Finding your true tone of voice in communications

Category: Branding
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Is your company tone deaf? Or is it simply in need of a fine tune? An imaginative and distinctive tone of voice in communications can take a brand in an entirely new direction. So why do companies spend so much time on style, and so little time on substance? Surely, the two should play an equal role.

To get the most out of visual identity, organisations must also possess a distinctive verbal identity. One without the other, simply doesn't make the most of branding and marketing opportunities. Intuitive tone of voice guidelines help creative agencies, content marketers and other contributors to remain on-brand and on-message – ensuring your tone of voice in communications is consistent across all media and all touch-points.

Most organisations have got much better at briefing visual identity designers to give their marketing communications a contemporary feel, and a distinctive personality. But there's still something missing – what Design Week once called "the last piece in the jigsaw of achieving total branding". The answer? Tone of voice. It might sound obvious, but very few institutions really understand verbal branding, and how to use language in parallel with their visual branding and the components parts of the communications toolkit. Which is an opportunity missed, because tone of voice should be a major consideration as part of a branding programme. Perhaps it's because tone of voice is overshadowed by the aesthetics of graphic design. Which is forgivable, as creatives and marketers are immersed in the visual aspects of branding. Eye catching visuals can feel more tangible than top-level messaging. And at the outset of branding, little if any

attention is given to the weight and tone of copy content. Drill beneath the headline and [maybe] the odd sub-head and you're likely to find Lorem Ipsum. It's not necessarily the case that tone of voice at a deeper level is seen as a poor relation, it's just too early in the process for any more than a cursory level of detail. Lest we forget…

Tone of voice guidelines are fundamental to successful brand-building, and creating messages that resonate and increase recognition (and recall) through consistency of tone and application. In the grand scheme of things, adding a module on tone of voice guidelines to the brand framework and application guidelines does not add significantly to the scope of work. And the benefits reach far beyond any initial outlay, providing long-term value for money.

The key point here is creating consistency. The basic housekeeping point is to ensure that there's evenness in your tone of voice across the whole range of materials and communication channels. Especially when different departments are producing their own literature, with different writers and different creative agencies. It's unsurprising that without sufficient tone of voice guidelines, organisations achieve completely different results. This has the disadvantage of making tone of voice in communications disjointed, even if they have similar visual cues. While it's second nature to place visual design with creative agencies, marketers frequently assume the role of copywriting, which is fine, only some people find generating content more challenging than others. In the absence of tone of voice guidelines writing styles can also differ noticeably. It's also worth bearing in mind that when considering the tone of voice you adopt across communication channels, the need to 'mind the gap' is often greatest between digital and traditional media. These activities tend to be masterminded by different people, and can leave an organisation looking a touch schizophrenic to the outside world.

In worst case scenarios, it’s even possible to find an inconsistent tone of voice within a single website or piece of collateral, which is doubly unnerving for the reader. It’s a version of ‘cut and paste’ syndrome, and easy enough to spot – sectors like financial services seem particularly prone to ‘lifting’ text that’s been written for one purpose and dropping it into something completely different, where it sticks out like a sore thumb. (Hence all those sudden eruptions of policy jargon in what you thought was a tailored piece of brand marketing communication).

The quickest way to solve both these problems is to use one writer for all your brand communications. But in the long term, there’s huge benefit from establishing a simple and robust framework for your tone of voice, that everyone can work to, and an editor can use as the overall yardstick. The best way to do this is to develop it in tandem with your visual identity, so that both work together.

You don’t need a reason to achieve consistency between how you look and how you sound, because the dangers of a mismatch between upbeat contemporary visuals and dreary, uninspiring messaging are obvious enough. But there’s a powerful opportunity here, that doesn’t just rely on tone of voice. Bringing verbal and visual identity design together makes a compelling (if largely covert) statement about who you are, and reinforces all the other overt messages about why someone would want to buy from or work with your organisation, rather than somewhere else. Key pieces of information like the homepage of your website need to be as strong on content as they are on style, with confident, forceful messages, written in a way that will make you stand out from the competition.

After all, these ‘high-traffic’ items are likely to be the first thing most prospective customers read. But far too many simply trot out statistics – listing the numbers of services, the main departments, and even the amount of research income – rather than making a direct appeal to people based on

personality, and how its products and services could benefit their lives. Rather than apply their own unique tone of voice, they adopt a ‘same as’ mentality, which is another missed opportunity. It’s not what you say, but how you say it. And this is where tone of voice guidelines are an invaluable asset.

This left brain/right brain problem makes itself felt in other ways too. Most obviously, it’s in the use of vocabulary that can be dry and lacklustre at best (‘leading’, ‘global’, ‘centre of excellence’, ‘research-led’), and at worst veers into the sort of business jargon that’s infesting so many corporate communications these days – all those ‘solutions’ and ‘missions’ we know and hate.

Take a good look (a really good look) at your brand communications, from your website and digital channels to all the other marketing and promotional materials you produce. Now be really honest with yourself. Is the language energetic and inspiring? Or, is it corporate, dull and predictable? Does it match the personality of your organisation well, or hardly at all? Does it sound as if it was written by a person having a two-way conversation with you, or is it a diatribe? Do you come across as dynamic and engaging, or like a government department? Would you expect someone to react to your messaging by contacting you at once, or by switching off? Even if there’s room for improvement, achieving total branding consistency is not an unrealistic expectation. You just need to find (and maintain) your tone of voice!