

WAG the TAGLINE

The rhetoric of brand messaging

by Eric Swartz



The news proclaiming the demise of the tagline has been greatly exaggerated. As a matter of fact, the tagline is alive and well — just grossly under-appreciated.

Admittedly, not all taglines shine. Many are vague, awkward, pretentious, complicated, or ambiguous. They communicate unintended messages, and are guilty of using trendy or meaningless business jargon. They often devalue the brand they're supposed to strengthen and support.

As tools of aggressive advertisers, taglines often exhibit the subtlety of an anvil. Novice marketers tend to use them indiscriminately as mere window dressing, and Internet sophisticates sneer at them as if they were quaint holdovers from the golden age of

television. Given the lack of product loyalty these days, one wonders whether consumers could care less if *"Bayer works wonders"* or *"Avis tries harder."*

IN PRAISE OF TAGLINES

Whether you like them or not, taglines still guide and influence consumer behavior, product preference, and company allegiance. They are, by far, one of the easiest and most effective ways to communicate a new or revised brand message. When properly applied, taglines can enhance the value and relevance of your brand, extend its reach, and give it renewed vigor. They can also be used to support pivotal objectives, such as launch-

ing a brand awareness campaign, differentiating a product line, or driving participation in an employee or third-party program.

A banner for all seasons, taglines confer marquee value on your central marketing message — putting the world on notice as to who you are, what you stand for, and why your customers should care. It's a tall order, but the proverbial tagline is up to the challenge.

THE HAIKU OF BRANDING

When conceived and crafted persuasively, a tagline can become an enduring symbol — elevating your brand message from the mundane to the memorable. Its task, though, is daunting: to distill the meaning of a corporate vision, competitive position, brand promise, product benefit, or customer experience into as few words as possible — less than seven or eight, optimally speaking.

In this sense, the tagline bears a striking resemblance to haiku, which reveals its insights metaphorically and intuitively in a highly compressed form. The tagline is also akin to a sculpture in the way it uncovers the essence of an idea after chiseling away all that is irrelevant.

Of course, the best thing about taglines is that they're not written in stone. They can easily be refreshed when internal and external pressures require a branding makeover. Within the constraints of this so-called nine-syllable novel, a kernel of truth (or myth) emerges that is often surprising, disarming, or uplifting.

FROM THE PRACTICAL TO THE PERSONAL

Taglines work their magic on a variety of levels. From a functional point of view, they can embrace your company's mission, purpose,

benefit, or competitive advantage (*"Works like a dream"* — Ambien; *"Built for the road ahead"* — Ford; *"Medicine with muscle"* — Motrin).

Taglines also can convey the essentials of brand character, revealing your core values and the consistent qualities expected from your brand (*"Raising the bar"* — Cingular; *"Pleasing people the world over"* — Holiday Inn; *"Taking care of business"* — Office Depot). Or they can align your company with a recognized class or category to give it added value and credibility (*"The most trusted name in news"* — CNN; *"We move the world"* — DHL; *"Babies are our business"* — Gerber).

Finally, taglines can focus on your audience's deeply-cherished needs and aspirations, promising personal fulfillment or the attainment of a desired goal or outcome (*"Will you be ready?"* — Cialis; *"Don't dream it. Drive it."* — Jaguar; *"It's everywhere you want to be."* — VISA).

Effective taglines work beneath the surface like a mantra,

gently nudging feelings and reinforcing opinions every time competing brands are weighed, measured, tested, and compared.

FOCUSING ON THE MESSAGE

Sadly, taglines are called upon to do the impossible, especially if they're forged in a creative vacuum unrelated to, and unsupported by, other marketing and branding activities. Creating a tagline without aligning it to your core marketing message or ongoing communications program is like taking a diet pill at the expense of proper nutrition and exercise. In sum, there's no such thing as a perfect tagline; rather, the true litmus test of a tagline's suitability is whether its message is clear, consistent, and compelling — and whether it is integral to your marketing objectives and overall brand strategy.

A tagline may only be the tip of the iceberg, but it can have a visible and lasting impact on your

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RHETORICAL GAMBITS OF

successful taglines

There's something highly subjective about how a tagline strikes you.

When its message, sound, and meaning work in harmony with each other, it has what branding strategists like to refer to as "legs." It tells a story that transcends commonplace experience. It forms a gestalt that's larger than the sum of its parts. The parts, however, can be dissected and examined. They are the building blocks of a tagline that make it artful, clever, and pleasurable. They are the rhetorical devices that amplify its meaning and crystallize its persuasive effect.

You'll fondly recall some of these devices from high school English class. Here is a brief sampling:

Alliteration:

The recurrence of initial consonant sounds, usually juxtaposed. Famously fresh (*Planter's Peanuts*)

Allusion:

A reference to a famous person or event. "The spirit of '76" (*Unocal*)

Analogy:

Compares two things that are alike for the purpose of explaining or clarifying some unfamiliar or difficult idea or object. "This is your brain. This is your brain on drugs." (*Partnership for a Drug-Free America*)

Antithesis:

Shows a contrasting relationship between two ideas by joining them together or juxtaposing them, often in parallel structure. "The toughest job you'll ever love" (*U.S. Peace Corps*)

Most definitions obtained from *A Glossary of Literary Terms and A Handbook of Rhetorical Devices* by Robert A. Harris.

