



Brand Voice and Its Attributes M. Thomson

The practice of brand voice is coming into its own. Where the concept once drew a “come again?” it’s now getting a careful sounding by marketing managers and brand builders. Thanks to the work of high-fliers like JetBlue and Virgin Atlantic, and market-shapers like Accenture and Apple, voice has been showcased as a powerful way to augment awareness and differentiation in a proverbially noisy marketplace. As with any emerging discipline, the rules and roles of voice continue to resolve. Among today’s “how to get from here to there” questions: How do we translate a set of core brand attributes into an actionable tone-of-voice for guiding verbal communications such as nomenclature, messaging and copywriting?

From idea...

We work in the “psychological” moment of branding. As any initiate to a brand rollout learns - “like a person, a brand has a personality.” As an effective, and affective, tool for creating relationships, strong brands are personified. Just as the modern corporation is embodied as a personage under law, brands have developed as a way to express this inherent individuality. And, voice is a key marker for differentiating one from another.

Among a number of essentials - usually including positioning and often encompassing mission, vision and values - core attributes are the most emotive underpinnings of a brand. They bridge the strategic to the sensory, linking the categorical (what it is) to the characteristic (what it’s like). Brand attributes provide a powerful directive for how a brand demonstrates and distinguishes itself for key audiences. Among its outcomes are visual identity, establishing what the brand looks like, and brand voice, defining what it sounds like. In the form of logos and other distinguishing marks, visual identity has always been fundamental to branding. Brand voice is a newer entrant in the field. But, in a marketplace of unequalled verbosity, a brand without a defined voice is as much an empty set as a brand without a logo.

To implementation...

The progression from core brand attributes to brand voice is not a solitary one - positioning, values and other aspects of brand must also be reflected, and inflected, through voice. But, as the emotive center of brand, core attributes have a special and immediate impact on voice. They inform its primary function - the way that language is used to convey meaning, relevance and distinctiveness for the brand.

Getting from attributes to voice is a critical step on the CMO's to-do list. The process is one of interpretation and links directly to the idea of brand as persona. As a guide for communication, brand voice answers the question: How does the unique character of the brand come through in the content and tone of the words it uses? It is in the intuitively-guided translation of brand attributes into brand voice that the answer is found.

As shorthand for a multi-faceted process, the development of brand voice can be roughly delineated into two stages: Identification and Maturation.

Now: Identification. Whether it happens when the overall brand strategy is established or as a back-fill for brands that have never truly addressed their voice, a starting point for voice must be established. More than a list of definitions on a page, this requires a deep and almost introspective foray into the nuances of personality: If this is who we are, then what do we say and how do we sound? What is the mindset suggested by our brand attributes and how do we engender this mindset among our communicators? What are the goals, parameters, tools and resources we provide to them? What are the links we establish between voice and other core brand practices such as visual identity or brand behavior?

Always: Maturation. As with visual identity, the work of brand voice is constant, proceeding over time within the basic parameters established at the outset. This is more than a platitude. Each new communication is an opportunity not simply to execute but to expand the voice of the brand. Again, the operative analog is personality. Just as individual character is never truly set but develops over time, a brand's persona grows and adapts to changing contexts. As the primary method for articulating the brand's point of view, voice is a key locus for reflection and refinement over time. The converse renders the point even starker: Any name, tagline, copy or other verbal element not addressed within the broader context of a maturing brand voice is an opportunity lost.

This "now and always" nature of brand voice development means that neither the idea nor the implementation can be truly or comprehensively "summed up." They can only be indicated as a way forward. It is up to the brand manager and her team of voice professionals to pursue that path to the optimal benefit of the brand. At any given moment, the measure of success to-date - as well as the stimulus to continue the conversation - is a brand voice that is as unmistakable as it is unforgettable.