



## The language brands use is not only exemplary of their communications strategies, but is derived from the personality, nature and identity of the company itself. Ruth Wyatt explains why it's important to maintain consistency and authenticity

There is only one thing worse than being talked about and that is not being talked about, Oscar Wilde wrote. Fat chance of that in the digital age. Everyone's talking (posting, tweeting, emailing, sharing, texting, commenting, blogging) some of the time, and some of the people are at it all of the time. What once might have been paranoia or self-importance on the part of marketers, now is reality: people are talking about you, or at least your brand.

In this world of incessant chatter, verbal identity has never been more important. It stands to reason that while you can't control what people say, you can control how you respond to them. The pressure to get it right, therefore, and the opportunities to cock it up have never been greater.

And lest we forget the offline world, brand voice also plays a significant role in customer service when real people have to talk to each other. Therein lies the rub; so many conversations of so many different sorts among so many people. Consistency in communications is crucial, but incredibly hard to achieve.

It can be done. Apple, for instance, manages it. The brand experience of visiting an Apple store is the same regardless of whether you are in Coventry or Covent Garden. The language people use and the way they use it to underpin great customer service is the same without Apple employees sounding like corporate robots.

The words people use reflect their state of mind; they influence thinking, feelings and behaviours. "We all speak using metaphor. These are much more than verbal clichés. We describe one thing in terms of another because that's how our minds work. On average we use six to eight metaphors a minute – it's virtually impossible for us to speak entirely literally," says Alastair Herbert, managing director of Linguabrand, a London-based language consultancy. "These hundreds of conversational metaphors classify into around 20 deep-rooted metaphor clusters. These are largely based on our physiological interaction with our world. And they're cross-cultural."

They also speak volumes about how we behave, he says. "Someone who sees business as an ecosystem will be much more open to potential partnerships than someone who views it as a battle. A person who sees their job as a battle ('I'm having to dig in..,' 'Everything I recommend gets challenged.')

will pattern-match to this metaphor. They will find fights where they may be none," Herbert says.

If words are windows to the soul, how they are used must be considered carefully. A small change can have a big impact, as Keith Yazmir, EMEA managing director of maslansky+partners, can attest. The firm of language strategists helped to usher in the term 'climate change' to replace global warming. "It's more accurate – some places are getting colder," Yazmir notes. The agency

measures emotional response to language and messaging on a second-by-second basis to assess people's gut reactions and help companies and politicians to hone their messaging to greatest effect.

A notable example was Starbucks' foray into instant coffee. When it said instant coffee, its target market heard cheap, bland substitute for proper coffee. When that was changed to "coffee, in an instant,," consumers accepted it as a quality product and Starbucks had a successful launch on its hands.

Some may have read that last part shaking their heads at companies' willingness to pay good money to be told and sold the painfully bleeding obvious. The thing is, it's only obvious when someone else has pointed it out. Or as Yazmir puts it, "The fact is the executives and communicators and marketers we work with are some of the best in the world and, of course, they know their business better than anyone else. The challenge is that their success depends on being able to communicate their brand, products, candidate or issue in ways that truly resonate with their target audiences – who don't know all that they do. What companies mean when they say things is absolutely the right thing to communicate, but it is often not interpreted by those audiences in the way intended because [they] bring all of their preconceptions and biases to bear when listening. It's not what you say that matters; it's what they hear."

Getting the language at the heart of the brand right – the correct articulation of its fundamental values and proposition – shapes how the brand is presented across all platforms.

Maslansky+partners' work with Microsoft informed the language strategy for Windows 7 that drove Microsoft's global advertising, public relations and digital campaigns as well as the brand's visual identity and packaging design.

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"Verbal identity encompasses naming, brand language, tone of voice, messaging structure, narrative and supporting nomenclature," says Interbrand director EMEA and Latin America Rebecca Robins. "If you look back 10 years ago, people were not debating these issues. There were trademarks and ad campaigns, but few other ways for consumers to interact with brands. Now that the environment for brands is much more complex to manage, [verbal identity] has more primacy."

Chris West, founder of specialist agency Verbal Identity, agrees that the tone of voice discipline has moved on, "Marketers are desperate to get it right so you've had consultants selling them a tone of voice based on vapid terms – usually four adjectives, three of which would be friendly, approachable and human. It always reminds me of those father of the bride speeches; he's describing the groom in these sorts of terms and it is obvious that he really doesn't know him at all. Tone of voice is one element – a really important one – that has to work within a narrative and messaging structure to be successful."

West says there are a lot of misconceptions about narrative, "The human brain is hardwired for stories, but a story doesn't mean a beginning, a middle and an end. We all have an innate narrative matrix and subconsciously create a reliable narrative from minimal data points. This is especially true of brands. Consumers hear what brands say and subconsciously fill in the gaps." The order in which messages are delivered affects the way they are understood and the impact they have on the audience, he adds.

In days of yore, tone of voice would be enshrined in a brand book that the chosen few might refer to. Sometimes. "A brand book sits in the bottom drawer much like the Gideon bible in hotel rooms. It might be looked at in desperation or boredom. A bible needs a preacher and verbal identity needs to be brought to life to be really successful," West says. That's the other big difference these days: the custodians of brand voice are no longer the top echelons of marketing, the ad agency and an in-house writer or two. Dozens, hundreds, possibly thousands of employees are responsible for writing and speaking it across the many and varied customer touchpoints now in existence. There is no shortage of examples of disconnection in communications. Communications agency

Golin presented a workshop on brand voice at last year's Cannes Festival of Creativity highlighting some absolute corkers. Dr Pepper's po-faced response to a complaint about its balls-out ad campaign for low-cal Ten variant was a case in point. The meant-to-be-humorous, designed-to-be-controversial ad proclaimed that Ten was not for women. The customer relations' response to a disgruntled female consumer was couched in the sterile language of a corporate giant. Worse – it was written by a woman making mention of how much she enjoyed the drink.

Ensuring consistency without turning your people into automatons is the Holy Grail. There has to be room for some degree of personal expression, but there has to be constancy, which suggests control of some description.

Or rather, inspiration. According to Robins, if the brand is the central organising principle, the process falls logically and intuitively into informing employees to create general awareness, understanding and excitement.

She says companies should engage employees so the brand becomes personally relevant and

actionable on a daily basis, then they can align the organisation so that HR programmes, corporate policies and operations support the brand.

She says, "Brand should act as a guide that drives business performance, culture, experience and attitude. A workforce and organisation that is inspired, engaged and aligned with the corporate brand promise, knows what services to deliver, and what not to deliver, how to answer the telephone, what to say on a sales call. Ultimately, how to make decisions guided by the brand."

The principle that great brands start from within and verbal identity is the reflection of authentic values applies regardless of whether you're selling instant coffee or expert legal counsel. As Tony Allen, Dragon Rouge group director of corporate branding, who is something of an expert on advising law firms, testifies, "They have an extremely strong sense of self, which we help them to express. We don't gift them their identities; it is more a process of clarification and affirmation."

To thine own self be true.

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