

# Hear, and be heard

# Creating value through brand voice

## By Fell Gray

To be successful, brands need to create an emotional connection or build a relationship with their audiences. By now, most of us know this—but how to deliver on it is less obvious. After all, there are endless types of relationships, infinite ways to connect. The hard work is defining a relationship that is valuable to your brand.

How do you know what the right relationship for your brand is? How do you define the relationship and express your brand so that it delivers on that connection? What do you look for in response from your audiences to know you are successful? One effective way to answer those questions is through your brand voice.

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## What is brand voice anyway?

At a basic level, your voice is how you express your brand personality through writing style and creative approach to communication.

But its role goes beyond that. The way we speak is deeply connected to the way we behave. Don't believe it? Pick a simple sentence like, "How are you?" Now imagine it said three ways: with a warm smile, with a

creepy leer, or with a comforting pat on the back. Yep, voice is behavioral. And it evokes an emotional response. As your brand voice is expressed through communications, behaviors, and interactions, it shapes audiences' expectations of their relationship with your brand.

And this is really why you need to think of voice as a strategic asset—it is how you create an emotional connection to build a specific relationship with your audiences. It is central to your brand experience, coming to life in all forms of communication and shaping the very storytelling of your brand.

#### Finding your inspiration

Brands with compelling voices use their personality as the starting point. Your brand personality should truly align with your organization's culture and be rooted in your brand purpose. This gives you the critical foundation that ensures your voice is authentic.

But authenticity alone isn't enough. Your voice needs to hit that sweet spot between what is credible for your business and what's relevant to your audiences. So who are they, and what do you know about them? What is that key insight your competitors are missing that will enable you to play an important part in your audiences' world?

Once you have these two pieces—the genuine articulation of your personality and the meaningful role your brand can play for your audiences—you are narrowing in on your brand voice.

## Voice beyond writing

Why is brand voice not simply about the way you write? The answer lies more than ever in the space brands occupy in our lives. With the proliferation of choice—and the definitive end of one-way messaging from brand to audience—brands are increasingly like living beings we choose to spend time (and money) on.

As a brand's voice is consistently expressed, we will come to see them as the like-minded peer, trusted advisor, source of inspiration or whoever is coming throughout between the lines. We hear brands this way, we interact with them this way, and so it defines our relationship.

Voice cannot just live in advertising and marketing communications. It must be understood and brought to life through your entire organization. It must be woven through every experience, for your customers and employees. Each interaction should build on the last to not only ensure your expression is deeply immersive, but also highly efficient in building that unique relationship your brand can own.

And, as brands are getting smarter about engagement through content strategy, approaching voice this way has never been more important. Just ask yourself, where is your brand turning up in your audiences' lives? Is that brand behavior right for the relationship? Is the content you are providing (and curating) designed to deliver on the emotional connection that is most valuable for your brand?

## You're only as strong as what you can measure

The same technology that has brought your audiences rich conversation with your brand has also made it much easier for you to understand how best to connect with them.

As people, this is something we do every day—on a date, with a customer, at a party: evaluate the room, gauge the reaction, modulate how we're speaking or behaving.

Likewise, with a truly strategic approach to brand voice, you can define, then track, the emotional and behavioral responses of your audiences. This will help you understand whether your voice is delivering on the intended relationship. And with this input, you can measure and manage the strength of your relationships and the success of your brand experience. Evaluate, gauge, modulate.

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It's best to establish a baseline as you begin to develop your brand voice. Listen to your audiences and find out how they respond to you now. What do you have to build on and what do you need to change? Once you've put your new brand voice into practice, listen again. Do audiences find your voice relevant to their lives? Do they see your voice as consistent with your behaviors—through your employees, your products—and with their expectations of your brand? And, most importantly, do they respond with the feelings and actions that you have identified as valuable for your brand and business?

#### Diving in

Don't be afraid to take an unflinching look at the way you speak. Have you fallen into the trap of what's expected for the category? Do you have a "voice" that's merely simplifying jargon, providing only a series of tactics for copywriters? Many brand voice guidelines do basically that: document best practices for writing. But while best practices can free you from dense, dry content, by their definition, they're never differentiating. You can't build a unique relationship if you're taking pages from the same playbook as everyone else.

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It takes commitment to bring together an entire organization—across business units and functions, across markets and languages—and unify it with one voice. Brand voice done right is an adventure; it's not for the faint of heart—but oh, the payoff. You'll build an ownable presence for your brand, one rooted in your culture and your strategy, and, most importantly, the way you speak will create demonstrable value for your business.

#### BRAND VOICE: RULES OF THE ROAD

## 1. Know your assets

We see many brands with established personality attributes, but they haven't gone beyond that to establish their voice. Personality is an essential first step, but it doesn't give enough guidance for expression. Think of it this way—would you give designers three attributes and expect them to arrive at a consistent visual identity?

#### 2. Create in concert

The verbal, visual, and behavioral elements of your brand work together to form the experience. If developed in the context of each other, they will work powerfully and efficiently to achieve your strategic goals.

#### 3. Train and then train again

Guidelines are not finish lines. Learning how to express your brand voice will be an ongoing evolution for your teams. Consider the range of talent and experience across the entire organization and support them accordingly.

# 4. Find the line between consistency and rigidity

Make sure the tools you use are designed to educate and inspire. Take into account language and cultural variables across global markets—having a consistent voice does not always mean the same tactical execution.

#### 5. Measure and evolve

Make room in your thinking and your brand management process for a feedback loop from your audiences. And don't be afraid to pilot new ideas. It's a great way to engage customers, and it's ultimately more efficient.



## **Fell Gray**

Senior Director, Verbal Identity

As a Senior Director, Fell is the practice champion for brand voice and ideation. She leads the Verbal Identity work for Qualcomm, John Deere, MWV, and Avis Budget Group, among others. Fell believes that astute, insightful strategy is the springboard for brilliant creative. She is driven to find the language and behaviors that are fundamental to compelling brand experiences.

Prior to joining Interbrand, Fell worked at MKTG/US Concepts developing the strategy and creative concepts for integrated marketing platforms for consumer brands, including those within the Diageo, Nintendo, and Coty portfolios. Her experience includes brand communication, experiential marketing, social media, and shopper marketing.

She fell in love with writers and writing during her former professional life producing theater off-Broadway. At Playwrights Horizons, Fell developed and produced award-winning productions with playwrights such as Doug Wright, Craig Lucas, James Lapine, and Lynn Nottage. She graduated with distinction from Yale University with a bachelor's degree in Psychology.

