

ARTICULATING YOUR BRAND'S PERSONALITY, VOICE & TONE

Hotsheets

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Do you suffer from BPD—brand personality disorder? Hip and ironic on one page, sweetly saccharine on the next? Articulating the essence of your brand can ensure that you are consistent in how you present your brand in all of your content, on the page, online and in social media.

DEFINING BRAND PERSONALITY, VOICE AND TONE

A brand's personality, voice and tone are creations of the brand team—whether that creation is deliberate or not. The content we choose to highlight, the design choices on page and online, the specific word choices in display and body copy, the types of columnists and contributors we feature, the editors and others who represent the brand publicly: all contribute to communicating brand personality, voice and tone to consumers.

LET'S START WITH VOICE AND TONE

Voice is the consistent, identifiable "sound" of a brand as "heard" through all of its communications. Voice should reflect the values of your brand. Tone is the attitude expressed through the voice. It may shift according to the audience, platform and message, but should still be consistent with your brand voice and values. So, for instance, you may define your voice as "Relevant, Credible and Constructive", and your tone as "Witty, Optimistic and Provocative."

KEEP IT TIGHT

When defining your voice and tone, limit the number of words you use to describe each to 3-5 key words. Be as specific as possible. If, for instance, your tone embraces humour, are you witty, sarcastic, goofy, corny? If your tone includes challenging accepted wisdom, are you provocative, incendiary, boundary-pushing, expansive, troll-like? It can be tempting to craft voice and tone guidelines that go on for pages—but the reality is that few employees will read or

remember lengthy voice and tone descriptions. Crystallize your voice and tone in a few specific words, though, and it will be relatively simple for staff to reference these descriptors when evaluating whether content is on brand or not.

SO WHAT ABOUT PERSONALITY?

It can be easier to grasp personality if you think of your brand as an actual person. In human terms, personality is defined as being comprised of appearance, intelligence, emotions, temperament, and character and moral traits. For a brand, personality is communicated through look and feel (appearance), the intellectual level to which the brand aims (intelligence), tone (emotions and temperament), and voice (character and moral traits). If your brand were a person, what would make it feel safe and secure? What would keep it awake at night? What would make it happy? What would make it angry?

THERE IS ROOM TO MOVE

As with humans, a brand's voice, tone and personality can shift slightly depending on the circumstances. So, for instance, your brand tone on Twitter may be a bit more playful than it is on your printed pages. Still, your consumer should be able to identify your brand as uniquely "you"—you shouldn't sound like a stand-up comedian on Twitter and a professor on the page.

HOW IS ALL OF THIS COMMUNICATED TO CONSUMERS?

While voice and tone are often considered largely as functions of words on the page (print or online), in fact, voice, tone and personality are communicated through many choices that go into creating a brand. A brand's colour palette, image choice, page layout (are you bright and airy or wordy and dense?), typography and other design choices all reflect personality, voice and tone. All copy on the page contributes to communicating personality, voice and tone—particularly display copy. Events connected to brands also communicate personality, voice and tone—and



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here, the choice of an event space, the music and even the smell of a room can enhance or detract from your overall brand image.

DOES THIS MEAN THAT ALL OF OUR WRITERS SHOULD SOUND THE SAME?

The simple answer is ‘no.’ There is room for the voices of individual writers to vary within your publications online or in print. But the treatment of that content—the display copy, the design on the page—should be consistent with the brand personality, voice and tone. As well, your choice of writer will be influenced by your brand personality, voice and tone: is a particular writer the kind of “friend” your consumer would expect your brand to affiliate with?

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Consumers choose brands that they are comfortable with—brands that appeal to how they view themselves and who and what they aspire to become. Once they have affiliated with a brand, they expect that brand to be consistent, that the brand will continue to be what they expect it to be. A lack of clarity about your brand personality, voice and tone can lead to unintentional shifts that risk alienating your audience.

KEEP IT SIMPLE—COMMUNICATE IT TO YOUR TEAM

Define your voice and tone in 3-5 key words each. (It can be helpful to match your “we are” words with 3-5 “we are not” words as well; for instance, we are “Witty, Optimistic and Provocative” and we are not “Sarcastic, Naïve and Incendiary.”) Craft your personality description in no more than a paragraph. Then work with your team to articulate the design choices that reflect that personality, voice and tone. With these building blocks, you will be able to create a brand guide that ensures your team delivers a consistent brand experience on all platforms.



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