

Voice

Taglines Disrupted

By Denise Lee Yohn As media gets more social and consumer attention shortens, brand messaging needs to be more invitational than imperative.



The death of the tagline may be overstating the situation, but there's a growing school of thought that considers taglines as bygone marketing relics.

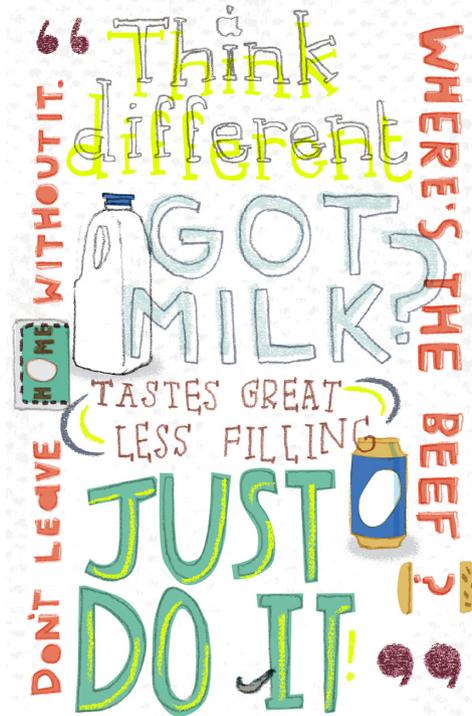
There's certainly evidence that taglines have diminished in importance. Many of the most admired brands—Starbucks, Whole Foods, Lululemon, Nordstrom—don't have them. Some brands whose taglines helped propel them to greatness no longer use them. Apple hasn't used "Think different" for years, and the sign-off to its most recent TV ads, "Designed by Apple in California," is less a tagline than a closing salutation.

Of The 100 Most Influential Taglines Since 1948, as listed by TaglineGuru.com, two-thirds ran before 1980. Half of Forbes' Best-Loved Advertising Taglines ran before 1975. While some may attribute these findings to a general decline in creativity in advertising over the last 30 years, it's not as clear and simple as that.

In the past, advertisers may have needed to summarize lengthy ad copy with a pithy phrase. But shorter attention spans have prompted a shortening of ad copy. There also seems to be fewer big-brand campaigns. Advertisers have realized that a targeted social media campaign or underground word of mouth can produce the same kind of impact, if not better, as a big anthem-esque TV spot or high-profile print campaign. So with fewer traditional big campaigns requiring them, taglines have diminished.

Taglines also now present some challenges for marketers. In today's media, the most common advertising real estate is a small mobile phone screen, and much of a brand's verbal messaging is constrained by a 140-character limit or six seconds of video. A tagline would dominate communication in these formats and crowd out the brand logo or the ad-specific message.

Moreover, companies are moving to flexible branding, in which they present different identities to express their range (Yahoo's 30 days of brand logos, for example) or a targeted brand strategy, in which they target specific brand messages to different audiences (e.g., Best Buy appeals to small businesses with Geek Squad, while it appeals to younger consumers with mobile offerings). A single brand tagline has less value in these more fluid and variable applications.



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Perhaps taglines' most significant limitation is inherent in their nature. An effective tagline helps a brand stand out in the customer's mind. As such, taglines work when a brand's differentiation is derived from a product attribute (Where's the beef?) or a unique benefit (Tastes great. Less filling). But most brands today are distinguished less by products and features and more by values and personalities. These differentiators can be difficult to convey succinctly.

So it's no wonder that some might declare the death of the tagline. But let's not be so quick to dismiss it. Taglines still serve an important purpose. They remain an easy and effective way to communicate a new or revised brand message.

The way we think about and use taglines needs to change. Carefully consider whether or not one is really needed. If your brand's differentiation is well-established, perhaps you don't. Think about the primary media and touch points in which it will be used. Do they lend themselves to the consistent use of a short phrase? If you're not going to use it regularly, don't bother having one.

Also the way we use taglines should shift from making declarative statements. In the '70s, American Express warned "Don't leave home without it," and in the '90s, Nike challenged us to "Just do it." But now, as cultural power shifts from corporations to consumers, it no longer seems appropriate for brands to be issuing imperatives.

In fact, Nike's vp of digital sport, Stefan Olander, recently said that the relationship between his company and customers has changed so much that Nike's legendary tagline almost no longer applies: "People now demand us not to say, 'Just do it.' They say, 'Help me just do it.'"

Ultimately, taglines that issue invitations appeal more to people's current connection-based sensibilities. Coca-Cola's "Open happiness" and Expedia's "Find yours" demonstrate the power of inclusion. Perhaps in this hyper social age, modern taglines can function not only as welcome signs, but highly concise mission statements as well.

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