing number of people who only rely on the Internet — as opposed to print — to find out information.

Google's algorithm also discourages the practice of inserting hyperlinks to material not truly germane to your topic. To the reader, unnecessary links are empty promises.

Hubspot, which offers software to generate web traffic, does a great job covering this in its "2013 Marketing Predictions: Hits & Misses." You can find at <http://www.hubspot.com>. I love what its report said, "Don't game the system, don't write for the algorithm, don't try to be sneaky - focus on helping the people you are trying to reach."

To this I offer a heartily, "Amen." Hubspot recommended that marketers focus on quality content (thank you very much), in-depth articles, and social recommends" - that is, the more likes your material earns, the more Google will notice.

Toward Credible Content

Producing material of journalistic quality will encourage reader trust. Today, that is called "brand journalism." To offer brand journalism, you have to think like an editor and view the customer as the audience. You need to anticipate business problems — what is keeping them up at night — and offer ways to help.

Even before "brand journalism" became a term of art, publishing quality content that readers could trust was always effective.

I had a client who self-published an article on a PDF about ten years ago. Ever since, searchers who enter the subject term in the search engine will still find it on the first results page. He is now nationally known for his expertise. Keep in mind this happened while word stuffing was a common practice and before Google's developed a finer text sifter.

Quality content also fills an information void. There are fewer journalistic publications, whether on paper or online, because publishers cannot afford reporters. Your organization can fill this information through brand journalism. That is, producing trustworthy articles, blogs, web content, etc., that will keep the readers for coming back for more.

Before producing written material, companies should make sure they live up to their promises. If customer service is lame, even great content will become meaningless now that people can complain online for the world to see.

To build public credibility, identify topics that will interest potential clients and produce copy the media would publish. If the piece is really hot, see if an outside publication would like to publish it first. If a reporter calls you for an article interview, your credibility goes up. If the whole piece is published, credibility goes up even more!

Ultimately, what customers say about your company is more important than what you say.

So next time you read your organization's website, put on your [customer empathy](#) hat and ask yourself if the text succinctly answers what readers want to know. Are the words empty or are they are building credibility for your company?

Anyone can say their firm produces quality whatever or the best service - and they do and will. Does the copy say what you mean? Is it accurate? Does it not just tell but also show the readers why it is so great?

Does it mean what you say? Can customers count on the truthfulness of the words? Does your firm's value proposition reflect the realities of customer service?

Ultimately, what customers say about your company is more important than what you say. When happy customers endorse your offering, credibility and sales should go up.

It all starts with awesome content about a quality offering.

How do you ensure meaningful and credible content? Please share at will!

***Like what you see?
Then follow me!
Just click the bottom right hand button on this page.***

[Blogging Quality Content: Do You Have What It Takes?](#)

Blogs are an essential marketing tool, but simply having one on your company's website is not enough.



www.zoeystactic.com

To draw readers and build brand credibility, you need to consistently publish quality content that drives readers to come back for more.

After spending the past couple years blogging, along with 25 years of publishing experience, I can tell you that blogging content worth reading is a steady commitment of time and energy. It's also not easy.

So before publishing a single online keystroke, ask yourself: Do you have what it takes to blog quality content?

Here is my list of the characteristics of effective bloggers. Effective bloggers are:

- **writers** who enjoy writing and can express themselves clearly. Sounds obvious doesn't it? If you don't like to write, your product will show it. Therefore, for the sake of your sanity, do not blog.
- **experts**. Any idiot can cut and paste material from other blogs and re-package it into blogs. You, however, confidently know your stuff and can offer original content. You are also an expert at knowing your audience ([click here](#)) and understanding their needs ([click here](#)).
- **critical and creative thinkers**. Effective bloggers are constantly thinking. You think while sleeping in an unending quest for better solutions and approaches and/or understanding and perspective.

- **curious.** You watch TV with you tablet to learn more about actors, plots and topics.
- **readers.** And I don't just mean Internet surfing. You read books about topics that have nothing to do with work because you want to learn.
- **ideas** people. When you attend events, you unwittingly go from small talk to substantive issues within a two-sentence conversation. You thrive on applying concepts from other disciplines to introduce innovative solutions to another.
- **disciplined.** Earning online traction requires consistently producing new content at least once a week.
- **thick skinned.** You can handle constructive disagreement online for the world to see.
- **givers.** You do not mind contributing useful information to help others and understand that sharing really means caring about your audience.
- **personalities.** There's no boresville because you take chances and engage in an interesting manner.

