

Memories of an Accidental Marketing Genius

How an Art History Professor Taught Me Most of What I Know About Business Communication

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Twenty-five years ago I encountered a college professor who was a marketing genius. She wasn't in the business school or in one of the communications-related disciplines; she was in the humanities. But she produced a course description that was so effective, compelling and direct that it reeled in four hundred students every semester. We're not talking about a glossy brochure or fancy marketing package here; just the sort of ordinary, essential communication that colleges and universities crank out by the ream.

What did my professor know that eludes so many marketing professionals? What did she do to turn a single sheet of paper with some copy on it into a potent marketing tool that drew in the audience she wanted in abundant numbers?

Five principles governed that simple little piece my professor wrote — and most of her interactions with students and others. These five things were the secret of her success at engaging with people and they have been at the heart of mine as a marketing professional. I hope that they will prove equally powerful for you.

1. No communication is ordinary.

We are all busy, and a huge amount of information passes our desks in both directions. Some things get more attention than others and some things are dearer to us. Nevertheless, if something is important enough to communicate about, it's important enough to communicate about it well. My professor was a very busy woman with an elderly husband and large property to care for, in addition to her academic duties. Nevertheless, when the dean, registrar or whoever asked her for a course description, she treated the assignment as if it were the most important thing she had ever written. It probably took a little extra time to construct the description this way instead of viewing it as an annoyance as so many other faculty obviously did. But it served her well for many years and saved her time in the long-run.

If it's not worth taking the time to do it well, it may not be worth doing.

2. Conversing is more powerful than informing.

Everyone has picked up some printed matter and, either bored or browbeaten by the relentless tone of its advocacy, put it down again quickly. There's a fine art to conversing with someone who is not present. My professor was an expert at envisioning her audience and presenting what she wanted to say as if her students were right in front of her. She wasn't telling us what she wanted us to know; she was telling us things that might interest us and couching them in terms that made it clear that's what she was doing.

Envision your audience and write as if you were speaking to it.

3. People like being spoken to by other people.

When I was first learning the rules of the language, we were taught that it was important to write most things in the third person. Some teachers even believed that the first and second person were improper except for personal letters. Times — and expectations — have changed. Few of us write letters in the traditional sense any more. And most of us do not have the

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time or the patience to wade through something written in the third person to figure out whether it's addressed to us. We also like catching a glimpse of the person who is writing to us. My professor understood that very well. Although she did not use the second person in her description, preferring to refer to us as "my students," she did use the first person. So skillful was she at this that the piece did not seem self-centered at all; her use of the words "I" and "my" were woven into the conversation she was having with us, making it come even more alive.

When you use the first person, it keeps you more connected to what you are trying to say.

4. *Excitement and interest are contagious.*

I cannot count the number of things I have read over the years that were just downright dull. The author was afraid to inject personal taste or observations, even while permitting herself or himself use of the first person. Whenever I encounter something like this, I remember something one of my high school English teachers said: "people who are bored are boring." And so they are. My professor knew this and she was not afraid to share her interest in her topic up front, before we ever met her. Her course description spoke in glowing terms about the material she would cover, identifying her favorite works, artists and periods in little asides. Reading the piece, I just had to know who this person was and even began envisioning our first conversations. Although I had never before considered the subject of the course, I was completely and irrevocably hooked.

If you're interested, your prospects will be, too.

5. *It's hard to decline an invitation.*

Since you're reading this, you've probably read other material about marketing. If so, then you know one of the essential pieces of advice that all marketing experts give is to incorporate a call to action in any of your written material. This can seem awkward and artificial even if you know what you want your readers to do; it's simply tough to get in their heads sometimes and make the call that will really resonate. My professor had this part down pat, too. She didn't urge us to sign up for her course before all the slots were filled or call her for a free consultation. Instead, she issued an invitation that was gentle, indirect and completely irresistible. Towards the end of her description she included a line that said something like, "I prefer to see my students any time they are available to see me. My office hours are..." If we signed up for her course, we were invited to spend time talking with her outside the lecture hall. At an enormous state university, this was a very powerful — and rare — invitation. It proved to be impossible for me and hundreds of other students to refuse.

Your call to action can be almost anything, as long as your audience is likely to value what you're offering.

Almost everything else about marketing is concerned with how you build these five principles into your strategy and what tactics you can construct to follow through on them. It is wonderfully, impossibly simple and so profound that it took an art history professor to teach it to me.



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