

Mark Shaw

Copywriting

*Successful writing for design,
advertising, and marketing*

Second Edition

Writing for brand and marketing

We all know the world's best brands, and we all have our favorites. They speak to us, we understand them, we have valid expectations of them, and they rarely let us down. Brand identity shapes perceptions, and if these perceptions prove to be correct, a brand becomes a trusted part of our lives—the objective of all brand marketing strategies. A brand's use of language is its primary form of expression, and by controlling and managing a brand's voice you create the opportunity to build mutually beneficial, long-term relationships with customers.

Language is the brand's personality

Branding has come a long way since it involved burning a mark of identification on the hide of a cow. How language is utilized, how a brand's personality is presented, and the messages it projects are being given increasingly greater importance as markets become more crowded. It is the content, the copy, the unique message the brand delivers that counts today. Graphic design provides the **brand identity** and copywriting provides detail to the brand personality.

Many brands—both product and corporate—have made huge progress over the last decades through their use of graphic design and imagery, but so have consumers, who are now very brand-savvy. In today's saturated landscape everyone has a brand, but it is not always clear what the brand stands for. It is not enough just to have a smart identity. The brand copywriter must understand the brand's essence, its reason for existing, and explain this, with supporting information, using a voice that reflects the brand's characteristics and appeals to the target audience.

Organizations face growing competition all the time and, for many, a strong brand is the way to build **market share**. However, the opportunities to create future brand innovations purely through design expression are diminishing, and the shift toward delivering meaningful content consistently is the new battleground, where good copywriting comes into its own. This emphasis will increase, and as a brand and marketing copywriter you could find yourself playing a key role as the owner and guardian of the tone of voice of a client's brand.

“The more you engage with customers the clearer things become and the easier it is to determine what you should be doing.”

**John Russell, President,
Harley-Davidson**

The brand expression has to be ahead of its time

You have to give careful thought to every aspect of a brand's language and its tone of voice, because it mustn't chop and change to suit the mood of the day. This means thinking ahead about the market, the customer, and how things will evolve. You're not just looking at plans for the brand this year or next, but for the next five, ten, or more years.

Consider how the marketplace is likely to adapt and evolve over this time, and the role that your brand is going to play within this. How will its products and services adapt over time? There are no firm answers, but your aim is to allow enough freedom for the voice to evolve without needing to be redefined in the near future.

It's not enough to create a style and tone that suits the current conditions or reflects the company's heritage. This means taking a few chances in the short term in order to be strong in the future—the voice you create may need to move on a lot from where it is has been. The brand has to avoid being fashionable, but it must be forward-thinking. This means you must be prepared to craft messages and use a style that are ahead of their time, so that the brand tone of voice is still current in three or four years.

The challenge of rebranding or creating a new brand

What's in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet. Does it matter what the brand's name is, or is this the most important aspect?

It is unlikely that you will be given the brief to come up with the new corporate brand name for Nike or Coca-Cola, but you may be asked to create the name for a new range of sneakers or a new drink for these giants. You may also find yourself in the team that is repositioning a tired or unfocused business and everyone is looking at you, the copywriter, for the new name. If it were that simple everyone would be doing it. It's not easy, but there are a few useful techniques that you can learn.

*“A brand that captures your mind gains behavior.
A brand that captures your heart gains commitment.”*

Scott Talgo, brand strategist

Giving a name to an identity

Brand naming is a tough call. Where a lot of the challenges of copywriting require a number of language crafts and creative skills, creating a single name, a word, is anyone's game. Having the eye to know which will work well, and which won't, is not as easy as it might seem.

You develop your critical eye for assessing a brand name over time, and through experience, but no one can claim to have all the answers when it comes to backing a specific name, and there are always surprise hits and misses. Branding requires vision, and vision requires nerve and commitment. Naming a brand is like naming a new baby. At first the name can seem unfamiliar and possibly unsuitable, but very soon the child "owns" the name and the idea of giving the baby another name is unthinkable.

"It is a pretty recognizable brand name. Originally it was 'Jerry's Guide to the World Wide Web' but we settled on 'Yahoo.'"

Jerry Yang, founder of Yahoo

In most cases the word that is selected as the name for the new brand will seem strange. It doesn't exist on the shelves anywhere, and doesn't have the tangible nature of existing brands. You have to rely on your vision, and picture how the audience will respond, and how it could fit into its marketplace. If the graphics and market positioning have all been thought through and the new identity resonates with the audience, your brand will soon find its feet.

There are several routes to creating a shortlist of brand names. You could experiment with amalgamating industry terms or words to create a new hybrid name that has some relevance to the industry. You could trawl Latin and Greek dictionaries to find interesting words with good connotations. You can brainstorm your rough ideas with other creatives or business brains, pool the ideas, and see if you can come up with a couple of contenders.

Use a pencil to scribble down all of the possible words and relevant short phrases on a large sheet of paper. Try lots of routes, including looking up relevant words in dictionaries and thesauruses, searching on the Internet for other possibilities, and even making up entirely new words that have a good sound or feel to them. While you're doing this research, note any competing brands. Think laterally, play with the words and mix them around, keeping the brief in mind at all times, and establish whether hybrids can be formed. When you've exhausted this process have a break and return later to assess the words.

If you're lucky, one or two of the rough ideas will appeal to you, and you can draw up a very short list of serious contenders, supported by a second list of possibles. (You should keep the rest of your roughs to one side for future reference.) Otherwise, you'll have to repeat the brainstorming, and spread your net wider, looking for inspiration in other areas of life once the well of business language runs dry.

Next, pressure-test the words in the serious contenders list. Do any have double meanings? Could they be misinterpreted? Are they like any existing brands? Can they be spelled differently? What are the alternatives?

You'll then have a shortlist of top potential names, some second-division alternatives, and the "also-rans." It is worth prioritizing these as soon as possible and having two or three hot solutions that stand out confidently above the rest. Giving your client too much choice can be overwhelming and the poor ideas can water down your good ones. Never present ideas that you are not completely happy with, even if this pares down the options to the bone.



At first sight this powerful branding poster for the San Jose Music Festival appears to be simply a strong graphic image. Look again and you'll realize that the use of copy, or typography to be more

precise, is just as innovative. It's chopped up and the letters are in different weights, but despite its ambiguity you immediately know it says "Music in the Park." Simple and striking.

Interview: John Simmons, The Writer

Having been head of copy at Interbrand for many years, John Simmons, now at The Writer, has extensive experience of brand communications and tone-of-voice management. As well as training copywriters in the rigors of creative writing, he consults some of the world's largest corporations and a number of smaller outfits on how to utilize language to represent their organization clearly and build strong relationships with their audiences.

I work to a wide variety of briefs and still write a lot of copy myself. I think it's important as a writer not to get carried away with your own ability to use words, and remember that sometimes no copy is better, as words could detract from an image.

When you are aware that someone speaking is choosing words very carefully you will listen more intently, but you will tend to cut off those people who don't. I have recently been working on a brief for a series of 48-sheet billboard posters that convey the skill of the writer, and we don't allow the copy on each poster to be more than six words. Hemingway is credited with writing the shortest story in the world, using only six words: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn."

I have a big problem with management writing, and also with brand strategists who are allowed to put words on paper. They are not writers and usually choose the wrong ones. Brand people have an urge to fill every space, and tend to take a scientific rather than a creative approach, preferring to replicate other big brands than create something new. It's not so easy as that. The copy must define a brand in its essence.

