

Finding a VOICE for your brand

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When we think of brands, we often think of their powerful visuals: the Nike swoosh, the Kit-Kat wrapper, or the distinctive shape of the Coke bottle. Or we might think of LloydsTSB's blue and green, or Vodafone's red speech marks, or Easyjet's distinctive typeface and orange colour. We know that colours, logos and typefaces go a long way to create our impressions of a brand, and they certainly reinforce a brand's presence every time we see them. But what about their language?

Brand guidelines, handbooks and identities reflect this emphasis on the visual. You will see pages about the way the visual identity can and can't be used. You'll know the typefaces that are on- and off-brand. You'll know your Frutiger from your Franklin Gothic.

It's crucial to get all this right. But we know that people's experience of brands is drawn on a wider canvas than this. That is where branded language, or 'Tone of Voice', comes in. Most brand guidelines devote less than 5% of their space to describing how the brand should use words. The guidance is often vague, amounting more or less to 'if you think about the brand, you'll write (or speak) in the right way.'

This is a missed opportunity. Language has enormous power to do what brands need to do – communicate. This goes not only for the highest-profile communications, such as advertising, retail environments and packaging, but for every point

Report on innovation in Europe

In June an international leadership forum looked at the role of innovation in advancing Europe's economic agenda. It called for a higher priority to be given to innovation and confirmed that putting the customer at the centre of this effort is the critical ingredient for success. A report on this forum is available free from the British Brands Group.

at which the brand touches consumers. This means every channel: internet, phone calls, face-to-face communications, text messages, emails, letters, bills, statements, instructions – everything that has a linguistic component. If brands consider all these touchpoints as potential spaces to express the brand, a huge benefit can result in terms of customer impact and even loyalty.

We know that people don't always read everything. A compelling communication therefore has to be well structured, allowing people to get the information they need. But people also return to communications and use them in different ways at different times – from reading the cereal packet over breakfast to skimming a bill at a later date to find the most expensive calls. Messages that are clear and well structured, therefore, win friends. To many brand owners, this has meant improving their English – which is a good thing – but it can fall short of creating distinctiveness for the brand, a 'voice' that makes the same kind of associations that the visual identity does.

We all speak differently at different times. Brand Tone of Voice works directly from the essence, personality and qualities of the brand to predict what kind of language that brand should use, to whom, and when. This may be different for different audiences. We also know that the way brands talk about themselves inside an organisation tends to leak through to the outside. So if your call centre has something called the 'Large Customer Unit', you'll eventually get customers who are insulted by being put through to it.

So what kinds of things does Tone of Voice cover? Most people intuitively think of vocabulary – informal and fun, formal and professional or somewhere in between. There are, however, many more dimensions of language to call upon. Linguists have identified a rich array of forms that people use to create a sense of 'self' in writing – to communicate a personality. For example:

- How much certainty are you communicating – saying something *is*, or it *could be*?
- How closely are you associated with what you're talking about? Are you, or the customer, or even the brand, the 'doer' in the activity? Does this make the customer feel empowered, protected and looked after, or passive and powerless?
- How much subjective evaluation are you including? Are you calling a product *fantastic* (which is positive, but highly subjective) or *most popular* (which is positive, but more objective)?
- How closely are you involving the customer? For example, in a brochure about a mortgage product, are you talking about *an account* or *your account, the house or your home*?
- Is the language predictable – or can you find new combinations of words that will surprise, perhaps more in keeping with a fun, vital brand?

Tone of Voice is most usefully based on a survey of existing communications, a solid understanding of the brand and research with stakeholders to find their reactions to the Tone of Voice as it develops. And training is vital, so that the Tone of Voice doesn't get lost in your organisation. Finally, thought needs to be given to translation, having guidelines prepared to make sure that your Tone of Voice is going to work in any other languages you need. The result should be a consistent, usable, effective and well-liked set of principles for on-brand language.

Tone of Voice, like much current branding practice, is all about consistency – making it clear that people can expect the same kind of personality from a brand, all the time. But what's next? Our ever-richer customer data might shortly enable us to create 'chameleon brands' that present different facets of the brand to different consumers. This is a future challenge both to visual and verbal branding – so watch this space!