Of course, great bloggers have other characteristics as well. What characteristics would you add?

Like what you see? Then follow me!

[Social Media Trumps Dell's Poor Customer Service](#)

Executives who focus on social media's marketing advantages without being prepared for customer feedback should take heed from my customer experience with Dell.



Last May, I had yet another frustrating experience with Dell. When I told a Dell customer service manager I was going to post a blog about my poor experience, he told me to go ahead.

So I did — not just for me but other frustrated Dell customers. (To read the blog, click [here](#).)

After posting my blog on Facebook pages started by disgruntled customers, I pasted it on Dell's Facebook page. Social media is designed to encourage two-way communication between companies and their customers.

At first, Dell removed my post, but when I reminded of this, it stayed.

Then I received a message from a member of Dell's social media team. My suspicion is that he was trying to be responsive, but Dell's internal bureaucracy seemed to make it difficult.

It took two months, but ultimately, I got what I asked for: a new replacement printer.

But I can't use it. Dell advertised the once highly rated printer as MAC-friendly, but it is not. My friend, who is a Mac user and computer professional, gave up on the install. Dell's "service" representative offered little help.

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Two months are a long time for my public relations business to go without a working four-in-one printer. Fortunately, I still had my 10-year-old HP laser jet and eight-year-old HP color deskjet, but neither have copy, scan nor FAX functions.

I had to break down and buy another multi-function device, forgoing other capital investments. The print quality is nothing like the Dell, but at least it works. In case you're interested, it's a highly rated Brother, which offers lifetime customer service.

There is a lot that marketing professionals and customers can learn from this experience.

- 1) Do not advertise a product as compatible with anything unless there is a commitment to updates. Dell advertised the printer as Mac friendly without keeping up with MAC system updates. As a result, the scanner function did not work well.
- 2) Offer customer specific service. Dell marketed to Mac users without offering quality support.
- 3) Social media's advantageous reach is great for consumers. After talking to the customer service manager, I used to write the company president for results. Social media is faster.
- 4) Be fair about posting complaints. It is poor taste to go public on social media unless every other reasonable attempt at resolution has been tried. I spent at least 14 hours with customer service for various problems. I did not go public with Dell until there was a mechanical failure and productivity issues.
- 5) Don't buy electronic products with short warranties. Dell only offers a 30-day warranty for replacing equipment. The 30-day warrantee on the Dell laptop I bought in 2009 expired while trying to get resolution. I have purchased Mac products ever since.
- 6) Base your choice on a company's current reputation. From 2003 to 2007, I was happy with my Dell products and enjoyed great customer service. Unfortunately, those days are gone.

Finally, I need to express my gratitude to the Dell social media employee who responded to me.

In the future, I don't plan to buy another Dell product, but it may not be up to me anyway.

Rumor has it that Dell is getting out of consumer products and putting its focus on large servers anyway.

*Like what you see?
Follow me!*

Why I am Never Buying a Dell Product Again!!!

Once upon a time, small businesses relied on Dell Computers. Once offering excellent products, it was hailed for its customer service — 10 years ago.



But now, Dell's products are worse than anything that ever came out of Yugoslavia. Dell's "customer service" rivals any government bureaucracy in the free world.

I write part-time as a sole proprietor. When something goes wrong, I have to deal with it directly. This takes away valuable opportunity costs. When I should be building a customer base, providing services and otherwise being productive, I have spent countless hours dealing with the nice Dell contractors whose English is still a work in progress.

I bought a printer in July. It was \$500 and a huge investment given my annual income as a part-time writer. At first, during the 30-day period I had to return the machine and get my money back, it worked fine.

Dell's "customer service" rivals any government bureaucracy in the free world.

But if anything happens after that magic 30 days, forget ever getting your money back. Not long after I bought the printer, Apple updated its software and the scanner quit working.

Did Dell honor its customers by updating the software? No. Instead, Dell's tech support advised me to "keep checking" for updates yet to happen nearly five months later. The techies gave me two "work-arounds" until then. The FAX part does not work correctly either, so I can only fax items but cannot send them.

Now the print tray also needs to be “worked around.” When I hired an outside consult to fix the printer, he explained that there is something mechanically wrong with the tray so it gives a false error message. The only thing I can do is pull out and then push in the tray every time I print. This is unacceptable for a printer less than a year old.

So I called today, explained how I have patiently tried to adapt to all this unreasonable silliness. I told them I have lost far more money in lost work than in the price of the printer and the least and honest thing Dell should do is accept the defective product and return my money.