It's important to use that part of the brain that you use yourself, relating to your reader as a human to a human. I put notes in a notebook, the things I want to keep and go back to. I write the first draft by hand and then type it up, editing it as I do so. I read the copy out to the client. I do this when I'm proud of copy and it works. It goes back to childhood. We all like listening to a story, rather than a PowerPoint presentation.

It is also important to maintain a consistent story across all expressions of the brand, globally. Guinness is in 150 countries and had been putting out different brand messages in each one. We rationalized this around the theme that Guinness reflects your inner strength, showing how Guinness helps them in a situation.

A recent copywriting and tone-of-voice project has been the cosmetics range ILA. It features

spas, products, and skincare with pure natural materials, which they describe as "beyond organic." The client, Denise, is an ex-nurse. She developed products for a client of hers who was "allergic to water"; this became The Himalayan Goddess Company, which we rebranded as ILA. Pentagram, with John Rushworth as partner, created the identity. There was no grand model, it was simply based around "purity."

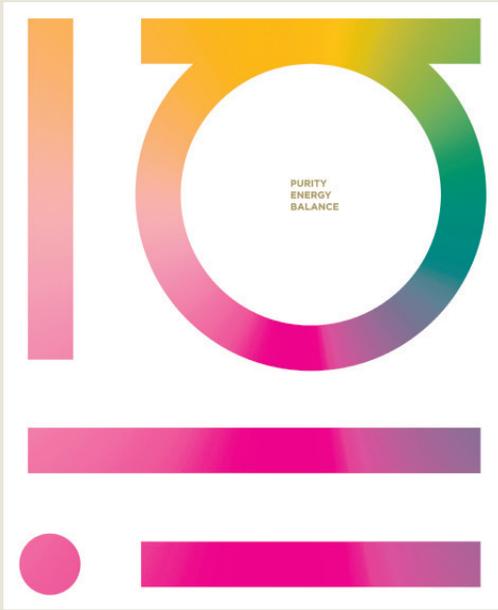
They required pack copy for a new range of products. The range was hardcore, drawing on ideas of vibrational energy from Vedic scriptures and involving chanting of mantras when making products. I was slightly skeptical at first. I aimed to get across what we felt was good in the range and broaden the market.

I began by researching ILA's story. As a writer you sense a company. It is vital to visit and get to know a business. How can you work if you've never met or spoken to its people? You'll probably not be true to its absolute essence. The key with ILA was going to the Cotswolds [England] to see where the products are made. Denise gave me a head massage and talked for three hours about her company and products. I just absorbed it all, the words and the atmosphere.

ILA is about essential oils, so their "essence" was even more vital than with other brands. I'm always skeptical about straplines, and instead I suggested we say "Purity, Energy, Balance." This came from John's original brand definition. ILA's tone is different to commercial companies, but shouldn't be too off-puttingly "spiritual."

I found out where the products came from, and the beliefs behind them: a blend of Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian thinking. Three ingredients are used: pink Himalayan salt crystals, argan oil, from the seeds of a tree only found in the Atlas mountains in Morocco, and Rose Damascene from Rajasthan in India.

When it came to the booklet, I started with the stories of the three ingredients (and the barn



PURITY
ENERGY
BALANCE

In the foothills of the Himalayas you will see slopes covered with Indian Rose Damascene with an exquisite smell. Here we found Pawan and his family, who have been growing and distilling roses for many generations while also supporting local rose farmers.

Pawan knows the soil, he knows the plants, and the way he tests their qualities is as natural as breathing. He smells the roses, knows the precise moment to pick them and use their petals for immediate distillation.



ROSE DAMASCENE FROM INDIA

IN THE FOOTHILLS OF THE HIMALAYAS, YOU WILL SEE SLOPES COVERED WITH INDIAN ROSE DAMASCENE WITH AN EXQUISITE SMELL. HERE WE FOUND PAWAN AND HIS FAMILY, WHO HAVE BEEN GROWING AND DISTILLING ROSES FOR MANY GENERATIONS WHILE ALSO SUPPORTING LOCAL ROSE FARMERS.

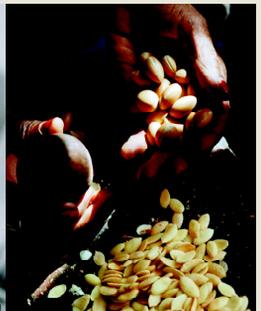
Pawan knows the soil, he knows the plants, and the way he tests their qualities is as natural as breathing. He smells the roses, knows the precise moment to pick them and use their petals for immediate distillation.



ARGAN OIL FROM MOROCCO

IN THE COASTAL MOUNTAINS OF MOROCCO, YOU WILL FIND ARGAN TREES. THESE TREES ARE USED TO PRODUCE ARGAN OIL, WHICH IS USED IN COSMETICS AND SKINCARE PRODUCTS.

Argan oil is a natural product that is used in cosmetics and skincare. It is known for its moisturizing and anti-aging properties.



“Keep saying to yourself ‘there’s always another way to write this.’”

where the company operates). I’d enjoyed listening to them, and thought, “well, if I like them others will too.” They worked well beside beautiful photographs of the ingredients being harvested and prepared at source. I was limited for space, and the designer wanted captions, but I said no as they wouldn’t have added anything. The introductory copy fires the imagination and the images, without any copy, let it go.

The ultimate role of the booklet is to sell, but we approach this in a subtle way, building brand values and letting customers discover benefits. The right tone of voice is about light touches. It’s more believable to say “known for centuries” instead of “will remove ...” ILA products are tested in high-tech laboratories but we don’t lead on this. We expect readers to take time to discover the qualities and benefits of the products because we know that the people we cater for will do this; the audience is women in their late 20s onward who shop in upmarket stores and on the Internet. They are attracted first by the emotion, the sensuousness of the approach; rationality confirms what emotions have decided.

I remembered the John Donne poem “At the round earth’s imagined corners,” using this as inspiration. We made the booklet square, with four “pegs” to the corners, Rajasthan, Kashmir, Morocco, and the Cotswolds. The theme was the love and care that goes into the products, the sense of discovery that accompanies them, and Phil Sayer’s beautiful photographs.

You have to find out about a company to inform your brief. I’ve recently been developing tone-of-voice and Internet copy for an accountancy firm that offers professional services to large businesses. Their brief to me is about defining their brand, and I was lucky enough to share the project with designer Angus Hyland of Pentagram.

When I met the senior client team they gave a PowerPoint presentation about how their brand was defined, but it was not to the essence, lacking

clear vision. They said “our people are different, and are encouraged to speak out on issues affecting the professional and the business world in general.”

Previously the copy on their website was dry, drudgy, with long sentences, no personality, and a bureaucratic, formal feel, which they knew didn’t represent them. I took on the roles of writer and brand consultant, writing some copy with the right feel, then breaking it down to determine what the values were, and checking to see if the new tone-of-voice definitions reflected these values.

The three values were “bold, clear, and positive” and I developed a three-part narrative structure: always start with something bold, develop the message with something clear, and work toward a positive conclusion. The next stage was to evolve a distinctive feel to the copy to set them apart from their competitors.

I presented this to a committee. You have to have principles behind your writing, and before presenting draft copy to the client I showed the tone-of-voice definitions, using only a few pages. It’s important to get full agreement and consensus from the start, because it makes it hard for them to disagree among themselves later. There is a large element of politics in this process. It was approved, and we also used the tone-of-voice and style guide to train their own people how to write and talk publicly on behalf of the company.

I always try to help provide the client with the eye and the ear to appreciate the copy. I let them read it and read it to them as well. The ear is the most important thing for a writer—the reader is listening to the words in their head.

