

Lessons learned: How to avoid 7 common marketing mistakes

A short guide on creating successful online marketing campaigns and web content

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*"If you can't explain
it simply, you don't
understand it well
enough."*

Albert Einstein

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Creating an effective brief

The Mistake

The first online marketing campaign I worked on was raising awareness of a special funding grant for non-profit organizations across Canada. Eligible organizations could access thousands of dollars if approved, but applications were scarce. We decided to start a national social media campaign in order to increase applications.

I spent hours creating exhaustive lists of eligible organizations across the country, their social media channels and contact information. I then created a detailed content and delivery calendar, customized for location and program details.

The campaign launched. Results were poor. Engagement was low, as were visits to the grant application webpage.

Digging a little deeper, I realized that while nearly all of our targets had social media accounts, few used them actively. Staff members at most of the organizations were not familiar or comfortable using social media, and in many cases left the pages to be monitored by volunteers.

We dropped the social media campaign and focused on email outreach, which improved our success rate dramatically. Spending more time creating an effective marketing brief would have alerted us to this much sooner, and saved us a lot of time and money.

The Lesson

Understand your audience and goals before starting any online marketing campaign.

The Rules

“Some of our best successes have been in industries that I knew nothing about.”

Leo Burnett

- 1** Establish what your client is expecting from you, and when they need it delivered.
- 2** Define the overall scope of the project and its context.
- 3** Collect as much background information as you can. Be curious.
- 4** Clearly define your target audience. What type of people are they, and what do they think about your client?

“Know your prospect and know your product, and know both in considerable depth.”

George Gribbin

- 5** Determine a single, compelling message that must be communicated.
- 6** You need to have a Unique Selling Point. What makes this message interesting and different?
- 7** Only now should you decide on the message medium and creative direction.

**The Art of Writing
Great Copy**
Mark Shaw

What branding can and can't do

The Mistake

An employment services organization was struggling to attract new clients, and asked me to re-brand their location. They reasoned that a fresh new look and a stronger online presence would attract a wider audience. I decided to split the project into two phases: a logo and print materials re-design, and a digital marketing plan for three social media channels.

The new logo and brochures looked great, but did little to increase new business. The digital content strategy was a similar flop. A few months after implementing the digital strategy, the client had sunk a considerable amount of time into social media activities with disappointing results.

To fix the problem, I conducted some research and uncovered a deeper issue. Jobseekers felt that the client's services were dated and ineffective. The re-brand had only addressed the organization's cosmetic issues. They looked great, but were still offering a service that was out of line with their audience's expectations and needs.

Focusing on updating their services instead proved to be the right move, and business has been slowly increasing ever since.

The Lesson

A new look can't make a bad product or service more popular or successful.

A good brand is one that offers a product that people want or need in a unique and consistent manner.

The Rules

“Any damn fool can put on a deal, but it takes genius, faith, and perseverance to create a brand.”

David Ogilvy

“[Richard Branson] is the living, breathing embodiment of a brand whose whole raison d’être is to be the people’s champion.”

Michael Johnson

- 1** A brand isn’t a logo – it’s what other people think of you.
- 2** Consistency is the key ingredient in creating a successful brand.
- 3** Branding is a process that takes time. It will not happen overnight.
- 4** A brand must be supported at the top of a business in order to have an impact at the bottom.
- 5** A successful brand always addresses a need or desire in a specific audience.

“Brands are not ends in themselves; they’re a solution, something that allows us to achieve something.”

Alan C. Middleton

- 6** Your biggest challenge will not be creating a brand, but stopping other people from destroying it.

Brand: It ain’t the logo*

Ted Matthews,
Andris Pone

The elements of a perfect (online) ad

The Mistake

I was having trouble writing an ad campaign for a new diet product that was soon to be released. The product had a long list of features that promised many benefits to the consumer. This was easy to convey in traditional print material, but I was stuck on the online ads. How do you convey so much important information in three short lines of text?