It turns out I would have done better putting the \$500 in my bank account even though it barely pays interest, which is gets eaten away by taxes anyway.

Both gentlemen politely read from the same script explaining Dell’s third-world return policy. Translation: Buyer Beware! Get a lemon from Dell and you are stuck.

Apparently, the one-year warrantee on the product gives me the privilege of bonding with my new best friends in India and Bangladesh for free. After this, I can buy an extended warrantee to pay for the privilege.

I should have known better. The laptop I bought in 2009 was a dud and a computer friend of mine could not resolve the issues despite endless Dell tech support time. It was never as reliable as the one I bought in 2005 or the two PCs I bought in 2003 and 2007.

We often blame government for being hard on small business. But companies like Dell make a profit at dishonoring trusting customers.

I am not alone. The Internet is a bastion of ignored pleas for Dell help. If Dell will come to its senses and help me, I am happy to sing its praises like I did TurboTax in a former blog.

Burned by Dell? Like the “Dell Sucks” Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/367476813294288/members/>

P.S. My HP 1320, which I bought 10 years ago, and my HP 9800, which I bought six years ago, work great! They just don’t scan or FAX, just like my new Dell four-in-one! Thank God for my old reliable HP printers!

[Why Injured Workers Hire Attorneys \(and What Employers Can Do About It\) -Part II](#)

(Due to the popularity of last week’s topic, I am publishing my blog a day earlier than usual.)



*Special thanks to watoday.com
for pic.*

[Last week's blog](#) covered some of the reasons why injured workers file claims according to a study, "[Avoiding Litigation: What Can Employers, Insurers, and State Workers' Compensation Agencies Do?](#)" published by the Workers Compensation Research Institute in 2010. (In full disclosure, WCRI is a client of Lipold Communications.) The study is based on the responses of 6,823 injured employees with lost-time claims in 11 states that represent 46 percent of the nation's paid workers' compensation benefits.

This week's blog covers on other factors that boost the chances workers will ask lawyers for help, according to the WCRI study.

Claims with greater injury severity or complexity are more likely to be litigated, according to the WCRI study. Attorney involvement among workers with the most severe injuries was 15 percentage points higher than those with mostly minor injuries.

Not surprisingly, soft tissue injury claims, for example, were more likely to involve attorneys. Unlike claims connected to specific incidents, soft tissue injury claims can often be filed without the employers' knowledge, which makes it difficult for them to communicate to workers right away.

By considering employee demographics, employers know their audience better – which is essential for creating effective employee communication plans.

This underscores the point I made in a previous blog that an effective workers' compensation employee communication plan should educate workers about workers' compensation *before* work-related injury incidents occur. Workers who know what to do and what to expect are more likely to get the best medical treatment.

Employer size is also a potential factor depending on the situation, WCRI found. Larger companies are more likely to have co-workers with negative experience with workers' compensation. However, larger employers are more likely to have the resources to provide timely and effective outreach to injured workers.

Workers in smaller organizations, however, are more likely to have direct personal relationships with their employers so claims are less likely to involve attorneys.

How long an employee has worked for an employer affected the likelihood of workers hiring attorneys. Workers who had less than one year on the job were injured were more likely to hire attorneys, according to the study. Meanwhile, those with more than 10 years of tenure with the same employer were less likely to involve attorneys due to employer loyalty. This was offset, however, when workers feared a pay cut from being unable to return to a job with their employer.

An employee's age can also be an influence. Twenty percent of workers aged 55 or older hired attorneys, according to the study. About 17 percent of those between the ages of 25 and 54 hired attorneys, and nine percent of 15 to 24-year-olds did so. The study hypothesizes that older workers are more likely to know others who hired attorneys.

Union membership is often perceived as a reason why workers' sought out legal help but this depends on the situation. The WCRI study noted union membership is not a reliable factor because the pros and cons of union involvement cancelled each other out.

Unions can provide valuable information to workers and tend to have connections to lawyers.

Unions, however, can also provide protection for reemployment and can help members through the process.

An employee's level of education is also a factor. The less educated workers were more likely to hire an attorney because they were more likely to be intimidated by the claims process. The study notes that high school graduates were six percentage points more likely to hire attorneys than college graduates.

