

Say What?

BY TOM SEPANSKI

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Let's start with an exercise: Your brand orders the filet at a steakhouse. When the expensive steak arrives overcooked, how would your brand send it back? How do you want the chef to feel? There are even tougher questions to ask of your brand: How would it propose marriage? What names would it consider if it had a baby girl? If you're not sure, then you might not be as familiar with your brand as you think.

Today's brands are engaging with customers more often and more quickly than ever before. They must react in an instant, and do so in an authentic way. To do so effectively, they have to have a strong sense of personality.

How to avoid three unspeakable verbal identities.

Every word attached to your brand—whether it's a product name you trademark or a tweet you release instantly—is part of your verbal identity. Your corporate name and tagline—the way you organize and name your products, the strategic messages you choose, and the tonal decisions you make—are all part of how customers perceive you. If each element isn't thought out strategically, these cues can broadcast chaos.

In best practice, verbal identity turns words into positive points of connection with audiences. Working holistically with other expressions of your brand, verbal identity helps create stronger relationships.

Let's say it's the Harley-Davidson brand sending that steak back. There's a recognizable point-of-view and personality behind Harley-Davidson, so you can guess how it might interact in any situation. Think about how it names its motorcycles (Fat Boy, Electra Glide, Softail, Bad Boy, Street Bob, Rocker, Breakout) or how it speaks on social media.

Mindful of both its past and its future, holding onto its core but allowing some flexibility, Harley's verbal identity has helped the brand retain the trust of its core customer base while elevating the brand to iconic status with a much broader audience. That's more than just choosing words wisely; that's knowing who you are—your own persona and the words that go with it.

You might expect all of the perennial superbrands to have well-established verbal identities, but that's not necessarily the case. As a litmus test, try our exercise with your favorite (or least favorite) brand. Can you tell the difference between that brand and its competitors?

The truth is, for every Harley-Davidson there are a hundred brands that either do not recognize or cannot execute a well-developed verbal identity. They might have a great name or tagline, but their words don't work together to convey a real sense of self. They are left with accidental notes in their verbal identity. For those brands, words quickly become the opposite of a huge asset—they become an increasing concern.

Verbal identity is a brand loudspeaker that continually broadcasts the thinking (or lack thereof) behind every word choice a brand makes. It's like a conference-room phone that someone mistakenly thought was on mute. The rise of social media has only magnified the deleterious effects of the wrong word in the wrong place at the wrong time. Given how savvy, well researched, and motivated today's audiences are, an accidental verbal identity may be saying a lot more about your brand than you ever imagined.

Today's brands can't afford to be guided by a dusty set of guidelines. They have to have a strong sense of self. They should still aim for consistency, but they also have to be agile enough to respond to their customers on-the-fly and engage in authentic ways. Companies should take steps to avoid falling into the three 'unspeakable' accidental verbal identity traps that today's audiences can spot in an instant.

Trap No. 1: The corporate clone

Let's take a look at copy pulled from the websites of some leading global financial-services brands. Can you guess who's who?

“(A) is one of the world's premier providers of

wealth management, securities trading and sales, corporate finance and investment banking services. Working with our clients as strategic partners, we create and execute winning solutions... One of the world's leading financial management and advisory companies... More than 60,000 professionals in 40 countries... The world's leading corporations trust (A) to help them solve problems... For decades, we have pushed beyond the status quo."

"(B) is a leading global investment banking firm that provides a wide range of financial services to a substantial and diversified client base that includes corporations, financial institutions, governments and high-net-worth individuals... (B) maintains offices in all major financial centers around the world... Our clients' interests always come first... We have an uncompromising determination to achieve excellence."

"Together with a client-focused Investment Bank and a strong, well-diversified Global Asset Management business, (C) will expand our premier wealth management franchise and drive further growth across the Group... We uncompromisingly treat our reputation as our most valuable asset..."

Any ideas? Be honest. Did you even make it through the third one? In a field in which a trusted personality is paramount, not one voice stands out.

Brand positioning in the financial-services industry tends to emphasize portfolio, process, or people. Messages dutifully address preeminence, globality, integrity, and excellence. Names favor surnames or geographic cues. Tonalities range from verbose and jargony to professional and curt. This is the corporate-clone verbal identity, where word choices default to the industry standard.

Meanwhile, report after report trumpets that Millennials value authenticity, good citizenship, and personalized attention. People are consuming 'brandspeak' on more platforms than ever before. Today's brands must churn out words not only for print, radio, and television media, but also for websites, social-media accounts, apps, YouTube videos, memes, banner ads, and more. If authenticity, purpose and customization are the top brand priorities for the next generation of power consumers, then the sea of sameness will have to be upset.

BREAKING OUT OF THE MOLD

Discover your brand persona. Start *connecting* rather than simply communicating. Give your audiences something to relate to, a sense of humanity on the other end of the copy. Brand persona can turn

your positioning into a 'who.'

One source of sameness is brands being driven by similar generic brand attributes like 'confident,' 'expert,' and 'empowering.' Brand persona picks up where attributes leave off by asking whom your brand attributes are like. After all, you can be confident, expert, and empowering in many different ways. A news anchor can be confident, expert, and empowering. So can a mayor, a teacher, a director, or a coach. Yet each of these personas attempt to connect with audiences in very different ways.