My advice is to continually return to the brief you’ve been given, or the one you’ve formed, and be as objective as possible. Go with your instinct, use this as your guide to creating a natural feel, and hone the copy. Keep saying to yourself “there’s always another way to write this”—it’s part of the editing process. I do lots of alternatives for myself, but I don’t show them all.

Interview: Steve Manning, Igor International

Steve Manning is one of the US's leading brand-naming copywriters. After running a highly popular blog about brand naming, he launched Igor International where he is busy naming and shaping the identities of some of the most high-profile brands across every type of business.

I find the whole idea of work obnoxious, and I'm not qualified to do anything. I don't like work. I worked for many years as a film editor and cameraman for a travel channel in New York, but it had been a random choice, like everything else in my life. I decided I'd had a great time traveling the world, but I was going to make a complete change.

I sold everything and flew to San Francisco. I told the cab driver to "take me somewhere nice" and he took me to Sausalito, where I booked into the best hotel. After about 100 days the money ran out; I found work as a cab driver, which I did for three years. It was a truly horrible existence. It was a small town, but a guy from a big New York agency got in my cab regularly and we got to know each other. We talked, and he'd seen my press over the last five years. He told me that he owned an agency, and he asked me if I wanted to be an assistant in a new naming company.

The two of us started an agency that we called ahundredmonkeys.com—it was during the dotcom boom and we were getting a lot of work in. My boss was charging \$15,000 for a naming job. I was looking to earn more for myself, and I proposed to him that if I could sell the work in for \$20,000 I wanted 10 percent of the fee, for \$35,000 I wanted 15 percent, and so on, up to \$75,000 where the scale went up and I wanted 35 percent of the fee. He didn't believe that I had a chance, but he let me have a go.

The next time we quoted, the client accepted the price of \$75,000, and I got my bonus plus the lease on an Audi A8. It's a numbers game, and by sticking to it we know it will work. We don't mind if we miss out on work because of quoting a high fee. We lost a lot of clients, and many would ask if we could do it for cheaper and I'd say "no." A couple of hours later they'd invariably call back to hire us. They can't tell how to assess the fee—it's all about confidence.

Next, I started my own agency, called Igor, with my partner, Jay, who I'd met at art school. We don't have degrees, and we didn't have any money. We thought that if we kept adjusting our website, taking notes of our observations on how these changes affected our listing on Google, maybe we could crack the Google search-criteria code. Thousands of pages later we cracked it! There are books by professors on how to figure it out, and we've done it! It's given us a huge profile.

Our name needed to do so many things, and one word needed to capture so many ideas. The best names are the ones that are demonstrative of the qualities rather than being purely explanatory. Everyone said "Igor" won't work, no one will hire you. But a few years down the line we're working on the MTV downloading service, naming top hotels, and working for the Navy and Department of Defense. Igor says "hunchback grave robbers" to most people; a corporation would say this is a negative connotation. But I see us as the ultimate assistant. We chose to use Igor because we had to demonstrate we believed in turning around a negative connotation associated with a name.

The brand name Igor eliminates the need for advertising, PR, and sales calls. We get a ridiculous amount of press, because when journalists search our field they see lots of bland names and then spot Igor and think "this looks interesting." Also, we know that our clients are risk-tolerant if they have the nerve to recruit a company called Igor.

Our blog was critical of the war and of the Bush administration, and we had a surprise call from the Department of Defense. Two days later they came round and grilled us. We realized that they clearly wanted to hire us, but they were very creepy. I quoted them a month's time for their brief, fairly randomly, sending them a high price (\$55,000) to send them away, then we worked on projects to name the next generation of their command and control systems.

Finally, something truly sexy from Australia.

Australia is up for it.

Life's a blur.

Eyes wide open.

INTRODUCING AUSTRALIA'S LATEST ESCAPE

THE PRIMORDIAL SPIRIT

vodka australis

Dive in.

THINGS ARE A LITTLE DIFFERENT IN AUSTRALIA

Pure pleasure.

WICKED. GOOD.

CATCH A PIECE OF AUSTRALIA

EYES WIDE OPEN

SEDUCED BY THE DEVIL DOWN UNDER

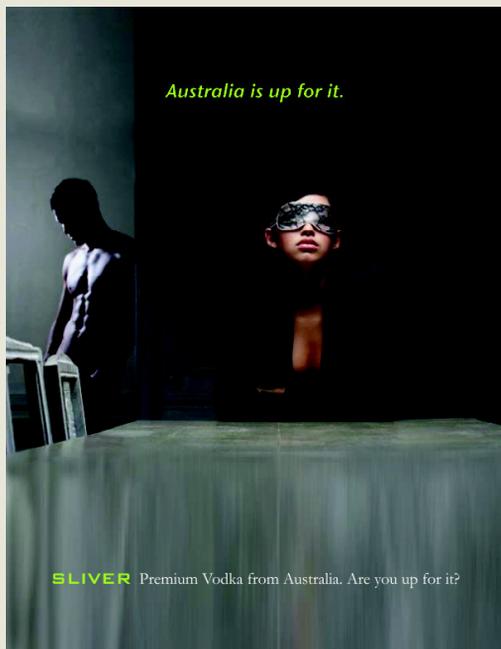
Sliver PREMIUM VODKA

SLIVER VODKA AUSTRALIS



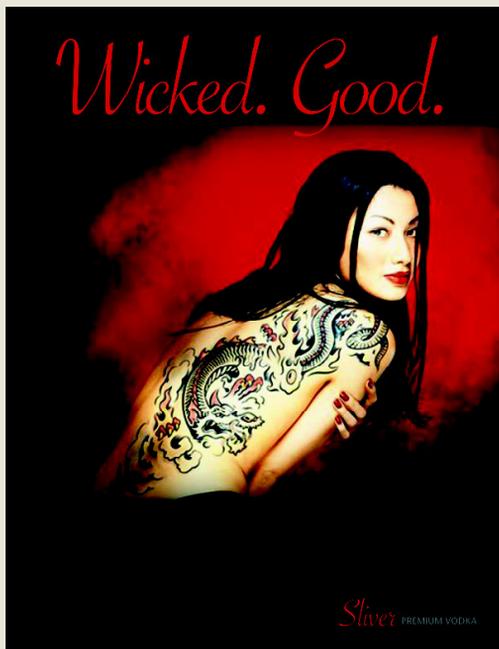
SLIVER

Premium Vodka from Australia. Pure pleasure.



Australia is up for it.

SLIVER Premium Vodka from Australia. Are you up for it?



Wicked. Good.

Sliver PREMIUM VODKA

“I never attempt to write anything over 100 words, because I specialize in brand naming.”

I never attempt to write anything over 100 words, because I specialize in brand naming. When we quote a price we provide a week-by-week breakdown of it, but this is all hoo-hah really. I named a hotel in Dubai for \$40,000, which took two weeks of naming, and I have just turned down a brief from a major corporation because they only wanted to pay \$35,000 and they said that we couldn't use the name we create for them in our portfolio. We e-mailed them back and said we were not interested.

A large organization that we didn't like too much approached us for a quotation for creating the name for a significant new brand. I didn't want the work, so I quoted \$150,000, and said I wouldn't look at it until they deposited \$75,000 in our account upfront. They said “no way,” but a few days later they called back. After they put the money in my account I took six weeks before I started the project, but they came back with new briefs a further six times.

If you're a company and you are launching a multi-billion initiative, you have to figure out which naming company to hire, so you approach three of the leading agencies. Two say they can do it for \$15,000, or \$10,000 if you'd want them to, and another says it's \$150,000 and we won't even think about it unless you deposit half in our account upfront. You're launching a multi-million dollar brand, so which naming agency are you going to choose?

