



What are words worth?

by Debra Blundell.

Think of the colour orange and the mobile phone operator 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. 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 brochures and direct mail are often let down by poorly-written copy. Well-crafted websites are lumbered with jargon-laden verbosity carved from existing collateral. Opportunities to add personality or information to stationery, bills and emails are overlooked. 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.

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 tone of voice, often advising users that, if they understand the brand essence and personality, they will automatically understand its language. Consistency is also a common stumbling

ground. Using a clear tone of voice in your brochure, website and advertising is a great start. But you are missing a trick if you're not applying it to all touchpoints, both internal and external, including your emails, fax headers, bills and even the way you answer the phone.

This undervaluing of 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 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 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. If in any doubt, use a professional proof-reader.

> Continued on following page...



Get some guidelines

A good branding agency will define a tone of voice as part of an identity review and include detailed guidelines on its application in your brand bible. Make sure the guidelines are freely available to everyone in your organisation, either on paper or on your intranet.

Be consistent

Tone of voice must be applied to every form of communication as stringently as colour and type face.

Be flexible

Recognise that brands can have a variable tone of voice. 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.

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.

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!

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? Do your letterhead and business cards convey your brand personality?

Think beyond vocabulary

Tone of voice is not just about choosing words that convey a personality. Think about:

- Find a central proposition and then apply 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?

If you would like to discuss the opportunities that exist to strengthen your brand communications please contact Gilles Guilbert on 020 8858 5100 for an informal discussion. Alternatively, email gg@indigocreative.co.uk