

Keeping taglines relevant

By Bala Shankar

“JUST do it” did it for Nike. “The choice of a new generation” ushered in scores of new generation consumers for Pepsi. That was the past. How much are taglines relevant in the new technology and communication age?

No marketing or advertising professional would advise you that the “tagline” that accompanies most logos have served their time. The question is as much about whether taglines as an effective marketing tool itself is dead as reinventing it in the context of other changes in marketing. Let us review some of these changes.

Media

The print media has long given way to digital media in many product categories. Hoardings have no portability. Visual media is not just a logo together with its sister, the tagline. It is more about personalities, experiences and images, all literally on our fingertips. Media is now “personal”.

Communication

There is now a plethora of avenues to communicate brand values and these can go beyond the three or four words in taglines. Personalised communication has afforded more space and breadth to take the core value message beyond the restricted four-word space. Communication is no more just between the brand marketer and the customer. It is now between customer and customer (social media), between brand owner’s associates and customer, independent critic or analyst and customer (for example travel industry) and even between employees and customers (social media again). With such an array of inbound information to the customer, both solicited and unsolicited, a brand stands on many legs, the tagline being only one.

Consumption defines the brand

This is an interesting concept. In the past, if a customer wished to buy an unfamiliar new brand, she would perhaps look for the advertisements (the tagline included), check with friends who may have used the brand or seek a trial opportunity. It is now fairly simple to reach out to a slew of online data that captures actual customer “experiences” (Tripadvisor or phone apps, for example). These ratings increasingly define your brand.

Time value

The dynamic nature of the online world means that your brand value and reputation are being continually evaluated, weighed, articulated, rated and modified by the multitude of customer experiences. This renders a static tagline meaningless (even if brand marketers change it every few years). The constant scrutiny is both a boon and a bane – boon because it can help you refine brand propositions in-situ and upgrade more dynamically, and bane because any faltered steps of brand mar-

keters come into the customer domain instantly and can affect brand image and purchase intention.

It is clear that the idea of a tagline needs a makeover. In fact, many brands such as Apple have dispensed with it. Minnows may not be able to do that as the brand strength has to have more pillars and the tagline is considered to be one.


Taglines are no longer about the English words they carry. I am not sure if anybody is so enamoured by phrases such as “ready for real business” or “connecting people” or “we educate leaders who make a difference in the world” or “because you are worth it” or “human energy” or “the pursuit of perfection” (these, by the way, belong to leading global brands, in case you are guessing) to consider a purchase. The fact that these could apply to any brand within the industry adds much to the confusion and can therefore be deemed a wasted opportunity. A tagline should ideally be used as a meaningful supplement to the brand values that the

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marketer wants to advocate, more so in the light of the diffused role of taglines.

Marketers need to ask themselves some serious questions, the most fundamental being, what do you want to convey? And more importantly, why? Framed differently, what do you want your customers to remember your brand distinctly as? It is a cardinal marketing principle that everything you do should fortify your differential position versus your competitors. There are four different tracks on which the tagline can be constructed – product or service, organisational core value, customer persona (or lifestyle or state of mind) and “theme” of transition (when the brand is being repositioned). Marketers could go a step further by linking the tagline to not just the product, but to esoteric values such as organisational spirit, social goal, collective strength of human resources or hybrid lines that encompass more than one facet.

It remains a great challenge to bring home such messages succinctly and with dynamic relevance. A picture is worth a thousand words, it is said. Perhaps pictures will replace the taglines in the new world order.

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