

Marketing Minute ~
7 Biggest Communication Blunders of 2010 -- and the Lesson Each One Offers
Contributed By Bill Lampton, Ph.D.

As we look back over 2010, each of us can remember some communication mistakes we made that, fortunately, only a few people noticed. Possibly we:

- sent an e-mail to the wrong person.
- forgot the name of a prized customer.
- left the budget page out of an important proposal.
- lost our place during a sales presentation.

Soon we will forget those mistakes. Once the embarrassment subsides, we'll consider them as nothing more than misfires that could happen to anyone--and will eventually.

Something else is in our favor: those slip ups didn't attract media attention--no headlines, no announcements that "we interrupt this program to bring you a special bulletin."

However, that relative anonymity wasn't the case in 2010 with those we consider public figures. Their blunders generated massive attention. The last twelve months we have seen sports figures, actors, politicians, musicians, government officials, and other supposed household names fumble, bumble, and stumble their way into humiliation and ridicule--providing ample material for the late night comics.

Out of the hundred or more most widely publicized goof ups that caught my eye, here are my picks for the 7 biggest communication blunders of 2010--and the lesson we can learn from each one.

(1) Sarah Palin's recent interview with Glenn Beck, when she kept referring to "our allies, North Korea," even after he tactfully corrected her the first time.

LESSON: There's a double lesson here. First, know the basic background before you comment on a topic. You don't have to be a prize winning historian to remember the region that the U.S. supported during the Korean War. And secondly, be sure to listen when a colleague is kind enough to help you out by correcting you. Observers will forgive one inaccurate remark, as though it might be accidental, but that's the limit.

(2) Congress giving Charlie Rangel nothing more than censure as his punishment, when it's likely that any regular U.S. Citizen would be imprisoned on any one of those tax evasion charges, much less the combination of Rangel's other lawless acts stretched across decades.

LESSON: Congress needs to re-examine what it really means to have equal justice for all. Apparently, the longer you serve in Congress, the less responsible you are for your misbehavior, fiscal or otherwise. Seniority seems to imply immunity from consequences.

(3) Minnesota Vikings Quarterback Brett Favre's annual charade of "Gee, I might play again this season... but I'm not quite sure."

I wonder: Will Favre be holding the press and the rest of us breathless during the summer of his 70th birthday?

LESSON: When you are considering a major professional change make up your mind privately, and then tell us your decision. We don't need to be party to your internal debates, just the results. And please note that, shockingly, there really are some people who don't care about your plans.

(4) BP Chairman Tony Hayward moaning, "I want my life back." Yeah, the same could be said by the fishermen, restaurant owners, hotel managers, casino operators, waitresses, excursion boat owners, and tourism officials whose business evaporated because of the massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

LESSON: When dealing with a highly sensitive situation, don't discuss your own problems. A leader is supposed to focus on everyone else's struggles, not his or her own.

If you're not in control of your own situation, how can you help those who look to you for answers?

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(5) Trapped Chilean miner Yonni Barrios Rojas announced that he wanted both his wife and his mistress to meet him when he was freed from the mine. Not surprisingly, his wife didn't show up.

You wonder: Did the claustrophobia and mine gases distort his ability to think rationally?

LESSON: Even sudden international fame doesn't enable you to have everything you want, especially at the expense of those who cared for you before you reached page one status in the news. No matter what you get in life, remember where your original loyalty belongs.

(6) Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi told the National Association of Counties, "We need to pass this health care bill, so you can find out what's in it."

LESSON: Audiences will not accept twisted logic. What you say must make sense. Pelosi's statement was like a realtor suggesting, "Buy this house--and then you will know what it looks like inside." Ever bought one on that basis? No, and you won't.

(7) Delaware candidate Christine O'Donnell said on television, "I am not a witch. I am you." She was trying to stifle on-going chatter about her comments, made years earlier on Bill Mahr's show, about dabbling in witchcraft.

LESSON: Sometimes it's better to quit trying to explain our mistakes. Why? The result might be that we are just reminding people one more time about our questionable actions. O'Donnell fanned public suspicion, rather than settling the witchcraft issue. To borrow from Shakespeare, "The lady doth protest too much."

**Bill Lampton, Ph.D.--author of [The Complete Communicator: Change Your Communication-change Your Life!](#) -- helps his coaching clients become poised, powerful, and persuasive speakers.
Visit his Web site: <http://www.ChampionshipCommunication.com>**

Information provided for you by ~

Marilyn K. Dayton, Business/Marketing Specialist

<http://www.marketingandbizpro.com> ~ marilyn@marketingandbizpro.com

860-389-2521

