

Ten Commandments of Online Communication

You can find anything online. Some positive, a lot of negative. Everyone wants something. Standing out while remaining ethical and productive is a narrow line to walk, but the possibility of doing harm demands a high level of attentive care.

1. Be Mindful of the Value of Attention

There are billions of voices competing against you.

In the early days of mass media, you only had to compete with a small handful of sources. Information channels exploded with the advent of television and increased to unfathomable numbers when the internet and social media emerged. Every day, something new ‘goes viral’ and demands everyone’s attention. Attention is pulled in literally billions of directions.

As television channels increased in numbers, programmers tried to compete by rejecting shows that had broad appeal, instead opting to step away and try to create programs that appealed to smaller groups. This switch from “broadcasting” to “narrowcasting” gave us cooking and fishing shows and the like- something that would not interest everyone but would make some people quite excited. Social media channels and blogs now provide us with ‘microcasting.’ A community for every interest you can think of. How will you rise above the noise?

2. Mentally Visualize the Audience

Will they all understand what you are trying to say?

Will a teenager understand your message in the same way that an octogenarian will? Will it offend anyone? Are there any cultural issues you should be aware of? It is important to consider all the ways your message could be interpreted. Pass it around to your team to make sure they understand it in the way you want it to be understood. Seek input from a diverse crowd to give you the best odds of landing on the best message. Remember, you are not an omniscient being who knows better than everyone and therefore must manipulate an audience for their own good.

Audiences are not required to adopt whatever it is you’re selling, and it’s not their fault if they don’t. They might not need it, or they might have experiences that negate what you say. They might be coming from a mindset that is miles away from where you are coming from. It is important to remember that it is your job to meet them where they are, and they are under no obligation to agree with you. You are speaking to your equals. What will make them feel seen and understood?

3. Maintain Your Integrity

Be accountable to your highest self.

Through misinformation or deceptive editing it is easy to create something attractive but less than honest. Growing acceptance of misinformation threatens to destroy American democracy. It is increasingly easier to get the dopamine hit of attention by creating fanciful stories. When these stories are presented as truth, especially when they prompt people to some sort of action, that is irresponsible at least. When they stoke the fires of hatred and violence, these lies can cause irreparable damage. The attention gained through deception is hollow and fragile, and presenting it does a disservice to you and your audience.

The siren call of money can cause you to make less than ethical choices. The need to monetize content provides powerful motivation to ignore emotional and/or cultural effects that the audience may experience. News stories keep you interested by choosing alarming stories. Social media platforms subdue posts that you might not like in order to keep you on the site longer. Are you doing what is best for you, or what is best for everyone?

4. Find Carefully Creative Ways

You have fewer boundaries than you think.

Some people believe that things created for mass audiences cannot make any significant change in the world. That it is frivolous and unworthy. But large changes require many people to adopt that change. Engaging art has changed the world since the days that art first existed. Dig deep. What can you do to make the message beautiful or unexpected? Make the message attractive and compelling to as many people as possible, and you'll get a great result.

It is good and noble to aim to create messages that influence positive change in the world. However, this aim, taken to its furthest extreme, becomes propaganda. It will be easy to skip straight to the point, underline it, put it in neon lights, and scream at people to believe it. Are you telling people what to do or showing them a better path? Are you inviting your audience to consider something better or telling them they're stupid if they disagree with you? Are you leading or pushing?

5. Keep It Simple Stupid

Complicated messages travel poorly.

Dozens of studies have explored the way that audiences process information. One of these studies provided us with the Two-Step Flow Theory. In the simplest terms, this theory says an opinion leader receives information and then passes it on to their audience. Recalling the games of Telephone from

childhood, the briefest, most condensed message had the best possibility of making it around the circle with minimal changes. Longer, more complicated messages not only took more time to take their trips around the room, but they also were far more likely to take on new, sometimes entirely different meanings as they traveled. If your message is overly complicated, it may not spread as you hope and might be misrepresented entirely.

If you keep things simple, people have more latitude to see their own views reflected in your message, which will help keep them interested. This employs the Selective Exposure Theory- “Selective exposure is people’s tendency to (become exposed to) media messages they feel are in accord with their already-held attitudes and interests and the parallel tendency to avoid those that might create dissonance.” Talking past the point of necessity invites more opportunities for dissonance. Do you really need to say more?

