

Are you making these 13 deadly communications & PR mistakes?

Spear Communications

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Avoid these costly blunders if you want to communicate in an effective, healthy and successful way

Over my two-decade-plus career, I've known and followed hundreds of top executives.

I wish I could say business leaders rarely make rookie mistakes in their communications.

But you know as well as I do that communications mistakes are common.

We've all seen the executive who goes on national television during a crisis and says the wrong things.

He denies, obfuscates, goes on the attack. Or he blames others for his mistake.

Whatever it is, it makes you wince.

And you never forget it. The business leader who makes a mistake like that does lasting damage to his business, his brand, and his reputation.

One thing is certain.

You do not want to be that leader!

Well, you're in luck. I'm now going to show you the deadly communications mistakes you should avoid if you want to communicate in an effective, healthy and successful way.

1. Saying one thing, doing another

Consistency is essential. Make sure your people know and understand the message. Frame it and put it on their desks, if you must. And then do what you say.

Also, know this: often we say one thing and do another

because we lack the courage to be candid. Never tell your audience what you think they want to hear. I tell my clients that bad news you can deliver upon is better than good news you can't. Why? Because delivering on the bad news shows people they can trust what you say. But over-promising and under-delivering will ruin your reputation, and fast.

2. Reacting, not acting

Did you build your business with your communications strategy integrated into every brick and beam and bolt?

If you're like most organizations I've know, communications was the last thing your business considered. And even then, it probably wasn't a strategy. You hired a college graduate, gave her the title Communications Officer, and put her at a desk in the corner of the building.

Am I right? Yeah, I thought so.

Then one day your company was in the news, and you

were unprepared. That's when you realized the value of a good communications strategy—when it was too late.

3. Not sticking to the facts

People will say bad things about your products, your company, and your leadership. When they do, never respond to their negative criticism unless it meets the following criteria: 1) it is objective and 2) it is factually and demonstrably incorrect.

Your hurt feelings is not a good enough reason to react. If you deal with facts in an objective, intelligent way, you'll be seen as honest and fair. If you get into a fight over opinions, you'll be seen as petty, mean-spirited and unserious. Deal in facts, or don't deal.

4. Not listening to your critics

Sometimes your critics will be right. So always listen to them. They might be providing real value to your

business, giving you information that your supporters are too kind, afraid or polite to convey.

Also, know that a critic turned into a supporter will be a super-advocate. It's not easy to do, but look for this opportunity and treat it like the potential gold that it is.

5. Asking how, not why

I see this one all the time. Here's how it works.

A client calls me for a meeting. The president of the company takes 25 minutes to tell me about the new thing she wants to do to communicate better with the target audience. It's all about the How.

I have this irritating habit. I ask my clients Why? Not just once, but over and over again, getting them to drill down to the real issue. And in 80% of the cases, their How is not going to solve their Why.

I understand. Once we think we've identified the problem, we want to solve it. Asking How? puts us into problem-solving mode. Asking Why? can make us look like we're wasting time in idle contemplation. But

here's what you need to know: if you don't answer the Why questions, you risk wasting resources on attacking the wrong problem.

6. Forgetting your internal audience

Our customers are important. We need to listen to them and communicate with them. But don't forget—you have another audience you need to listen to and communicate with: your team. A communications strategy isn't just about the information that goes out the door and into the world. Treat your team like customers, or soon there will be no brand loyalty in your organization.

7. Not keeping a log

The people who speak directly with your clients and customers should keep a log of every call and meeting, including the day and time of the conversation, the topic discussed, and any issues that



arise. This is Communications 101, and I'm astounded by how few businesses practice it. By not keeping communication logs, you're allowing critical front-line information to leak out of your organization.

Also, think about the impression you make on a customer when you can refer to a conversation the two of you had on Friday, June 25, 2004. (At 11:02 am, if you must know!) That's when they'll stop wondering forever if you are paying attention to their concerns.

8. Being a wall, not a door

Do you make sure that information flows to the people who need it? Does outside information circulate into your organization? Does internal communication get to the customers and clients who need it? Are you a door, or a wall?

9. Making it up as you go

Even some organizations that have taken the time to craft a communications strategy are making things up

as they go along. Somewhere, in a drawer, is a binder containing their communications manual. Only a practical, executable step-by-step communications strategy has value. Come up with a plan and follow it. Don't make up your communications as you go.

10. Speaking the language of sellers

You have great services and products. You're very proud of your work and your accomplishments. So your communications is all about who you are and what you do and how great you are at doing it. You are speaking the language of sellers.

Buyers want to know that you have heard them, and that you understand who they are and what they need. Speak the language of buyers.

11. Focusing on products, not relationships

Your communications should be about fostering trust, winning allies and advocates, growing your customer base, and attracting people who will be with you in five, ten and even twenty years. Products come and go, but solid relationships are long-term. You want your company to be doing business, fifty years from now, with the grand-children of your customers today. This only happens if you focus on relationships and then build the products which nourish them.

12. Not owning it

You know the two dirtiest words in the English language?

Spin, and control.

You made a mistake. Take responsibility, show that you understand the nature and consequences of your error, fix the damage, where possible, and commit to making sure it never happens again. Only then, say your sorry. And mean it.



13. Having an answer for everything, even when you don't

No-one likes to be caught with his pants down. Admitting you don't have the answer is the hardest things to do. But do it all the same, because it's dishonest not to. Say that you'll find the answer and follow-up later. And, to return to #1, do what you say.



- Wayne K. Spear is the Founder and President of Spear Communications. This article is part of his ongoing series called "Thought Bombs."