Perfecting your brand language and verbal identity

Category: Branding
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With some notable exceptions – Innocent and Virgin spring to mind – brand language plays second fiddle to visual language. Surely, the two should be playing duet… ?

Think of the colour red and the fizzy drink might immediately comes to mind. A flickering flame is instantly British Gas. Subconsciously, you sense that a letter written in Times New Roman will have a serious tone, while an email peppered with smileys will be fun and frivolous. It's all part of the corporate identity armoury. But what about brand language? Creating a distinctive verbal identity could significantly increase the effectiveness of your marketing efforts and brand communications. Is it time to assess what your words are worth?

Logos, colours and typefaces send out clear visual signals and, when used in branding, give an instant impression of a brand that is reinforced each time we see them. But what about the words that accompany these visual cues? Do they send such compelling messages about the brand and its promises? Sadly, the answer is often no. Beautifully designed communication pieces are often let down by poorly-written copy. Well-crafted and technically sound websites are lumbered with jargon-laden verbosity carved from existing collateral. Opportunities to add personality across the entire marketing mix are being missed. Developing a powerful verbal identity adds to vocabulary of a brand, giving it texture and meaning. Exposing a basic truth of individualism.

Even companies that have invested serious thought and hard cash in defining their brand can slip up. The majority of

brand bibles devote no more than a few paragraphs to verbal identity, often advising users that, if they understand the brand essence and personality, they will automatically understand its language. Consistency is also a common stumbling block. Developing a verbal identity for use across your website, literature and advertising is a great start. But you're missing a trick if you're not applying it to all touch-points, both internal and external, including your environments, signage, digital templates, emails, bills and even the way you answer the phone.

This undervaluing of brand language sometimes boils down to a form of arrogance – we don't all think we can design but many of us think we can write. Important pieces of copy that would benefit from the services of a professional copywriter get written in-house. All too often it's down to budget. The money gets spent on the instant impact of images without appreciating the vital role language and verbal identity has to play in reinforcing and refining the visual message. But mostly, it comes from a lack of understanding of how to create a brand language and verbal identity, and put it to work. Follow our advice, below, and you will be on your way to giving your brand not just an image, but a voice to go with it:

Improve your English

At the most basic level, ensure every written communication from your company is clear in its meaning and has good grammar and spelling. Developing a powerful verbal identity takes commitment and time, and it would be a shame to undo your hard work by overlooking the fundamentals. If in any doubt, use a professional proof-reader.

Get some guidelines

A good branding agency will define a tone-of-voice as part of a visual and verbal identity audit and review, and include detailed guidelines on its application in your brand manual. Make sure guidance on your verbal identity is freely available to everyone in your organisation, preferably through a dedicated online brand centre.

Be consistent

Developing a powerful verbal identity means your tone-of-voice must be applied to every form of communication as stringently and consistently as colour and typeface.

Be flexible

Recognise that brands can have a variable tone-of-voice within an overarching verbal identity framework. You may need to talk to your employees in a different way to the way you communicate with customers, but certain key elements of your tone-of-voice will always run through, containing the essence of your verbal identity.

Consider training

Communication training makes people feel they own the brand language and encourages them to use it more effectively. It instils pride and fosters creativity. Consider external writer training to instil confidence in your marketing and communications team. This will help them to express your tone of voice in more imaginative ways, while adhering to the verbal identity guidelines.

Work from the inside out

If your staff refer to your help desk as a ‘customer complaints centre’, the negative phrase is sure to leak out to customers! That’s just one example, but in developing a consistent verbal identity you’ll need to concentrate on the positives, and banish negativity where possible.

Look for opportunities

Once you’ve found it, ‘work’ your tone-of-voice. Is there space on packaging that could be used to say something useful or fun? Again, Innocent springs to mind. Do your letterhead and business cards convey your brand personality? Are you already on the road to developing a powerful verbal identity? Or does your brand language still require a sprinkling of magic?

Think beyond vocabulary

Tone of voice is not just about choosing words that convey a personality. While the personality expressed through your verbal identity needs to be unique, it also needs to be an accurate reflection of who you are and what you do. People are not stupid, they’ll know when the wool’s being pulled over their eyes. An authentic verbal identity, with substance, will always resonate better.

Think about:

- Finding a central proposition and applying it to everything you do. What are you all about? Honesty? Fun? Innovation? Caring? Value?
- Distance – do you want to create space between yourself and your reader by talking about yourself as ‘the company’ or bring them closer by referring to ‘our

company’.

- Do you talk about health or education generally or the customer’s health or education specifically?
- Is your language subjective or objective? Which is most likely to appeal to your audience?
- Is your language memorable? Predictable phrases are quickly forgotten whereas a new way of saying something will stick in the mind.
- Certainty – do you say something ‘positively is’ or that it ‘could be’?
- Jargon – does using technical language and ‘in’ terms demonstrate your credibility and knowledge or merely cloud meaning and shut people out?
- It’s never too late to sharpen your brand language. Companies who embrace change communicate differently and stand out in new and exciting ways. Just think what a conceptual and creative verbal identity could say about your organisation.