



Taglines That Work

Q: I'm launching a new concept and trying to decide on a tagline. What makes a tagline work?

A: Taglines are powerful communicators. The right tagline can attract attention to your concept, help position your brand, and make people remember you.

They're particularly important today. People's attention spans are at an all-time low, while the need for pithy lines is at an all-time high, thanks to the popularity of small screens on mobile devices, text-messaging etiquette, and character limits on social media profiles.

Popular taglines like Apple's "Think Different" and Nike's "Just Do It" are deceptively simple, but there's a solid strategy behind most great taglines. So let's break it down.

First, a definition: A tagline is a succinct phrase usually used with your name and logo that communicates a single, powerful brand message. For the purposes of this column, I'm going to also discuss theme lines, descriptors, jingles, and slogans, and refer to all of them as *taglines* (and save the distinctions between them for some other time).

Note that a tagline is not a mission statement or a generic description of your brand. It's also not a proverb, maxim, or employee rallying cry. Although some lines can be used for these purposes, you shouldn't start off your tagline development with these intentions. It's best to think of a tagline as a haiku—you know, those three-line Japanese poems with prescribed syllable counts. They're creative yet meaningful, conveying information in a highly condensed form, often metaphorically.

There are several different types of taglines:

1. Descriptive about the company. Some taglines convey the company mission, purpose, or scope. For example, Cotton: "The Fabric of Our Lives"; or Taco Bell: "Head for the Border."

2. Descriptive about the function of the offering. Some companies use taglines to communicate the benefit of their product or service, or their competitive advantage. For example, FedEx: "When it absolutely, positively has to be there overnight"; or Burger King: "Have It Your Way."

3. Persuasive. You can use a tagline to convey your brand character, values, or personality. For example, Mastercard: "Priceless"; or Outback Steakhouse: "No Rules, Just Right."

4. Provocative. Some taglines help position the brand by inviting a response from the customer or appealing to a specific target audience. For example, Volkswagen: "Drivers Wanted"; or McDonald's: "You Deserve a Break Today."

The type of tagline you should use depends on your marketing challenge. If you are a new company trying to establish brand awareness and trust, a company descriptor tagline might be the best approach. If you are introducing a new type of product or something unfamiliar, consider a product or service descriptor. Persuasive and provocative taglines, with more emotional appeals, tend to be useful when people may not perceive there to be big differences between brands. They're also helpful when you're trying to reposition or refresh your brand.

Taglines can be concrete or abstract, amusing or serious, declarative or questioning. There are no hard and fast rules. In fact, last year I conducted an analysis on the "Best-Loved Advertising Taglines" as determined by a panel of advertising executives convened by *Forbes* magazine. Looking at lines like BMW's "Ultimate Driving Machine" and American Express's "Don't Leave Home Without It," I couldn't find a common approach or clear pattern that distinguished the top 25 taglines. What makes a great tagline is more art than science.

But there are a few strategies that will make your tagline sing. First, be brief; target seven or eight words. As noted earlier, pithiness is handy when messaging real estate is limited and people take to scanning (versus reading) ads. Also, be differentiating. Don't simply describe your product category; call out what distinguishes your offering from your competitors'. And keep in mind that a tagline that uses a claim like "best," as in "the best subs in town," is not differentiating. Such an approach relies on superlatives that are pretty meaningless to today's savvy consumers.

Use your tagline consistently across different touch points (media advertising, in-store signage, Facebook page, employee uniforms, etc.) and over time. De Beers has used "A Diamond is Forever" since 1948. Think how memorable that line is!

Finally, design a tagline that complements your brand name. If your name is descriptive, like Phil's BBQ, use a tagline to inject some personality. If you have a more evocative name, like Rubicon, a descriptive tagline can help ground people's expectations.

This leads me to my last point. Bear in mind that a tagline is only a single piece of brand messaging. You can't expect it to convey multiple points about your brand, nor to make up for a poor name choice. The selection of a tagline should be considered in concert with your brand name, elevator pitch, brand strategy, advertising concepts, and visual design elements.

All of these brand elements should work together. And when they do, you'll pique people's interest in your concept and make an indelible impression in their minds. 