When we sell it in we do several funks to help get the client dialled in, excited, and confident, and get them on board with the whole concept. A lot of people want to get their two cents in, but they are always critical and they don't know how to achieve their objective. I tell them to forget the name we're naming now and dissect existing brands. I take them through the top ten US brands—for example, looking at airlines. We agree that the name should say “experience, dependability, confidence, and professionalism.”

Something like “Transatlantic Air” would cause no problems. Then I reveal the Virgin Atlantic brand, and show that “virgin” says “never done this before, inexperienced, young, and naïve,” and how it is likely to offend Catholics. My client starts to understand they would never have created the names of the top ten US brands.

We critique them all, and then they collectively go “these are all good brand names, but we've got the wrong attitude—we would never choose these names.” We then present the leading five to seven proposed names and some basic visuals that we have created, that we call “contorted support,” which usually consists of about 15 print advertising treatments [see left].

Some think the availability of the dotcom name should lead the brand-naming process, and if it's not available not to use the name. Having the name.com is seen to carry cachet—it's the prize. Clients say they'd rather have the dotcom, but I don't see it as a priority; we didn't have the dot.com for Igor but that didn't stop us choosing it as our brand name. We show up in the top three when you search product naming, and that's what counts.

We show hundreds of options, and make sure that the client feels at the end of the project that they've examined every possibility. Clients keep checking dictionaries when considering the proposed brand names, but they have to realize that people—their audience—don't run to dictionaries every time they see a brand name that they don't understand. We have created the scientific name for new chemicals when we know nothing about it at the start.

A recent project was to brand a new vodka that costs \$50 a bottle. It had to be all natural, really sexy, with worldwide trademark availability (for any beverage, not just alcohol). We use online sites to search for trademark availability and always search a name before we show the client. The new brand is named Sliver.

Searching for availability

The rule of thumb is that if you create a brilliant brand name then it is bound to be registered somewhere. You have to be confident that the names you are presenting are unrestricted and at this point you must have the names checked (or check them yourself) for availability in the relevant **trademark** categories. This can initially be done via the Internet, and the searches can be free and quick. Try the following websites—US trademarks: www.uspto.gov; UK trademarks: www.ipo.gov.uk; international trademarks: www.wipo.int; European Union trademarks: www.oami.europa.eu. A full search for trademark availability should be carried out by experienced intellectual property lawyers before the client commits to the concept. This can be expensive, and should be quoted to the client upfront.

“Any damn fool can put on a deal, but it takes genius, faith, and perseverance to create a brand.”

David Ogilvy

Clients may use formal or informal **focus groups** to test your proposed brand names, and you will need to be strong-minded and diplomatic to manage these sessions so that they remain objective and focused. Set your proposed brand names in a clear, well-known font such as Helvetica and print them out in a large point size, one per page. Present them one at a time, and don't sell them in. The aim is to get a balanced and considered response to each name, one that you can use to guide your creative thinking. You may find new ideas within the research group, so listen intently—this is your target audience.

It's fine to use research to guide work, but never let the results make the decision. A few years ago the president of Renault ignored customer research rejecting a new car concept, and launched the Scenic, which became one of the bestsellers in Europe. Unfortunately, not every launch is so successful.

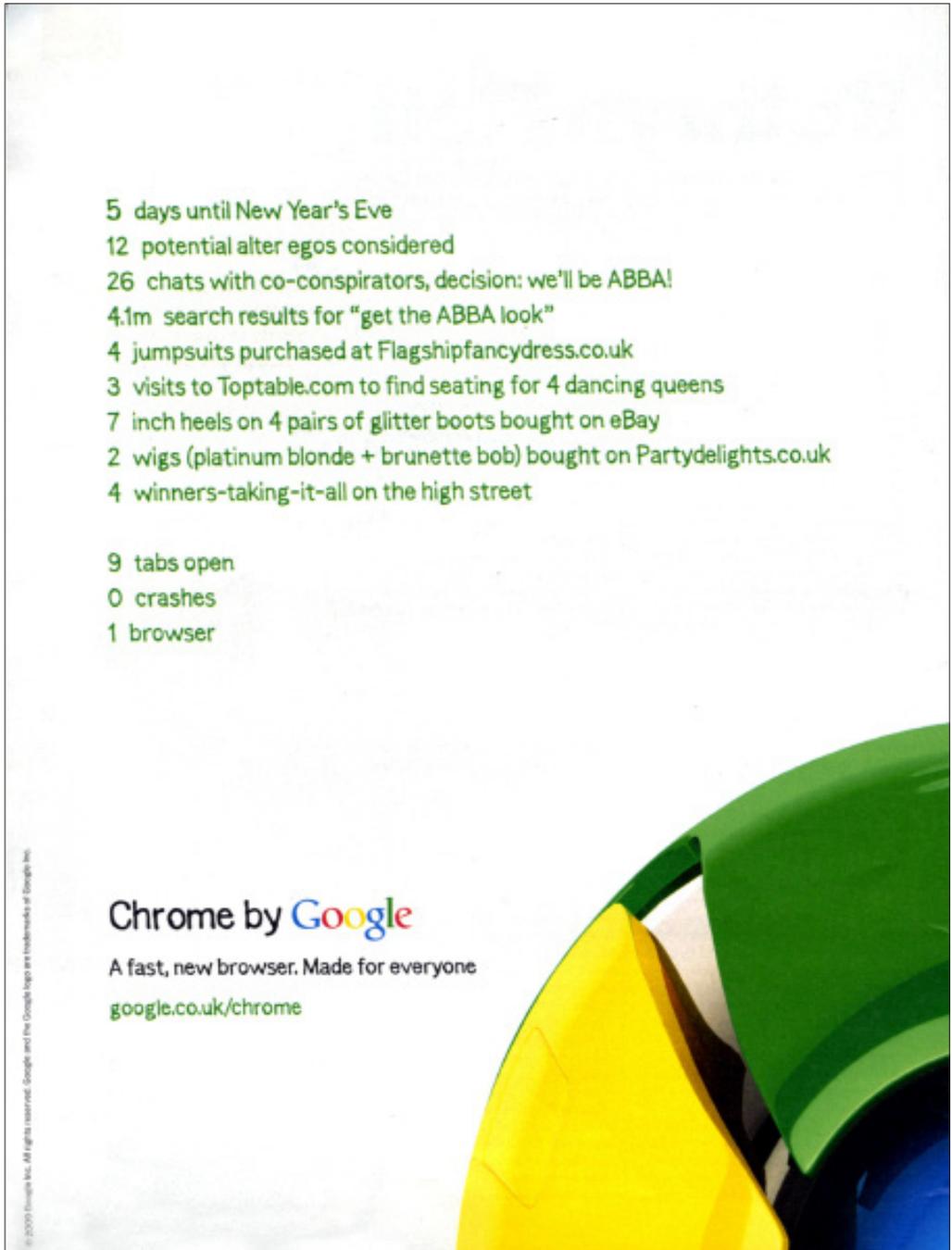
There are increasingly fewer words available for brand names and this is forcing creatives to come up with increasingly unusual solutions. This can be dangerous territory—there are rarely strong arguments for rebranding an existing business with a strange new name, as the brand equity that has been built up over many years can be lost overnight. It is much better to retain the existing brand name and refresh its personality in these cases. Entirely new names are more appropriate for start-up businesses or new groups.

