

# Voices Carry:

## Brand voice basics

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Interbrand



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## Brand voice basics

by Melinda Flores

### What is brand voice and why does it matter?

Marketers and branding professionals have long spoken of a brand's tone of voice. It's a phrase we all think we understand, but it lacks clarity: We can't say for sure what a brand's tone of voice consists of, but we know it when we see (or hear) it.

Where the definition trails off is where we pick up the trail, by keeping in mind that great brands are like people. They have personalities that remain steadfast in certain crucial ways without being inflexible or rigid—and brand voice is a more specific and useful way to convey a brand's personality and tell its story. Brand voice is similar to tone of voice, only modulated. Think of it as a customized verbal strategy that guides and defines the way an organization communicates its particular point of view.

Consider a musical analogy. Tone of voice is like the key you're playing in—G major, for instance. But that's where the guidance ends. You could be playing slow reggae, speed-addled punk, an exalted symphony or a children's ditty. Your lyrics might be about anything or nothing. And you can still be in G major. Tone of voice, similarly, offers little concrete guidance beyond a very general consistency.

Brand voice, on the other hand, is more like a complete score from which you and your team can play, a full-on arrangement of the "song" that is your brand. Done right, it has room built in for improvisation. And in addition to making sure we're all singing from the same songbook, brand voice is meant to make sure the song we're singing is the right one for our brand — one that appeals to all our audiences and one they're not going to get sick of hearing anytime soon.

Think of it this way: brand voice is a strategic tool to help everyone in your organization tell the story of your brand in a consistently compelling way.

But why does brand voice matter? Why do brands require a specific and useful way to tell a brand's story?

First, people currently interact with your brand in more venues and touchpoints than ever before. Second, more people are finding ways to speak back to your brand, and about your brand, through social media channels and other forums driven by the imperative of transparency. Finally, more brands are clamoring more loudly for the eyeballs, ears and consumer dollars of your potential audience. In short, it's loud out there.

### Crafting a strategic and ownable brand voice

In today's noisy marketplace, a strategic and ownable brand voice ensures that your brand is clearly heard, quickly recognized and easily remembered, through the din and above the clamor. Often that means employing voice tactics that go against the common wisdom of your competitive space.

For example, what other salad dressing lays claim to zest and zing the way Miracle Whip does? "We are Miracle Whip," the brand asserts. "And we will not tone it down." Miracle Whip's brand voice has the same tangy zip as the product, and works extra hard to send its message of differentiation: "We will not be quiet, try to blend in, disappear in the background, play second fiddle. When we're in a sandwich, a salad, a panini or crostini, you'll know it."

### Six rules of brand voice

#### 1. Your brand voice fundamentally defines your brand

It's an expression of the values that shape your organization—it best delivers the messages you're trying to send and shapes the perception of your brand not only through what you say but how you say it.

#### 2. Brand voice, like a singing or speaking voice, has a range

Your brand voice should span several registers, from whisper to shout. Consistency is not the same as sameness, and in order to remain consistently compelling, brand voice must adapt to different scenarios—mood, medium, and audience—to say the right words the right way at the right time.

#### 3. Brand voice is more than word choice

It's about syntax, structure, semantics, style. It's about sending your messages in the most clear and efficient way by evoking a style that matches what you're trying to say. That's why your brand voice works best with messaging as a complete communications toolkit.

Sometimes, though, differentiation can only be achieved by owning the clamor—as in the case of new efforts by the U.S. Army to shift traditional marketing broad reach dollars into social media. When asked about its strategy to have soldiers blog truthfully and sometimes negatively about their experience, Army CMO Bruce Jasurda, said: “For us, it’s been key that there is authenticity, that we are being totally honest... We are the ultimate considered purchase: you buy this product, you could lose your life.” Every organization could use a dose of the profound self-knowledge Jasurda advocates for the Army’s verbal approach. “The onus is on us,” he added, “to talk about it in a no-BS way.”

Like a distinct visual design that cuts through the chaos, a differentiated brand voice establishes the unique personality of your brand and builds deep emotional connections with your employees, shareholders and customers alike.

### Brand voice = strategic storytelling

What your customers are saying, if you can listen through the din, comes down to this: Tell me a story. Your story.

And a story well told is really a strategy. It’s a strategy for deploying words to create an effect. Good brands make an impact when they speak. A really good story can change people’s lives, and if enough people hear it, that story can change the world. Meaning your brand can change the world, in part, by telling a great story.