It was the last of these—the coach—that helped New York Life Insurance Company turn industry-standard copy like this...

"Life insurance can help you make sure your family is provided for, your child's educational needs are taken care of, and that your children won't have to worry about their future."

...into a more emotional appeal to the audience:

"You don't want life insurance like you want a BMW. You need life insurance like you need the passenger-side airbag."

One of these examples tells you the facts you already know. It communicates. The other is a punch of personality, inspiring you to take action. It connects.

Writing with a persona is more akin to a role-playing exercise than a standards-compliance writing exercise. Teams are no longer writing 'for the brand.' They are writing 'as the coach' and bringing their own nuance to the role.

The coach persona translates to social media as well, creating connections with potential customers and driving New York Life's engagement score well above industry norms.

Trap No. 2: The channel chaser

A common mistake in verbal identity deployment is creating separate verbal strategies for different audiences and platforms. Brands that have disparate audiences quickly find themselves managing several brand voices. A schizophrenic verbal brand is more difficult for an audience to trust or connect with, and easy for them to ignore.

When teams think solely within specific channel conventions, it's easy to lose the essence of the brand itself—it winds up operating in places and with voices it has no permission from the audience to use. In social media, these discrepancies can be especially jarring.

IHOP has become a frequent offender on the popular Twitter account @BrandsSayingBae, which

patrols the web for “corporations speaking like teenagers.” While the majority of IHOP’s corporate communications sound like a cheerful hostess emphasizing family friendliness, its Twitter stream sounds like a teenage MTV devotee (e.g., Pancakes. Errybody got time fo’ dat). In a similar case of disconnect, Toshiba was undoubtedly targeting Millennials when it switched from its usual corporate tone...

Toshiba delivers technology and products remarkable for their innovation and artistry — contributing to a safer, more comfortable, more productive life.

... to this tweet:

Twerk as you work! The @Skullcandy speakers on our #Chromebook2 sound “simply spectacular.” Toshiba-us.co/wtaS5D

This kind of cringeworthy disconnect is becoming a frequent, visible blunder for many brands — and it’s becoming less and less acceptable.

WRITE FOR INTENT, NOT THE CHANNEL

Brands with strong verbal identities think about whom they are — and the intent of a piece of communication — before they think about the conventions of a channel. Instead of creating completely different voices for each channel, they develop different modes of the same persona.

Modes make the channel secondary to intent. By grounding voice modifications in the persona, teams no longer write for print, web, or Twitter — they write to teach, strategize, or empower. If new channels arise, teams must determine the appropriate intent and choose the corresponding mode. Modes ensure cohesion while allowing flexibility and adaptation.

Trap No. 3: The exquisite corpse

The exquisite corpse is a writing technique in which a number of writers or artists sequentially contribute to a body of words or images. Each contributor passes the work to the next, and each contributor sees only the piece that came immediately before. There’s no sense of the body of work as a whole, which leads to interesting results.

It’s a great teaching technique but not a great model for developing a verbal identity. Too frequently companies take on verbal-identity projects piecemeal. A name here... a tagline there... and social media messaging next week.

The larger the company the more likely it is that it’s developing a fragmented verbal identity. Take one

leading wireless and Internet provider. While it claims to be “ridiculously innovative,” its services are presented as a towering list of dry, technical terms: managed data service, content delivery, and mobility solutions.

It claims to be a company that is “anything but ordinary,” but its service letters are computer generated (an industry norm) and the brand has three vague taglines instead of one memorable one. Because its verbal identity is so massive and fractured by overlapping and conflicting messages, the brand is impenetrable and almost adversarial to customers. Pair this type of verbal identity with an experience that underperforms or customer service that doesn’t deliver, and it’s little wonder the brand has to rely on exclusive offers and lower prices to keep customers.

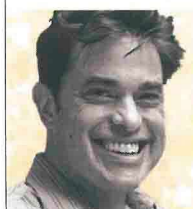
CRAFTING A COHESIVE VERBAL IDENTITY

The choices that go into selecting a corporate name should influence the choices that go into developing a persona, and vice versa. Think first of a megaphone, with your name at the starting point. Then think of nomenclature, messaging, and brand voice connected and cascading outward toward your audiences.

Brands can avoid becoming an exquisite corpse by appointing an owner of verbal identity and committing to the holistic management of the work. The creative elements go hand in hand with strategy. Every step of the way. This can only happen if a holistic verbal identity is embraced and supported by the leadership.

Verbal identity is an investment of time, resources, and budgets, but first and foremost it’s an investment of mindshare. That’s an investment brands have to make as the rules of engagement with audiences continue to evolve. Your brand needs to know who it is and the role it plays in people’s lives, and then it needs to make the verbal choices that are true to that persona.

Today’s brands can’t afford to be corporate clones, channel chasers, or exquisite corpses. They must prioritize their verbal identity and consider it holistically. They have to be poised for consistent strategy and agile execution, and realize that every piece of copy carries two messages: the topic itself and the unspoken things verbal choices say about the brand’s values. ■



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