Brand language is all about the big picture

Don't confuse your objectives for the overall use of language of a brand with your objectives when writing each specific piece of communication. The role of a brand's language is to communicate its core principles and messages clearly and consistently, so that every time customers have contact with the brand they receive the same impression of what the brand is all about. It's about long-term relationship management.

On the other hand, the writing you create for marketing activity and other creative communications is intended to promote something and generate a response from the audience, which is more about short-term promotion. While marketing campaigns come and go, the brand is ever-present. Both are vitally important and have to live alongside each other in harmony.

Most of the individual communications that you will write will have a short shelf life. A marketing brochure should have a shelf life of two years, but this is still a relatively short time compared to the lifespan of the brand itself. If the leaflet you're writing is being mailed out, or if your advertisement is appearing in the press, it will be an active piece of marketing material for only a matter of weeks. These communications tend to burn brightly but fizzle out quickly. Make sure you use the basic brand tone of voice, but be prepared to flex it to suit specific briefs, bringing more impact to direct marketing, and being more conceptual with advertising and more succinct with point of sale.



5 days until New Year's Eve
12 potential alter egos considered
26 chats with co-conspirators, decision: we'll be ABBA!
4.1m search results for "get the ABBA look"
4 jumpsuits purchased at Flagshipfancydress.co.uk
3 visits to Toptable.com to find seating for 4 dancing queens
7 inch heels on 4 pairs of glitter boots bought on eBay
2 wigs (platinum blonde + brunette bob) bought on Partydelights.co.uk
4 winners-taking-it-all on the high street

9 tabs open
0 crashes
1 browser

Chrome by Google
A fast, new browser. Made for everyone
google.co.uk/chrome

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This gives readers a sense of the journey they take when deciding how to entertain themselves, and how Chrome can help them rapidly move from ideas through to making things happen. It takes a bit of

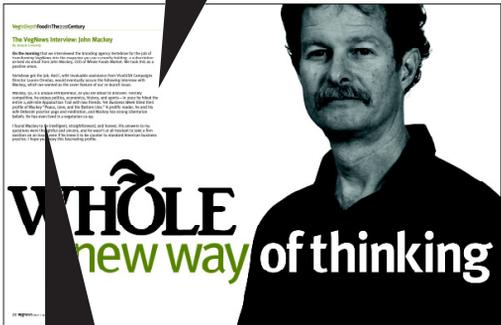
reading, and understanding, but your effort is rewarded with a summary of benefits.



Major news publications including the *New York Times* and *Fortune* magazine have run stories featuring several well-known lawyers who led the charge against the tobacco industry. Last June, these same attorneys held their “First Annual Conference on Legal Approaches to the Obesity Epidemic.”

No sooner had the proposed settlement been announced than questions arose about who would receive the money.

Mackey, 50, is a unique entrepreneur, as you are about to discover.



The case is being appealed, millions of dollars are at stake, and the outcome is in doubt. What's the story?

In 2002 he hiked the entire 2,168-mile Appalachian Trail with two friends. Yet *Business Week* titled their profile of Mackey “Peace, Love, and the Bottom Line.”

The subject matter presents challenges, which are handled with skill. *VegNews* has to support the vegetarian cause and reflect the views of the reader, yet must retain complete integrity and

avoid being perceived as biased. The approach taken is to keep body copy factual and objective, with a few light touches to steer readers and hold their interest.

Writing and managing a consistent voice within a client's overall brand communications require you to stand back and consider the personality being projected by the combined messages of the organization. For better or worse, they always reflect the personality of the organization. Bear in mind the heritage, performance, and vision (past, present, and future) of the brand and develop a tone of voice that will create a strong sense of credibility and build a lasting and positive relationship with the customer. This is not necessarily about fabulous creative writing, it is about the appropriate and controlled use of fresh and inspiring language. The overall look and feel of your brand messages may not dazzle in their intensity, but they will cast a strong light across a wide area.

The elements within the mix of a brand's communications, from the website and company brochures to advertising and promotional messages, target diverse audiences and may well be generated by different teams or individuals. Each of these writers will be taking contrasting approaches to their copy. Controls are needed to manage the way everyone writes within an organization. These usually take the form of a restriction on who can generate high-profile copy, and training these writers to understand what is on-brand and off-brand in terms of tone of voice, use of language, and style of writing.

There are two key factors to consider: the correct tone of voice or personality that should be communicated across the organization; and the way that this is managed and controlled for maximum consistency without hampering creativity or ignoring the real needs of different target audiences.

“Economics is now about emotion and psychology.”
Professor Robert Shiller, Yale

Creating a brand tone-of-voice guide

Copywriting for effective brand communications centers on consistency, and there is enormous value in coordinating the messages that a client organization projects to the outside world. Achieve this and every piece of communication supports the others, backing up the core brand messages that lie at the heart of the business. This continual reinforcement—and lack of contradiction—builds credibility and trust, increasing the likelihood of customers buying into the products or services on offer.

Many organizations have a brand design manual that provides templates, color and imagery guidance, and direction on how to make sure every item produced has the definitive brand “stamp.” The correct approach to copy is rarely included in these, partly because it is not often clearly defined and also because it is difficult to encapsulate, manage, and control the way copy is written within a large organization.

Your starting point for creating a tone-of-voice guide is to consider its role. Why produce a guide at all? How many different writers will be working on the brand in the next few years? Are they professional copywriters or in-house staff? What type of material will be produced? What are the core values that are being projected? Answer these questions and you will be able to build yourself a brief for the guide itself, knowing what its function is, who the audience is, and how the guide will be utilized.

Your audience will be the writers and managers who are working on the brand communications. They will need clear guidance that is easy to understand and makes sense. A crucial element is explaining when they must stick to the rules without fail and when they might be allowed to break free and use a more creative or unpredictable voice (which is sometimes allowed for creative advertising campaigns, for example). Be very clear about this from the start and you will have a better chance of controlling their approach.

Having determined the role of your tone-of-voice guide you will have an idea of the best approach to take. If it's a formal brand for a large organization and a number of writers will be working on it, a detailed document is most

“Your brand is created out of customer contact and the experience your customers have of you.”

Stelios Haji-Ioannou,
chairman, easyGroup

appropriate. If it is a younger brand, you may feel it is best to keep your guide short and sweet by focusing on the ideal language and the fun expressions that can be used. Whatever your approach, the tone of the guide should always reflect the tone of the brand. Most companies will have a written **mission statement** supported by some detail on attitude, values, and purpose. If these have not been defined you should try drafting some of your own so you have firm guidelines to follow and refer to. Studying these statements gives you the direction you need to create an effective and relevant tone-of-voice guide.

If the guide is too long and ponderous no one will refer to it; if it is too short and punchy it will be open to many different interpretations. You should aim for something that is between five and ten pages long, makes perfect sense, and gives the approved writers lots of support and guidance without taking away their freedom to create strong concepts and ideas.

Marketing communications are all about the audience

With the brand defined and the tone of voice being guided, you can now focus on delivering the marketing communications for your client. Your objective with any marketing communications activity is to reach your audience, attract their interest, and elicit a positive response. It's worth remembering a few of the basics. Short, clear words and simple sentences (depending to a certain extent on the audience and the nature of the marketing) are far more effective than complexity.

Clarity usually means simplicity, and while this is relatively straightforward to achieve by controlling the voice and style, you also have to have worthwhile things to say. You can't cover poor messages or lack of content with good technique, so be sure to understand the core of your message before you start. This means thinking through and researching your ideas and concepts, arguments, and logic.