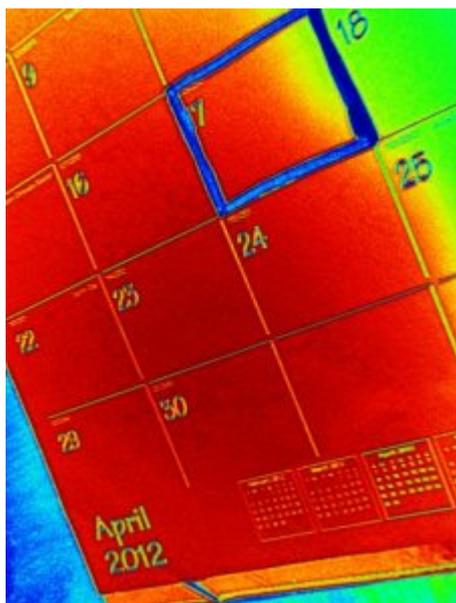
WCRI's study points to the importance of understanding the demographics of the local labor force. The key to effective communication in all cases begins with **knowing the audience you are trying to reach**. By considering employee demographics, employers can know their audience better — which is essential for creating effective employee communication plans.

To learn more about the importance of knowing your audience for effective communication, click [here](#). My blog on customer empathy, which you can find by clicking [here](#), should also be helpful.

(Note: This is part of my ongoing series on What Every Employer Should Know About Workers' Compensation. Check out the "workers' compensation" in tag in the left-hand column for more tips.)

[Kudos to Turbo Tax \(and My Tax Tips from the Trenches\)](#)

Benjamin Franklin said that the only two sure things in life are death and taxes. It is also certain that for most people, preparing taxes are complicated.



Taxes are due April 17, 2012!

As I wrote in a previous blog, **customer empathy** (<http://wp.me/p25Cue-B>) is key in attracting

and retaining clients. My most recent experience with TurboTax (<http://turbotax.intuit.com>) demonstrates such impressive customer empathy that I am compelled to share it. (Wouldn't you like your customers to do that as well?)

Most of us dread doing taxes amid the looming Fear of Audit that pervades the complicated process. Many hire professionals to avoid the hassle. But by the time I collect and organize the documents, the work is already half done.

Enter TurboTax. To benefit the most from this tax preparation software, you should become intimately acquainted with how your circumstances affect your taxes. Thanks to a helpful representative from the Internal Revenue Service, I qualified for an additional deduction and a credit. Confusing wording in TurboTax's "interview" questions, however, made entering this information impossible.

God was smiling on me when Sharon W. answered my call. Past TurboTax customer service reps were unable to help me with this question so I tried calling again. Empathetic and understanding, Sharon W. did not give up until she could help. After reaffirming my qualifications, she patiently walked me through the "interview questions" to satisfy the software. She was empathetic and understanding of my situation. With her help, I saved \$500.

Together, we shared the rush of triumphant excitement as I hit the "file" button.

I had two other problems and she was about to get off work. I had finally found someone very helpful and I did not want to be thrown into the general call center. So she offered to call me the next day.

And she kept her word! On the second call, she helped save me additional \$800! Together, we shared the rush of triumphant excitement as I hit the "file" button.

Producing easy-to-understand tax content to a consumer audience is not easy, and TurboTax generally does this well. Providing such a consistent level of excellent customer service is not easy either. TurboTax would do well to use Sharon W as a model. I hope she someday sees this post. And no, this is not a paid endorsement.

And while I am not a tax expert, here are a few tips from the trenches:

- 1) **Know what is deductible.** It's painful to discover deductions you missed. I know. I amended my 2010 taxes.
- 2) **Keep good records.** Keep track of every possible deduction. Since I pay for my own health insurance, I spend enough on medical expenses to get a tax deduction. I also faithfully track all my family's medical expenses, including mileage for doctor visits, parking, co-payments and deductibles.
- 3) **Develop spreadsheets for next year's deductions by specific tax questions.** My spreadsheets for business and medical expenses are broken down by exact information the tax forms ask. My spreadsheet features business categories that include telephone bills, supplies, hardware, marketing and training.
- 4) **Do not procrastinate.** I generally don't, but this year I had so much client work I didn't realize until March I was missing a 1099 form. Track expenses as they come so you don't forget anything.

- 5) **Begin doing taxes after collecting all the paperwork necessary.** TurboTax is, however, is great about picking up where you left off.
 - 6) **Be persistent and insistent on receiving true customer service.**
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Marketing Mistake 1: Not Knowing the Audience

Companies waste millions of dollars on ineffective marketing and communications efforts. While I cannot back this up with a study, anecdotal evidence and firsthand observation are on my side.

To stop the nonsense, I offer my list of the top five biggest marketing mistakes I've seen. Enjoy!

Biggest Mistake #1: Not knowing the audience and their needs well enough.

To reach your targeted audiences, you have to know them. Do you?