Epizeuxis:

Repetition of one word, usually for emphasis. "For fast, fast, fast relief" (*Anacin*)

Hyperbole:

Deliberately exaggerates conditions for emphasis or effect. "I'd walk a mile for a camel" (*Camel Cigarettes*)

Inflection:

Alteration of the form, stress, or intonation of a word. "They're g-r-r-r-eat!" (*Kellogg's Frosted Flakes*)

Irony:

A mode of expression that conveys a reality different from, and usually opposite to, appearance or expectation. "With a name like Smucker's, it has to be good" (*Smucker's*)

Metaphor:

Compares two different things by speaking of one in terms of the other. Unlike a simile or analogy, a metaphor asserts that one thing IS another thing, not just like it. "The champagne of bottled beer" (*Miller High Life*)

Meter:

The rhythmic pattern that emerges when words are arranged in such a way that their stressed and unstressed syllables fall into an accented pattern. "The quicker picker-upper" (*Bounty*)

Metonymy: A form of metaphor in which a closely associated object is substituted for the object or idea in mind. "Take a bite out of crime" (*National Crime Prevention Council*)

Pleonasm:

Being redundant to express an idea, usually for emphasis. "Extinct is forever" (*Friends of the Animals*)

Assonance:

Similar vowel sounds repeated in successive or proximate words containing different consonants. "A silly millimeter longer" (*Chesterfield Cigarettes*)

Colloquialism:

An informal word or phrase of conversational language that brings color to everyday speech. "Wassup?" (*Budweiser*)

Diacoep:

The repetition of a word or phrase after an intervening word or phrase. "Always low prices. Always." (*Wal-Mart*)

Double meaning:

A figure of speech similar to the pun in which a phrase can be understood in either of two ways. "Take it all off" (*Noxzema*)

target audience. Given the short-term memory of a fickle marketplace, the tagline must rise above the din and clutter, vibrant and intact, like a battle cry or a flag waving in the breeze.

As an essential part of your branding arsenal, a tagline can serve as a sort of mnemonic, sky-writing device that slips inside your prospect's cloudy mind and pushes aside other conflicting messages. The successful tagline is one which communicates brand affinity — an ability to find common ground, stretch expectations, and appeal to basic needs for comfort, safety, assurance, excitement, love, acceptance, or, ultimately, self-actualization.

TEXT AND TEXTURE

We all know a good tagline when we see it, but what makes it great? Sure, it may be brief, clever, original, funny, ironic, simple, or elegant, but what makes it memorable? Apart from its ostensible message or promise, and the brand elements and benefits it reflects, I would like to focus on the ways in which a tagline's message is crafted and executed to determine the source of its attraction and appeal.

Like much of classic literature, commercial taglines and slogans are replete with rhetorical devices that their creators use, unwittingly or not, to give them a distinctive tone, image, style, and personality. After all, tagline development is all about wordsmithing — using the right words in the right combination at the right time for a desired effect. It requires being cognizant of the symbols, nuances, and associations they evoke, as well as the order and combination of sounds and images they conjure up.

Tagline development is a way of communicating both textual and textural meaning while, at the same time, strengthening the specific brand aspirations of an organization, product, or service.

SUMMARY

The art of tagline development is similar to the writing of a lyric for a melody. It must adhere to certain conventions and constraints prescribed by the brand in order to work in close harmony with it. Since brand messages can be expressed on several levels (e.g.,

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position, promise, benefit, differentiation, etc.), there is an expectation that taglines should multi-task. Although some taglines are better suited than others in assuming this burden, those that focus on a single brand message are generally more memorable and effective, and easier to grasp.

Serendipity does play a factor in the creative process. Whether you call it inspiration or the fortuitous collision of disparate ideas, it

usually occurs when impulse and intent coalesce to express a thought simply and effortlessly. Actually, this is how many rhetorical devices find their way into commercial taglines. For example, the person who created Apple Computer's tagline, "Think different," may not have been trying to intentionally break the rules of grammar (e.g., "think differently"). Most likely, it just came out that way, in the vernacular — and it sounded, well, different! The key thing is, its creator had the presence of mind to recognize the difference.

The crafting of a tagline's many variations and permutations is also an indispensable part of creative development. No matter how you slice it and dice it, you have to wag the tagline repeatedly until you hit upon the best way to express your message. And whether you're conscious of literary tropes or not, a punchy and persuasive tagline derives much of its individual artistry and fluidity from the way it is expressed rhetorically.

After all, where would RAID be if it didn't "kill bugs dead?" And where would we be if Yellow Pages didn't let our "fingers do the walking?" Oh, yeah, we've "come a long way, baby." 

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