If your material is weak it is up to you to strengthen it. Conducting original research to boost your raw material is a good way to discover a suitable creative angle. A compelling fact, revealing piece of information, or unusual insight can form the whole concept and help your finished communication to stand out.

Another important technique is to question your client. Simply tell the person from whom you're gathering the raw material that you need to ask a few "stupid" questions and then ask for clarification of the points that everyone assumes are understood. "What is your business really about?," "Why would the audience find this interesting?," "How is this better than the current products on the market?," and so on. This approach allows you to dig deeply into the brief in search of great selling messages.

Be clear about the role of each piece of marketing

The function of a brochure or leaflet dictates the approach you should take to writing it. Most marketing falls into two distinct categories: education (in healthcare, for example) and selling.

Brochures that are intended to educate the reader will require you to process all of the information without any ambiguity or error, and to structure the copy in the most logical way. Your titles and subtitles must guide the reader through the content and ensure that the information makes perfect sense.

By contrast, a brochure that is designed to sell a concept, service, or product needs to work a lot harder. Your copy has to be compelling, which means the reader can't help but read it because it is presenting information to them in a way they can't resist.

Elements of a brand tone-of-voice guide

Word bank

Create a collection of suitable words to be used in brand expression. Categorize them by sections within the business if necessary. Focus on the type of words that are preferred, for example “our people” rather than “employees,” and “our branches” rather than “our stores.” For a product brand it might include evocative words such as “sumptuous,” “delicious,” and “extravagant.”

Brand essence

Define the brand, its values and purpose, and the company’s mission statement. Why does this brand exist and what makes it unique? Don’t try too hard; simple statements of fact will do just fine.

Company dictionary

It is likely that the client organization has all sorts of words, phrases, and abbreviations that are unique to itself. There is no room for jargon in good copy, so set up a company dictionary that explains it all (not everyone will admit to not knowing all the jargon!) and gives the best alternative in plain English.

Brand hierarchy

There may be sub-brands—smaller brands within the business or different versions of the brand for different marketplaces. Show how they relate to each other, how the core values have to be the same, and how each can have some unique personality.

Sample copy

Having explained the best approaches, it is important to give clear examples, showing good copy and versions that are not acceptable. This has to be done for each defined part of the brand, including sub-brands. Cover enough ground to give examples of each type of copy, but only provide enough to make the point.



Strong copy sells strong coffee. Ritual Coffee focus their brand around the message “revolutionize your daily routine” and play with all sorts of provocative lines that stimulate some kind of a

response—even first thing in the morning. A great tone of voice, bursting with humor and attitude, drives this distinctive brand in a crowded market.

“A brand is a living entity—and it is enriched or undermined cumulatively over time, the product of a thousand small gestures.”

Michael Eisner, CEO, Disney

The distribution method is also a key consideration—the way in which it is being picked up or received by the audience will affect the way you write your headlines. Is it being sent to their homes? Are they supposed to pick it up in-store, or is it a leave-behind brochure to help with sales calls? A powerful, benefit-led headline is essential if the brochure is to be picked up in passing, but a gentler, more intriguing approach is more suitable for a brochure that is being given personally to the reader.

Not all of your readers will pore over every word, so cater for the skimmers too. If the only words that are read are the cover title, subtitles, and picture captions, the core messages must still come across effectively and completely. Test this by reading your headlines and picture captions, and consider adding a few highlighted quotes from the body copy to bring out other vital points. Link your copy to the imagery where you can so that the completed item is fully coherent and integrated, not the merging of two separate directions.

Staring into space—or getting on with it?

Creative writing for business is like any other form of creative writing—it can be slow, hard work and you may struggle to find inspiration. A copywriter hard at work may look like a normal person sitting at a desk staring out of the window. Exploring your head for ideas and chasing lines of thought does work, but this can be an interminable process, and one thing you won't have much of with a commercial brief is time.

Fear not the blank page, for writer's block is a myth, it does not exist. Writers get blocks only when they rely on inspiration springing into their minds out of thin air. You are not searching for a wonderful new concept for a novel, you're not grasping for the perfect emotional poetic resonance, and you're not a Hemingway or Burroughs living the life of a tortured writer. Not yet, anyway.

There is an efficient process for preparing and drafting copy that will help you focus on the ideal solution by breaking down a job into small, manageable tasks. Every copywriter will use different techniques; there is no definitively right or wrong way to approach the challenge. Your deadline is the most effective taskmaster. Don't leave things so late that you can't do a thorough job; do all of your preparation as early as possible and you'll give yourself every opportunity to deliver well-crafted copy on time. It always takes longer to write copy than you think, so start early and get the groundwork out of the way.

Brochures that cover many pages need proper planning in order to maintain balance throughout. Sketch a thumbnail page plan for yourself and allocate content accordingly. Consider the word count, and the spread and flow of information. You can keep it very short or opt for long copy—decide this before you start.

Bad brand names spell disaster

There are always new foreign brands (usually for products rather than companies) being highlighted online where the use of English just doesn't work, and these are a lot of fun. These include a Chinese chocolate bar called “Swine,” a Japanese mineral water called “Kolic,” and a Greek lemon-lime drink called “Zit.” These will keep cropping up, but you can learn from this by making sure you are being careful to understand the foreign interpretations of any new name you create, particularly if there is an international dimension involved. With instant translations online there is no excuse not to know the implications in the markets that your client will be operating in.

Of far more importance is the risk of renaming a corporate brand. How Powergen's choice of name for their new Italian operation—Powergenitalia—was approved is anyone's guess. It's worth looking at what a brand is before looking at what a brand name should be aiming to achieve. A brand is not a logo, it is a promise—that has to be delivered. I always describe brand as an experience and that a company's brand is anyone's experience of that organization, including how it looks and feels, how it presents itself in the media, and how it interacts with its employees and customers. My good friend, colleague at Liquid Agency, and international branding guru Marty Neumeier describes brand simply as "what people say about you after you've left the room."

Your brand is so much more than a name, just as you as a person are so much more than your name. But your name has a big role to play in the experience of your brand—not so much for the name itself, but for what people associate with it. In 1996 no one survived the crash of ValuJet Airlines Flight 592, a disaster that stopped the airline operating for months and created a negative brand impression. The name itself did not build confidence, it suggested a company that might be willing to cut costs and possibly cut corners to achieve this, and the crash gave everyone a sense of nervousness about flying with them. They solved this problem in a single move by buying a smaller competitor and adopting its name—AirTran Airways. By the end of that year customers were flying ValuJet again, under the new brand identity.

Opinions vary, but it is generally felt that Datsun was a powerful leading car brand in the US but that Nissan is seen to be an also-ran, and that Kentucky Fried Chicken lost a lot of their strong brand identity when they renamed themselves KFC. These days, the power is with the customer not the organization, as shown when GAP changed the design of their logo and their customers boycotted the store until the old logo was restored.

Trying too hard is a route to disaster. Advertising can be eye-catching and fashionable because it never lasts for long, but a brand lives on, and on, and has to be rock solid. A famously bad rebranding exercise in the UK happened in 2003 when the Post Office decided it should be known as Consignia. The branding agency presented the name on the basis that: "It's got consign in it. It's got a link with insignia, so there is this kind of royalty thing in the back of one's mind. And there's this lovely dictionary definition of consign which is 'to entrust to the care of.' That goes right back to sustaining trust, which is very, very important." They also used three bread-roll shapes bearing words such as "ambition" and "scope," and claimed to bring together "the hard and soft aspects of the brand's desired positioning." From day one the media and public united in their disgust at this decision. It was boycotted by unions and reviled by customers. Even the new chairman, Allan Leighton, abhorred the brand name and pledged its demise, setting an instant deadline of 2004 for the brand's replacement—with Royal Mail.



