

Laugh at Your Marketing Mistakes – Because Others Will!

While new technologies enable more targeted mass marketing, they also raise the visibility of human error. If you can't laugh at your mistakes or turn them into marketing opportunities, tread lightly!

By Kathy Klotz-Guest, MA, MBA

When we use new technologies and move towards automation, there can be a tendency to put them on autopilot. Of course, the more visible and threatening the error is to your business, the greater the need to apologize and accept blame immediately. But if the error is funny and not life-threatening, use humor to lighten up! Humor is relative, of course. And some machines have a better sense of humor than some of the marketers I've met. But it isn't about the technology per se.

Sometimes it's the technology that fails, and sometimes it's just plain human error magnified by a mass marketing tool such as email. Spell check isn't error proof. If it's worth doing, do it well. Spell checking, for example, does not check for context. But when that fails, and it will occasionally, the reality is some humorous errors can work to your advantage – depending on how you handle them. Delicate handling can earn respect; whereas the blame game puts the lens close up on your error. Sorry, life doesn't have a Control-Z shortcut (the *undo* key for Apple applications for those not in the know!).

A friend recently called me with a recognizable problem: she had made a gaffe in an email that went out to hundreds of prospects. There is no “undo” button for that one. When I told her you have an opportunity to demonstrate your fallibility in an endearing way, she responded with disbelief: “Are you serious?!”

Very, actually! Hey, when you call a humor and marketing expert, be prepared for the answer: humor IS serious business. We all make mistakes in a rushed world and humor is the perfect way for dealing with them. You can't undo these mistakes – they're out there. So the real question to ask here is, how do you handle them?

Sometimes Mistakes Are Opportunities Waiting to Happen

When the mistake is funny (read: not business-threatening) – use it as an opportunity to laugh at yourself and show that you are human. If you handle the issue in a way that shows grace and ownership, it will earn people's respect. People will forget the mistake and instead admire your ability to laugh at yourself. Just because we all take our work seriously, does not mean we must take ourselves so seriously all the time! Moreover, studies show that we like and *respect* people who admit their mistakes and laugh at themselves. And most marketing today, frankly, could use an injection of levity and charisma. Yes, some of it is *that* bad!

Here are a few **true** recent email mistakes I've seen that are also great marketing opportunities in disguise:

- “Lists” was misspelled as “Lusts” several times. You just got my undivided attention!
 - Recommendation: Some people won't notice; others will. When they call you on it: respond, “Hey were not your ordinary marketing firm,” or “I got your attention, so it worked!” Another great line: “no togas will be necessary for this party!” People will

laugh, but they will respect how you handle it! So work it and laugh at it! It's funny. That actually could work in your favor as a piece of "viral" marketing that has a life force of its own. The marketing director has an opportunity to change the stodgy image of the company to one that is more fun, light-hearted, and human. I know the company - believe me, it could benefit from a light-hearted touch. Of course, for this company, stodgy is a bit of an improvement!

- "Copywriting experts" was misspelled as "Copwriting experts." Let's hope the spelling police are AWOL here.
 - Recommendation: Is this a faux pas that has to undermine credibility? Not necessarily. You could respond, "We spell, our fingers don't!" Or give a prize – a free consultation – to the person that finds the error. Celebrate the irony here – copywriters do make mistakes. The mistake is out there, so own it and have fun! Use it as an example of what **not** to do moving forward.
- A networking topic email read, "*Turning Yes into No.*" What a minute; don't I want to turn *No into Yes*?! Finally, a workshop created for *my* selling style! Yes, it's an error, and a funny one. Luckily, this particular sales expert has a great sense of humor.
 - Recommendation: This is an opportunity in disguise to have fun and make an important point about connecting with people in order to sell. Tell people, "hey, just wanted to make sure you were really reading it" or "do we have a workshop for you!" At the networking dinner, talk about the biggest sales mistakes people make (sending incorrect emails!?), and then tell them how to turn *No into Yes*. The class content should re-affirm the positive. But this snafu is a great way to open a talk on *selling*! Embrace the irony as a gift because it makes a great story and an important point. If you have fun with it, so will your audience. Laugh at yourself, and you will make a positive impression.
- A mass email read: "Happy Holydays." Ok, in some sense this is true. But how does a company move on?
 - Recommendation: This is an easy mistake to make with all the religious holidays of December. The good news is it's also an easy fix. The business sent 3 emails apologizing for the mistake – that's overkill. A better solution would have been to have some fun with it in a single follow-up email: "May your holidays be holy and bright" or "Hey, we meant holly days, but were short on mistletoe!" One email is sufficient. A funny email will tell people it was an inadvertent error and make them laugh. Three apologetic emails looks like a marketing plan unraveling fast. Nobody wants to see that!

There's an important lesson here: learning to handle mistakes with dignity and fun makes you approachable and likable. Humor allows you to own them with a sense of grace that will be remembered long after your mistake is forgotten. Use mistakes as opportunities to connect with people personally, and you will humanize your company and brand in the process. Of course, there's another lesson here, too: remember to proofread and to run spell your checker, folks! Technology is great, but it is no substitute for human intelligence, whatever that means!

Happy marketing and Happy Holidays!

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