One of my clients thought they knew. My research, however, revealed that the company's client needs vary by circumstance (such as company size, corporate philosophy and outsourcing appetite). I suggested tailoring services and product offerings not just by category, but by situation. Developing customer profiles helps assure you are reaching the right audience with the appropriate message.

Do your materials help your prospective and current clients see why they *must have* your products and/or services?

I interviewed another client's customers to discover their perception of its products and services. The customers were indeed very satisfied with the product and customer service. But, due to a merger, they were confused about the client's name. The customers did not care. They were happy to know who to call to get what they need. Such results still call for a branding effort.

What do *your* clients need? What are they worried about? Of course they are looking to save money and time while boosting the bottom line. Who isn't? But what particular challenges do they face? Does your message and supporting material clearly show — not just *tell*— the value you add?

Can you explain the value-added of your wares in a clear, succinct and specific manner that transcends empty buzzwords and promises?

Too often, marketing and communications materials are written from a general and corporate point of view. Do your materials help your prospective and current clients see why they **must have** your products and/or services? Have you actually satisfied the questions your customers want answered?

As an outsider looking in at my customers' operations, I have the fresh look of their customers'

perspective. I write material that aims to give satisfactory answers. What is more customer-focused than that?

These basic customer questions are:

- 1) What in heck is it?
- 2) Why is this a must-have for my business?
- 3) What is so great and special about it?
- 4) How will it make my job easier?
- 5) How will it improve or support a better bottom line?

I often suggest graphic representations as another way to get your point across. People with high spatial intelligence are likely to get the point more quickly with effective graphic representation near the text.

For example, consider the insurance agent who is trying to sell more umbrella coverage. First, of course, he must describe what umbrella coverage does and why many people need it. But he can communicate the need more effectively with a graphic that shows the limits of auto and home insurance and the more comprehensive coverage that results from an umbrella policy placed over the others. (Here I refer you to Aartrijk, www.Aartrijk.com, which specializes in branding and public relations for insurance agents.)

(To learn more about thinking like your customer, check out my blog on customer empathy <http://annmariecommunicatesinsurance.wordpress.com/2011/12/28/concerning-customer-empathy/>.)

Next week, I will cover **Top Marketing Mistake # 2: Spending Too Much Money**.

In the meantime, have fun!

[Concerning Customer Empathy:](#)

Too Often, Decision Makers Forget How They Feel When They are Customers

The other day I called the pediatrician's office to schedule flu shots for my children

"I would like to schedule an appointment. Which slots are available?" I asked.

She offered, "If you visit our website, you can see the slots and select your time."

"Yes," I said, "But since we are already on the phone, and your computer shows the available slots, can't I just make an appointment?"

"Oh," she said with slight surprise. "OK..."

We have all been on the other side of frustrating customer service. We have seen the marketing material that does not show why we would be fools **not** to plunk down our hard-earned cash for the latest and greatest product or service.

Why does this happen? The trouble is business folks are so convinced that their product is a must-have that they forget to show that to the customer. I've seen clients list products and services on their marketing material assuming the customers are so educated they already know their need. The irony is so many professionals, who are customers themselves, lack empathy when trying to attract, retain and service their customers. Customer empathy considers the needs and desires of the customer to bridge the gap between what you are offering and why they need it.

Don't assume your customers know about *why* your service or product is the best. Prove it.

Relationship experts say that in our narcissistic society, we are less empathetic to others. But with a recession with no end in sight, and people working harder to have less, businesses have to do their diligence to assure they understand their customers.

Customer empathy is also critical for effective social media since it requires a more relational approach to communicating with customers.

Knowing your audience is the number one command in journalism. It dictates the information to be presented in a story. The same is true when trying to reach your audience of customers. Don't assume your customers know about *why* your service or product is the best. Prove it.

Imagine sitting at the desk of the person you are trying to reach and asking questions like: What is this person worried about? What are the toughest challenges they face? Who are their customers? What do they need? These are known in the business as "pain points," a term some expert came up with that gives me images of acupuncture.

Disney World does not cut corners when it comes to knowing their customers. When I took my girls there last summer, I was in awe that everything was in place to make our experience wonderful. (My dream really did come true!) Target is another example. Because the store understands my needs, often I can't leave without dropping \$200!

As for the pediatrician's office, I will scroll through multiple screens to sign in, even when doing so on a piece of paper is easier for me. But what do I know? I'm just the customer.

Posted by Annmarie Geddes Baribeau at [9:50 AM](#) [0 comments](#)

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