Hammering home the brand tagline “ready, steady, yo!,” these marketing posters for the express service at YO! Sushi follow the theme of a “quickie,”

tempting the reader to be indulgent and spontaneous and have a fling at lunchtime, with a box of sushi. All good healthy fun.

Great copy makes the reader feel good

Here are a few tips on how to find the right voice for your copy:

1

Don't focus on your client, focus on the relevance of your messages to the reader. Instead of "We have been leading the field and are the biggest ..." use "As market leaders, we know how to give you ..."

2

Don't chat to them—95 percent of the body copy should be clear, well-structured information that highlights the benefits to the reader.

3

Use short, clear words and sentence structures. Keep to the point—don't editorialize or pontificate by adding your own thoughts or reflecting on the implications of the points you are making.

4

Keep the creative concept to the headlines and your opening and closing paragraphs (top and tail).

5

Work with the designer to share the creative concept. Be prepared to let the design imagery dominate the message, or to lead with your copy concept.

6

Write for one person. The print run may be seven million but only one person reads your copy at a time. Stay relaxed and friendly, and maintain a consistent tone of voice.

7

Instead of sitting thinking about the best approach just get on with it. You'll cut out your early attempts and fine tune the whole thing, so give yourself some material to work with.

Techniques for preparing and processing copy

1. Gather as much raw material as you can, conduct some research of your own, and then gather it all together.
2. Read the brief again, and then reread your raw material, looking for patterns, common themes, or connections.
3. Build your working notes. Lift off the key facts, figures, details, and arguments from the raw material and make very concise but full notes for yourself. This should be no more than a few sheets of paper, depending on the job.
4. Put away all of the raw material and reread your notes a few times. Immerse yourself in the content and go as far as you can to “take on” the mindset of the target audience.
5. Decide on the most logical structure for your body copy. Sketch a page plan for a brochure or leaflet. Group facts together so that your paragraphs are packed with good information. Decide what will stay and what will go.
6. Decide on the overall, compelling message, but don't try to crack the main creative line yet. Scribble down ideas and options, even poor ones. Then set up a new document on your computer.
7. Now sit down and put together a full first draft of your copy. Don't worry about the creative concepts, just turn your notes into coherent, logical, structured body copy.
8. Having immersed yourself so deeply in the job, it's now time to decide on the creative concept. Look back at your scribbles in the light of the structure of your text. Do they hold any water? You don't have to set the world on fire, you just need to create strong conceptual lines.



Exercise: creating a brand name

Choose a product that you like, something that you use fairly often. Create a basic brief based on this product, but without including its name or brand, by considering who the product was created for, why they would like it, and what makes it special or different from others. Your brief should be split into “target audience,” “core message,” and “point of difference.”

Your brief is to create a new brand name for a product entering the market to compete with the one you have chosen for this exercise. Study the information you’ve collated, and brainstorm possible names, searching in dictionaries and on the Internet, in books, and in the recesses of your mind. Scribble down all of your ideas.

Review your names, and shortlist the best ones and the possibles. Discard anything you don’t like. See if you can improve the shortlisted names, and select the one that you think will answer the brief in the best way.

Now take another look at the competition for the product you are branding, and see how well your new brand would compete in the marketplace.



Exercise: create a tone-of-voice guide

Select a prominent product or corporate brand and take a good look at the communications they produce. How does the copy work on their packs, or on their annual report? What does the website copy say about their brand? What impression of the brand is created by the communications they publish?

Your brief is to create a five-page tone-of-voice guide for the copywriters who work on the brand. Begin with a page plan along the following lines: summary of the brand, definition of the brand essence, company missions and goals, a summary of the principles behind the tone of voice, a basic word dictionary showing how language is used, a basic word bank showing suitable types of words, examples of good and bad copy, and any other information.

Analyze the tone of voice you are studying and determine the principles behind it. It might be “upbeat, informative, and fresh.” It’s up to you to define it. Under each of the headings listed above, draft a few sentences explaining the tone of voice.

Return to it later and imagine you are a copywriter about to use the tone-of-voice guide. If you knew nothing about the brand previously, would you be able to write on-brand by following the tone-of-voice guide?



Round-up

Graphic design provides the brand identity and copywriting provides detail for the brand personality.

The brand copywriter must understand the brand's essence, its reason for existing, and explain this.

It's not enough to create a style and tone that suits the current conditions or reflects the company's heritage.

Branding requires vision, and vision requires nerve and commitment.

Never present options that you are not completely happy with, even if this pares the selection down to the bone.

If you create a brilliant brand name then it is bound to be registered somewhere, so search for trademarks.

It's fine to use research to guide your work, but never let the results make the decision.

The role of a brand's language is to communicate its core principles and messages clearly and consistently.

Your objective with any marketing communications activity is to reach your audience, attract their interest, and elicit a positive response from them.

If your raw material is weak, it is up to you to strengthen it.

The function of a brochure or leaflet dictates the approach you should take to writing it.

A copywriter hard at work may look like a normal person sitting at a desk staring out of the window.

Fear not the blank page, for writer's block is a myth, it does not exist.

Every copywriter will use different techniques and there is no absolutely right or wrong way to approach the challenge.

Your deadline is your most effective taskmaster.

Bad brand names spell disaster.

The Objective:

create competitive advantage through branding

The owner and managing director of Envirotech Waste Services, David Birkett, met with Jonathan Sands, managing director of Elmwood, a design and branding agency that I worked for as a copywriter. The brief was to rebrand a sewerage processing plant. The client specialized in small- to medium-sized organic sewerage processing units for those not connected to the main sewers, and was trading across the UK's North Midlands.

David explained his business to Jonathan along the lines of "it's important that MDs of all businesses take care of their waste processing. If not, they can be personally liable for up to £20,000—this is serious shit." Jonathan briefed me that his idea was to call them "Serious" and that I should develop "serious" as the angle. I worked alongside a project manager and designer to build the brand.

The copy brief was to play around with the idea of "shit" and how to bring this to life and make it interesting, and not to be afraid of adding a bit of humor, of the saucy seaside postcards type, aiming to be "naughty but nice" but avoiding causing any offense. The team next to me in the studio had just been given a really glamorous brief for fashion retailer Marks & Spencer's lingerie, and all I could think was "why do you mock me oh Lord?"

The Approach:

*straight-talking and tons of bulls**t*

My motto is "make it interesting" because people remember what interests them. In *Information Anxiety*, Richard Saul Wurman says that people don't "forget" things, they just never remember them in the first place because they are too boring.

Everyone always wants to get involved, and great original ideas can become mixed in with other ideas. We have to find them and tell them apart from the bad ones, and this is an instinctive process that requires a lot of experience—it is all about spotting the interest.

Once I have formulated an idea I stress-test it, and optimize it. I get it down on paper in the optimum form of words. Once it has been through this process, the mechanical side of writing the copy is the easy bit. Once you get the thinking right, the words will come.

I love creating copy systems, where we can crank the handle and the solutions can just run and run. However, it requires care because if we fiddle with it, the house of cards can come tumbling down.

We only did one concept for Serious and there was no need to revise it, create alternatives, or develop second ideas. There was no conflict or drama.

The brand was not something to hide behind the scenes. The brand tagline ("It's serious **it") is basically a play on "it's shit," using asterisks to avoid offense. To fully express the brand, we painted the company's tankers brown and dressed the staff in brown uniforms. Unfortunately, some staff left, but others joined because they liked the brand image.