In an effort to fit in all the facts, my headlines were filled with abbreviations and jargon. It was a mess. Stumped, I brought my efforts to the director and asked for advice.

The director crossed out every headline, and wrote at the top of the page: “Lose 10lbs in 10 days.”

“First, make them interested,” she told me. “Then give them the facts.”

Of course, she was right. The headline resulted in a click through rate three times higher than other online ads in the campaign.

The Lesson

A successful ad first peaks the reader’s interest with a promise. Only then will they read about the features.

The Rules

“Promise, large promise, is the soul of an advertisement”

Dr. Samuel Johnson

- 1** The sole purpose of a headline is to capture the reader’s attention and offer them a reward for reading further.
- 2** A headline should convey how the reader can save, gain or accomplish something with your product, or avoid risks, worries, and other undesirable conditions by using your product.
- 3** To get attention with your layout, either make it so powerful, unusual or dominating that it captures the eye, or so uncommonly simple that it’s very restraint demands attention.

“The customer doesn’t give a damn about you until you have aroused his desire.”

Christopher Morley

“I’m not saying that charming, witty and warm ad copy won’t sell. I’m just saying I’ve seen thousands of charming, witty campaigns that didn’t sell.”

Rosser Reeves

- 4** The thing that people want to know above everything else is: What will your product do for me?
- 5** Show people an advantage – and keep showing them.
- 6** Use facts and testimonials to solidify your arguments and prove your claims.

**How to Write
a Good
Advertisement**

Victor O. Schwab

Designing websites that work

The Mistake

I was asked to design an online calendar page for an organization that offered weekly workshops for clients across five locations. To make it easier for clients to find the workshops they were interested in, I added a search bar at the top of the page that filtered events by location, topic and date. Instructions were placed directly under the search bar, where I felt they couldn't be missed.

During a usability test a few months later for an unrelated issue, I decided to throw in a question about the online calendar to confirm it was being used by clients as intended.

To my surprise, 80% of the test recipients had a lot of trouble using the calendar. The test showed that no-one was reading the instructions, or even noticing the search bar at all!

I re-designed the page to make the search bar more prominent, and removed the instructions entirely. A second round of testing returned much better results.

The Lesson

We don't read web pages in the same way we read books and magazines. Design web pages to help people easily find what they're looking for.

The Rules

“Why are things always in the last place you look for them? Because you stop looking when you find them!”

Children’s Riddle

“Good things, when short, are twice as good.”

Baltasar Gracián

- 1** Page navigation and layout should be immediately self-evident and obvious. Erase any questions from the visitor’s mind.
- 2** We don’t read web pages - we scan them. Use subheadings, white space, short paragraphs and lists to help visitors find what they are looking for.
- 3** Make it obvious when something is click-able.
- 4** Omit needless elements. No Happy Talk. No Instructions.
- 5** Conventions are your friend.
- 6** Usability tests are the only way of knowing whether your website design is good or bad.

“Why didn’t we do this sooner?”

What everyone says during their first usability test

- 7** Focus groups are not usability tests.
- 8** Websites need to be designed for viewing on all devices.
- 9** Making things more accessible benefits everyone.

Don’t Make Me Think
Steve Krug

Writing web content that people will want to read

The Mistake

A client wanted to re-design their digital promotional materials for an upcoming service fair. They provided the copy, which was written by their staff and filled with technical terms and jargon. Feeling that the client's own staff had the best understanding of their services and audience, I used their copy verbatim.

The fair was a flop. People who viewed their materials left with no understanding of what the client was offering. While industry experts could easily understand the content, the average person was left out in the cold.

I had made the mistake of assuming expert knowledge naturally lead to general understanding.

For the next service fair, I re-wrote everything using simple, every-day words. Traffic and downloads increased 80% compared to the previous campaign.

Once people understood the service, they wanted all the information they could get.

The Lesson

Web content is a conversation between you and the reader. If they don't understand what you're saying, they'll find someone else to talk to.