Take Ally Bank. Formed immediately after the depths of the banking crisis, Ally’s voice was built on three principles: “Talk straight. Do right. Be obviously better.” That story has served to differentiate Ally from its competitors in a largely tainted industry. Ally explains on the landing page of its website that “Being upfront means having nothing to hide.” In its space, as with the U.S. Army, people these days are demanding transparency and honesty—and those verbal assets are precisely what make Ally Bank an institution of choice.

How to sustain that kind of impact? Brand voice should be **flexible** enough to cross mediums, moods and audiences while remaining relevant at every touchpoint. For example, the earnestness you find on the Zappos website extends to all its touchpoints, including Facebook and Twitter. It is even evident in the more functional emails Zappos sends customers about shipping: “We’ve enclosed some tracking information, so you can follow your order from Zappos Fulfillment Centers to its final destination! It’s almost like being a superspy!” By making sure that committed voice is present everywhere you encounter the brand, Zappos keeps customers excited about shopping with them.

Your brand voice also needs to be **accessible**: clear to all who hear it and easy for anyone in your organization to use. As Gareth Hornberger, “the Levi’s guy,” tweeted, “@samplur I’m a fan of the 511’s and the Matchsticks... what about you? PS – I think I’ve been wearing the same pair of Levi’s for 8 months.” It’s exactly the kind of conversational and down-to-earth voice you’d expect from a brand that has recently rediscovered its roots and its devotion to working people.

Finally, when people say, “Tell me a story,” the subtext is, simply, “Inspire me.” That’s why your brand voice must be **inspirational** and exciting. Your language should drive behavior in the marketplace among customers. AT&T’s “Rethink Possible” campaign, centered around imaginative graphics and playful imagery, comes to life on its website through words like “Explore. Play. Discover.” Even touchpoints one might consider mundane are infused with the brand voice. When you go to make a payment with AT&T, you’re greeted with the idea of endless possibility: “You choose. Pay your bill using a checking or savings account, a credit or debit card, or in some cases, an AT&T gift card.” At every step, AT&T is working to bring its brand to life for consumers, because that keeps consumers coming back.

### 4. Brand voice creates a dialogue

Communication requires a response, and your brand voice brings value to that dialogue. It means you’re able to listen and respond in a way that brings your brand strategy to life.

### 5. Brand voice is key to internal brand engagement

Internal brand engagement means everyone’s on the same page, which is easy to do when you’re all speaking in one voice with one shared point of view. Your brand voice helps you deliver on your brand promise from the inside out.

### 6. A strong brand voice will evolve over time

Maintaining the consistency of your brand voice across the organization requires review, feedback and discussion: what’s working and what isn’t? By taking a descriptivist view, and stopping to re-evaluate your verbal strategy from time to time, you’ll strengthen your linguistic approach across the board.

Just as your language should inspire customers, it should also inspire your employees to embody the values and attributes of your brand. Brand voice can play a vital role in attracting and retaining your people. They in turn will be your greatest brand ambassadors. As Google explains on its Careers page, "Google is not a conventional company, and we don't intend to become one. True, we share attributes with the world's most successful organizations—a focus on innovation and smart business practices comes to mind—but even as we continue to grow, we're committed to retaining a small-company feel." This is the simple, straightforward language we've come to expect from Google, and it serves perfectly to rally both internal and external audiences behind the brand.

### How does it work?

Interbrand believes there are three phases to building a brand voice:

#### **1. Establishing your brand's personality**

Understanding the larger strategy of your brand—who you are, what you stand for and where you're going.

#### **2. Developing your brand voice**

Identifying communication tactics around viewpoint, structure, syntax and semantics, and mapping them to the brand personality.

#### **3. Socializing your brand voice**

Training internal teams on the brand voice and how to use it; providing additional as-needed verbal consultation on writing projects.

In addition, there are six rules of brand voice that shape our approach (*see sidebar*).

In the end, you will be judged on what you put out there. The way you speak—how you tell your story—is a key to making sure people are listening to what you have to say.



### **Melinda Flores**

Melinda Flores is Senior Creative Writer in the Verbal Identity Department at Interbrand New York. She is responsible for developing brand voice and messaging for a number of clients, as well as developing workshops to train writers and other brand ambassadors on how to use these verbal identity systems.

Melinda's ten years of writing experience—as a journalist, copywriter and even poet—empower her to recommend new and creative ways for clients to differentiate themselves in the marketplace through what they say and how they say it.

Paola Norambuena  
Senior Director, Head of Verbal Identity  
T: 212-798-7590  
Paola.norambuena@interbrand.com