Once we got the theme right we could run with it. We did wordplays around the words "shit" and "it" and created a list of words and phrases that we could use. Our team loved the list, and we set them in the brand style and presented them to the client. He is a very conservative North Midlands businessman, but went with our ideas from the start. He had the courage to implement a radical idea.

The Result:

where there's muck there's brass

Serious is the clearest example I've ever seen of a brand, and its copy, paying off. The client's business made a lot more money after the rebrand and business is booming. There was no other marketing activity or additional spend on advertising, and turnover and profit has increased. The communications consisted of the brand, and the tankers—great big, shit-colored tankers driving around Macclesfield!

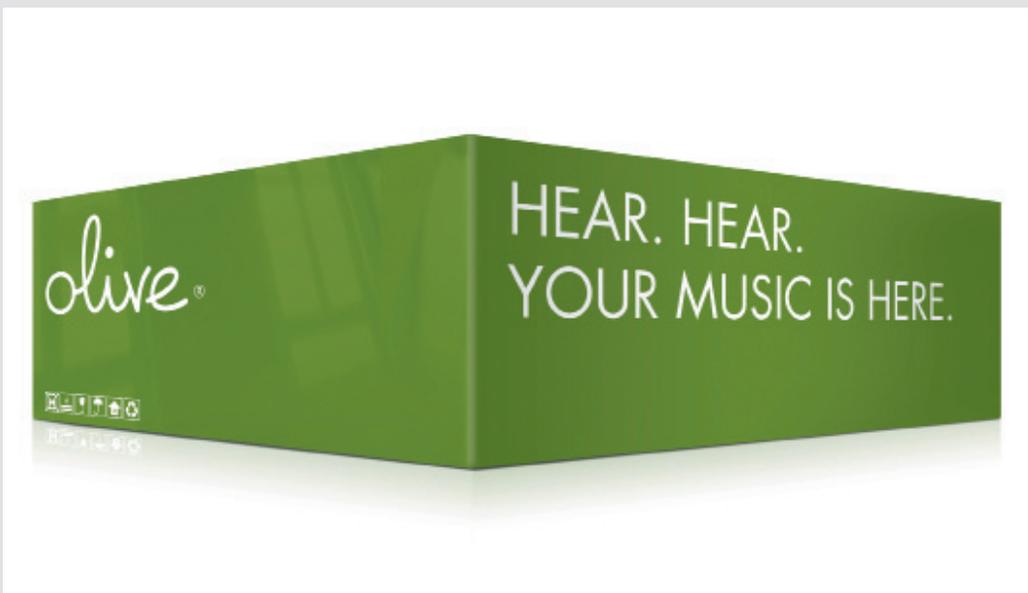
The brand did not so much come from an initial vision of the end result, it was built up in stages. Jonathan led with the "serious" theme, I developed the taglines and advertising lines, the designer brought it to life visually, and the project manager ensured the brand was implemented in the right places. It was very easy really.

Clients will often say "my manager might not like it" but in the case of Serious, David is in charge and has no shareholder opinions to worry about. Having one decision-maker in the process is the key to the successful use of language in brand communications. Trying to maintain creative ideas when the approval has to go through a board, committee, or middle-managers can be soul-destroying, and the writer usually has little influence or power in the process. Wherever possible I want to deal directly with the guy or girl who makes the final decision.

The quality I love the most in a client is the balls to go with an idea and not stamp out its originality. Some clients actively strip out language and ideas on the basis that it will offend someone, but I believe that if you don't risk offending, you will never interest anyone.

Case Study: Olive Media Products

Liquid Agency, San Jose, is a “branding farm” delivering brand strategy and execution. Founder Alfredo Muccino has 25 years experience in the field, mainly with technology companies in Silicon Valley, including Apple and Intel. He worked with a long-term client on the development of Olive, which offers the versatility of digital music management and the quality of high-definition files, doing a lot of the copywriting himself.



The Objective:

creating and launching a new product and company brand

A brand is the relationship you create with the consumer: how they feel about it, how it reflects on them. Technical companies tend to have a problem with communication. Engineers speak to engineers, but customers don't want to know how something works, they want to know what it will do for them.

The iPod gives you 1000 songs in your pocket—convenience and portability. It's an accepted way to digest music, but people are giving up on sound quality. Olive's founder is a technologist and audiophile. He combined his interests to develop a new system to store and play large, uncompressed files, retaining the original quality. It replaces hundreds of CDs, yet is a return to the idea of quality of experience. There is a truly remarkable difference in the sound it delivers.

We worked out the brief together. In Silicon Valley it can be informal: meetings were usually over lunch or dinner, sketching out the marketplace and the audience. At Liquid we have a formalized briefing process that includes discussion with the client to define the objective, in-depth evaluation of market landscapes, and audience profiling. We develop an idea of where we can take a brand and how we can differentiate it. The target audience here are "early adopters" who will pay a premium for the latest and greatest technology. We focused on audiophiles (competing with \$10,000 systems).

The Approach:

ensuring a strong, clear identity

The quickest way to create disappointment on these projects is not to clarify communication at the start, both for the agency and the client. Creatives are not always disciplined and we need to strike a balance between logic and magic.

The idea we developed is "save the sound," a call to arms protecting the quality musicians create. Naming can be complicated, as lots of names and URLs are registered. In the bar having martinis we came up with "Olive." The client's name is Oliver, so this was one connection. He had always admired Apple; this is a similar quirky approach, where the brand comes across seamlessly in each expression. We looked at lots of alternatives before settling on Olive, adding "Live Better" to highlight the quality of the experience and reference "live" with "Olive."

There was a lot of trust on both sides, enabling us to develop every aspect of the brand. On our small scale we were able to get every expression

right. Industrial design in this sector of music equipment is not sophisticated and we upped the level of design. The surface of the product is etched with jazz and opera symbols, subtly suggesting the range of music. It connects with people, and has a depth of design that the customer can discover.

The copy we use is crucial, and it's the little things that make the difference. When you buy an Olive system, you send your CDs to Olive and they load them up, so on the box we say "hear, hear, your music is here." The copy forms conversations with the customer—on a one-to-one. The brand is friendly and approachable. A brand's relationship with a customer has certain expectations, including consistency. If it goes from informal to formal it can become confusing. Design uses a consistent color and typeface, and in the same way copy has to maintain a consistent tone and voice.

We needed names for Olive products. Starting with a long list, we settled on "Opus" for the key product. It has the "O" of Olive, is short, stands for a work of art, and has classical-music references. This represents both the product and the music the product enables. Other names we use for products include "Melody" and "Sinatra"—both have a music link and are obvious at some level. If Olive is the main trademark, we can then use names such as Melody—Olive Melody. Olive is all about music, and everything we do is connected to that ideal.

The Result:

a strong brand generating widespread interest

The brand connects on an intellectual and an emotional level and the press we've had has led to substantial sales. The first product was launched in September and by November sold over 1000 units. We did some clever marketing: American Express offered discounts to members, generating sales of 750 units in three days. We were watching the figures and getting excited as we sold one, then 10, then 50, then 80. We couldn't believe it reached 750!

Olive is only a couple of years old, yet enjoys more coverage than many larger companies. *Rolling Stone*, *Playboy*, *Business Week*, and the *New York Times* all requested information when Olive launched. As a firm it is incredibly small. It's super-efficient, with four to five people achieving these great results, showing the power of a strong brand. It is a good product with a good story. Music companies that create content are looking at Olive as a distribution channel; Time Warner is talking to us about creating high-definition music files. I'm very proud of it: I was trusted to build the brand and it's a major success.