The Rules

“Short words are the best, and the old words when short are best of all.”

Winston Churchill

“Any word you have to hunt for in a thesaurus is the wrong word.”

Stephen King

“Had I more time, I would have written you a shorter letter.”

Madame de Sevigne

- 1 Talk to your readers – use “you”.
- 2 Use “I” and “we”.
- 3 Write in the active voice (most of the time).
- 4 Write short, simple sentences.
- 5 Use words your readers will understand.

“High-literacy readers are likely to be the busiest and least patient of your readers.”

Prof. Kathryn Summers, University of Baltimore

- 6 Cut unnecessary words.
- 7 Give extra information it’s own place.
- 8 Keep paragraphs short.
- 9 Put the action in the verb.

Letting Go of the Words

Janice Redish

Getting your reader to take action

The Mistake

While re-designing a website for an organization that offered a complicated and expensive service, I was struck with a dilemma. The page content provided did not fully explain the benefits or features of the service being advertised. After meeting with several of their staff, I wrote a long and in-depth explanation that fully explained the service and uploaded it to the new web page.

The client panicked.

“Nobody will read that much text! You’ll scare everyone away! We need to keep it short and simple...”

I asked for a two week trial of the longer copy before making any changes.

Not only did the longer copy attract more page visits than the short copy, but the average session time doubled overnight.

The client kept the long copy. After three months, service inquiries had increased by 55%.

The Lesson

Long copy only scares away people who have no intention of buying your product or service.

People want information on subjects they are interested in before taking action. Don’t be afraid to give it to them.

The Rules

- 1** Determine what action you want your reader to take, and how quickly you want them to do it.
- 2** Write as much as you need in order to get that action. The bigger the ask, the more you'll have to write.
- 3** The more interesting the copy, the longer it will hold a reader's interest.
- 4** Since people are always interested in themselves, your general subject should always be:

What will this product do for the reader?

- 5** A skilled writer will hold the interest of the reader while moving them to the point of action.
- 6** Real interest will get a reader to read many pages of content. A lack of interest will not get them to even read two lines.

*"Tell the truth, but
make the truth
fascinating."*

David Ogilvy

**How to Write
a Good
Advertisement**
Victor O. Schwab

Measuring online success

The Mistake

At my first job leading social media activities for a non-profit organization, I measured everything in meticulous detail. Not content with standard reports, I created advanced excel spreadsheets that tracked follower growth by channel in minute detail. I could calculate audience growth rates, identify shareable content, and had a scary amount of demographic data on our audience.

At the end of the year, I was asked to create an impact report. Feeling pleased with my mountain of data, I submitted the findings. The directors called me in, sat me down, and asked, “So... what does this all mean?”

I had no idea what to say.

In my eagerness to track everything in detail I'd forgotten to ask the most essential question: how did my social media activity impact the bottom line of the organization?

The Lesson

Don't track data for the sake of it.

Identify clear business goals, and tie them to a Key Performance Indicator (KPI). Your success is measured on the impact your activities has on that KPI.

The Rules

“But the audience is right. You hear directors complain that the advertising was lousy, the distribution is no good, the date was wrong to open the film. I don’t believe that. The audience is never wrong.”
William Friedkin

- 1 Determine what goals matter to your success. You should have no more than three.
- 2 These goals will be unique for every business. Ignore anyone who claims to have a universal solution.
- 3 Start with the big questions: How many visitors are coming to my website? Where are they coming from? Are they doing what I want them to do when they arrive?
- 4 If the answer the last question is “no”, find out why.

“The obvious clearly stated, and combined with new observations, was sometimes close to revolutionary.”

Wallace Stegner on John Wesley Powell

- 5 Focus on the critical few, not the insignificant many.
- 6 Be guided by data, not opinions.
- 7 Any metric by itself is meaningless.
- 8 Capturing data is easy. Accurately analyzing it is not.

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