

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

Sunday, August 2, 2009

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

*“Each word in a Creative Brief should be treated as each word in a poem
— with that much care.”*

--Former President, FMCG Company

Does anyone read poetry any more? Many adults who did read poetry in school (where it was usually required) will readily admit that today they not only do not read poems, they avoid them: “Poetry—I just don’t get it.” But while most of us may avoid poetry, we still recall what makes poetry, well, poetry. It’s that alchemy of words chosen *precisely* for (1) what they mean—both their denotation, or commonly understood dictionary definition, and their connotation, or what they imply and for (2) how they sound. Like it or not, the language of good poetry is known for its insistence upon precision of word choice...and, according to our quoted colleague above, so should the language of our most important document for giving creative direction, the Creative Brief.

We couldn’t agree more. And this past week, while working as player-coaches for two JV clients and their three creative agencies, the incredible added-value of precise word choice in the Communication Strategy (you know, the Target, Benefit/Belief, and Reasons to Believe), which is the heart of any Creative Brief, came through to us again loud and clear. While not a single person ever mentioned poetry, virtually every person on the combined team was seeking the same outcomes: A Communication Strategy that was air-tight in its intended meaning and in how it sounded.

Getting to this kind of air-tightness is always challenging. Challenging because we never seem to devote the right amount of time to the articulation of our Creative Briefs. Challenging because we rarely gather together the right combination of talent—strategists and creatives—to do the articulating. And challenging, perhaps more than anything else, because we marketers have such a limited vocabulary, a vocabulary that is bloated with “fat” words (words that are patently imprecise and/or have multiple meanings).

Coming out of our experience this week, therefore, we would like to offer as our practical Boats & Helicopters for this week some of the techniques that *really* do work in overcoming the common “blockers and tacklers” that keep us from articulating an air-tight Communication Strategy or Creative Brief. And we hope you will review them each time you begin a work session with your collective teams—as a pilot would review a checklist before taking off!

BOATS & HELICOPTERS: Getting to a More Air-Tight Strategy

1. **Call people on their use of “fat” words; refuse to accept any.** When someone says that the benefit of our product is that it is “more effective,” insist that the team get down to the exact way(s) in which we are more effective. One fast way to do this is to jump to the source of this effectiveness (what we usually call the Reasons to Believe—that is, a clinical study, or a preference test, or an ingredient or design feature that is generally known to be superior to others). So, if for example, the source of our product’s “more effectiveness” is a study that shows we “relieve pain two times faster than current analgesics,” that language gets the team quickly to the intended meaning and a tighter articulation of our Communication Strategy benefit: “Our product works twice as fast as other pain relievers.”

By the way, here is our list of the 10 fattest strategy words (that we should purge from our vocabulary): **Quality, Powerful, Better/Best, Empowered, Complete, Efficacious/Effective, Performance, Outcomes, Control, and Active** (as in “Active Adults”).

2. **Directly ask the senior creative team members what they understand the meaning of the strategy words to be...and if they find them helpful in creative exploration.** For a long time now we have been advocating that our clients include senior creative team folks in their articulation of the Communication Strategy and Creative Brief documents. One obvious advantage to anyone who has ever included them is the noticeable improvement in the team’s overall vocabulary; experienced creatives have a number of languages to express denotations and connotations with. But, as we observed first-hand this past week, there is no substitute for getting the creative team’s *immediate* understanding of and reaction to the strategic language of our briefs. You can take this to the bank: they will **always** add value to our strategic expressions.
3. **When expressing an *emotional* need or benefit, demand that the team express it with “feeling.”** There is nothing more frustrating than a wasted argument about what is or isn’t an emotional need or benefit. Someone on the team suggests that we include an emotional benefit like, “The patient gets back to normal.” But expressed this way, it is not an emotional benefit—it’s a rational one: the patient gets back to normal-life function. If we really, really mean to express an emotional, higher-order benefit that may follow such a return to normal-life function, then we should consciously use the word *feeling* to say it: “The patient feels once again like she is a normal human being.” So often we hear marketers from all corners of the globe say something like, “Volvo owns the emotional benefit of safety.” No, Volvo pioneered the *functional* benefit of safer cars for families with design features other sedans lacked; over time, this

functional advantage may well have given the Volvo Brand a perceived ownership of the *emotional* aspect of that..."making parents feel more assured their families are safer in a Volvo." Start each articulation of an emotional need or benefit with the words "feel like" and you will be much better able to express the true emotion you're seeking.

- 4. Allow a short, but reasonable, time for the strategy to incubate.** Actually, we've found that the best way to allow for "language incubation" is to make sure all team members have the final Communication Strategy or Creative Brief in their hands no later than the next day after it was pulled together by the joint client-agency team. Then, within say another 24 hours, a smaller team should communicate via conference call and provide their "having slept on it" thoughts. But once again, whatever final-final wording changes ensure from this discussion, more than anything else the client must hear from the senior creative team: do they understand it, do they find it helpful, is it an even more precise articulation than before?

Give these simple, four steps a shot at your next client-agency Communication Strategy (or Creative Brief) building work session. You'll be amazed at how much more your strategic language will begin to resemble poetic language!

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