

Daddy, Where Do Tag Lines Come From? What makes a tag powerful?

“I have only made this [letter] longer because I have not had the time to make it shorter.” Blaise Pascal

Mr. Pascal may just have well been talking about a tag line as a letter. Boiling a product or company brand down to a sort of corporate haiku of five or so memorable words can be a mind-bending task. Or it can happen in an instant; it's only a few words, after all. I was recently asked my opinion of a tag line that the president of a tech services company had agonized over, for weeks evidently. I gave him my frank opinion. Frustrated, he asked me what made one tag better than another and what might be the secret for creating a good one. Here's my perspective:

What's a tag line anyway?

The American Heritage Dictionary (4th Edition) says a tag line is an “often repeated phrase associated with an individual, organization, or commercial product; a slogan.” Okay, fair enough. But there are slogans and there are slogans. An ad campaign may have a tag line that summarizes the main idea in a few words. Or a company can have a tag line that communicates their brand promise. Two different things. For example, Accenture's current (very nice) ad campaign with Tiger Woods uses the tag “Go on. Be a tiger.” Their corporate tag line is “High performance. Delivered.” Burger King's corporate tag has been “Have it your way” since Ronald McDonald was an infant, but they've messed around with it in various campaigns over the years. All's fair in love and tag lines. And while we're talking burgers, remember “Where's the beef?” A classic tag line for a Wendy's campaign that sticks in the mind yet lasted less than a year (with a little extra lift from Walter Mondale's presidential campaign. Ah, memories.).

It's a rallying cry.

Because this is an opinion piece about brand building and to keep matters simple, we'll focus on brand taglines, rather than campaign tags, in fact, to simplify matters, let's not even call them “tag lines.” I prefer the term “rallying

cry,” because that’s exactly what a corporate or brand tag line is: the set of words that’s so pithy, everyone inside and outside the organization can remember it or—better yet—can’t forget it. It’s the phrase that summarizes your brand and no one else’s. A great tag line can help drive your company (“Just do it.”) A poor one is an opportunity lost.

The three qualities that make a good tag line, er, rallying cry.

As fun as great rallying cries can be, they carry some serious business weight. So it’s sensible to be clear about what’s important in a good one. Here are the three major criteria in order of importance:

#1: Meaningfulness: By *far* the most important quality of a good rallying cry. Which seems obvious, yet so many people get hung up on catchiness and brevity. To be effective, a tag line has to mean something of importance to your company and your audience. And the “something of importance” it means needs to set you apart from your competitors (or why bother?) What makes “Think different.” (Apple, of course) very good are the layers of meaning it holds that are so perfect for Apple’s brand. What makes it great is its brevity and catchiness, which by the way add to the layers of meaning. Rule of thumb: Say the most important single thing that makes you different.

#2: Catchiness: Catchiness is the magical quality that makes a rallying cry both instantly and eternally memorable. It’s what professional writers get paid big bucks for and researchers have such a tough time measuring, though it’s not impossible. Catchiness may be accomplished by what some people call “emotional bonding” or by odd word usage or musicality. It may also be aided by incorporating the company name into the rallying cry. Partners & Shevak/Wolf tested 19 tag lines that were part of successful, long-running advertising campaigns to determine how recognizable they were and how well consumers could link the tag lines to their brands. Turns out the five brands for which linkage was strongest included the product or advertiser’s name, while none of the bottom ten did. For example, State Farm’s rallying cry, “Like a good neighbor, State Farm is there” presented without “State Farm” in the phrase, still provoked nearly universal recall and linkage to the brand. On the other hand, BMW’s long-running tagline “The ultimate driving machine,” experienced 60 percent recognition, but only 11% knew it was BMW’s! But as tough as catchiness is to quantify, as Supreme Court Justice Stewart famously said about

pornography: “I know it when I see it.” Rule of thumb: Meaning first, catchiness second.

#3: Brevity: I've read some experts who believe a good rallying cry is no longer than five words, though I don't know what's special about that number. Rallying cries are short, by definition. How short? As short as possible, while retaining meaning and catchiness. Catchiness and brevity run pretty much arm-in-arm, but they're not the same thing. “Plop, plop. Fizz, fizz. Oh, what a relief it is.” isn't very brief as rallying cries go (ten words), but it's certainly catchy enough. Same thing with “When you care enough to send the very best” (nine words). If you're having trouble making a rallying cry that's brief, you may want to make sure you're not trying to say too much. Remember: a good rallying cry says a *single* important thing well. Rule of thumb: If you can make it shorter, do it. If you sacrifice meaning or catchiness, don't.

Tag Line Traps to Avoid

Before you lock and load on a new rallying cry, have you avoided the traps? Is your rallying cry: **In current use by others?** Check, seriously. **Me-too, bland or generic?** Better on-strategy and uncreative than off-strategy and very creative. **Industry Jargon?** “Trusted ePlatform Services.” OK, I'd trust you more if I knew what an ePlatform was. And by the way, do we ever need “trusted” in a rallying cry? Makes me wonder why I *wouldn't* trust you. **Prompt for a sarcastic or negative response?** “Behind you every step of the way.” Yeah, sure, waiting for me to screw up. **Pretentious?** Unisys – “Imagine it. Done.” I think this falls under “Meaningless,” too. **Negative?** “New Jersey – We'll win you over.” OK, maybe not overtly negative, but not exactly positive either. Corporate BS? “Meeting strategic challenges is our priority.” Let's not confuse a mission statement with a rallying cry. **Make you say “So what?” or “Ho-hum?”** How's this for a rallying cry for a bank – “Our people make the difference.” Wake me when it's over. **Complicated or clumsy?** “Solutions for building strong constituent relationships online.” Say that again? No, don't. **Meaningless?** Kyocera – The New Value Frontier. Gives new meaning to “meaningless,” doesn't it?