6. Always Meet a Need

What will people get if they pay attention to you?

Most people turn to media to meet some sort of need. Social media often fills the need to belong, and the need for self-presentation. For televised media, the need could be escapism or relaxation. These needs generally fall within these five domains: the need to know, the need to feel, the need to build self-esteem, the need to socialize, and the need to relieve stress.

Ultimately, the audience decides if your media meets these needs or not. If you are not meeting needs, people will tune out and look for other, more gratifying channels. Any sort of feedback such as surveys, samples, feedback portals and social media pages can help keep tabs on how your messages are being received by your audiences. It is a continual process as needs can change over time. How can you craft your message to meet more needs?

7. Leave Fear Behind You

You will never scare people into love.

It is impossible to watch the news and feel better about the world these days. Fear is the primary tactic to keep people glued to media. War, bombings, car wrecks, murder, these are all very scary things that we can’t look away from. In attempts to gain and keep more attention, fearmongering has become a leading agenda. When audiences pay attention to the scary stories, the news gains viewership which increases advertising income. The need to know keeps people tuning in, which frightens them more, which leads to a greater need to know.

The wealthy and powerful have always feared the loss of control that they enjoy if media ever creates a narrative that they do not condone. Now that media

is growing more decentralized, and alternative narratives can propagate without permission (the assault on Gaza is a prime example). Fear is being utilized more than ever to keep the public in line, as evidenced by the demonization of pro-Palestinian protests as anti-semitic, even though Palestinians are also semitic people. This deep spiral of fear and attention and power and money has turned into a mountain of madness. Your voice does not need to add to this seemingly endless, harmful noise. If you want to do better than fear, highlight solutions, focus on care, and bring anything different to the chaos. Are building something good, or building fear of something bad?

8. Be Mindful of Children

Vulnerable populations require heightened care.

Children have not yet developed the habit of thinking critically about the media they consume. This means that everything they take in can change their view of the world for years. For unscrupulous marketers, this is fertile ground to build life-long customers. If a company can make child-focused ads and put them on child-focused programming, they can create positive associations that will stay with them forever. This isn't necessarily always wrong, strong campaigns like D.A.R.E. can plausibly keep kids away from drugs, for example. If you are trying to sell something that requires adult discernment like medicines or alcohol, it is irresponsible to create something that would appeal to children. Your messages are affecting the future as well as the present. Are you doing right by the vulnerable?

9. Do the Work.

Nothing good comes easy.

"The point is you have to work. That is why the propaganda system is so successful." - Noam Chomsky. There is a saying that a lie can travel around the world before the truth puts its shoes on. Lying is an attractive option when it will bring you money or fame or keep you from unpleasant consequences. It can be cut and tailored to meet whatever need you feel you have, whereas truth is static and unchanging. But ignoring reality and creating your own brings its own consequences. If people cannot trust what you say, they have no reason to listen to you. If they are relying on your information to help them make decisions, a lie robs them of the ability to truly make their own choices.

Even if your audience is small, lies can spread and become something far larger than you could imagine. All media that present informative content possess a heightened level of responsibility to do the work of fact-checking what they present. Without careful dedication to presenting the whole truth, the normalization of misinformative or heavily biased reporting will destroy the

self-determination demanded by democracy. Are you doing everything that needs to be done?

10. Mind Your Own Mind

Maintain distance and find the balance.

Creating space between yourself and what you take in, being able to think critically about everything that you take in, will allow you to keep things in perspective. Building the habit of checking in with your own thoughts and worldviews regularly will equip you to keep your goals on track without being mired down in whatever the wealthy, powerful or simply loud use to distract you. Automaticity where you just take in and even respond to messages without thinking critically about them puts you in the passenger seat with someone else driving for you.

Analyzing media might feel like a quick path to becoming cynical or even a cynical act unto itself. To watch for lies and manipulation requires an assumption they will be there. But being mindful of the possibility of danger is the first step in avoiding it. Constantly staying vigilant for manipulation and doing the work of finding the facts will keep you from getting dragged down into the mire of confusion and wrong thinking. Are you taking care of yourself?

Doing good work in any capacity requires good education, good intentions, and good hard effort. Your work will likely not go unnoticed, even if it is bad. Asking people to listen to you in whatever capacity requires careful thought, backed up with solid planning and execution, with analysis afterwards to fuel continual improvement. It's hard work. But it will be done by someone.