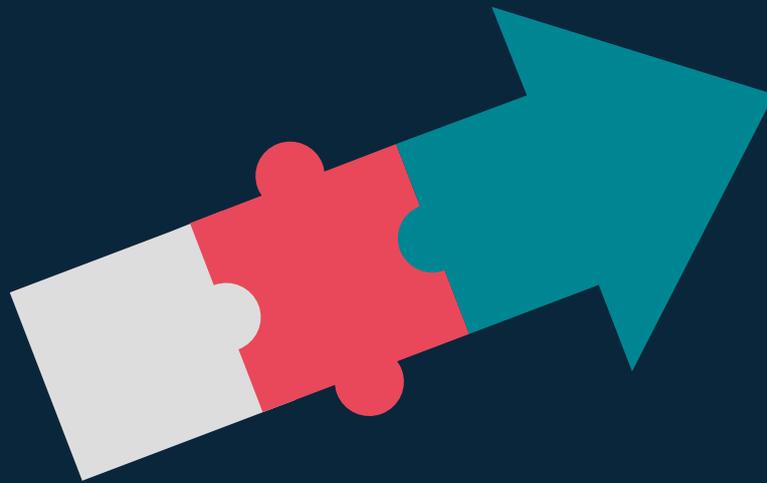


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ARTICLE

VERBAL BRAND IDENTITY: POSITIONING, ATTRACTING AND WINNING OVER

HOW TO DIFFERENTIATE YOURSELF IN
A TURBULENT TIME

Madrid, 24 April, 2020

VERBAL IDENTITY: THE BRIDGE BETWEEN STRATEGY AND COMMUNICATION

With the arrival of COVID-19 and while people lock themselves away in their homes out of fear for their own personal health and their loved ones, brands are regaining our attention. We are seeing similar initiatives and content emerge and overlap in attempts to tackle a major communication challenge. Never before has it been so easy to speak, and never before could the results have been so costly.

What can your brand do to build a solid commercial and reputational recovery?

In times such as these, we need to remember that our brand is much more than just a logo or simple advertising announcement: it is one of the company's most important strategic assets, responsible for building emotional relationships with people. Especially now, we yearn for a way to express authenticity and differentiate the brand so the organization's DNA can be conveyed, and connections built with stakeholders: **verbal identity**. A tool that employs linguistic and narrative techniques, empowering brands to tell their story and be perceived in a tangible and coherent manner.

Still the least well-known aspect of branding, verbal identity is the key to humanizing the brand and connecting it to its audiences. It is not "only" about doing and saying, but rather about knowing HOW to do it and say it. Because **having a communication strategy is as vitally important for dealing with any crisis, as is implementing that strategy while protecting, conveying and strengthening your brand identity.**

Has your brand built a verbal identity? If so, has it helped you more effectively respond to the challenges of COVID-19?

Answer these questions while considering the **four main components**:

1. VOICE TONE
2. BRAND MANIFESTO
3. MESSAGING MATRIX
4. NAMING SYSTEMS

“Still the least well-known aspect of branding, verbal identity is the key to humanizing the brand and connecting it to its audiences”



Can you imagine if Ikea used “Sir” and “Madam” to address you or if the Cirque du Soleil had no music during its performances? Can you imagine if Nike encouraged you to binge watch TV series during this confinement?

A fine example can be found in **Lowi**, a virtual mobile operator of Vodafone in Spain, which has such a strong and recognizable verbal identity that its teams and agencies consider it to be the guiding principle when building brand communications. Lowi’s tone of voice is based on cool, empathy, informal speech and fun, all cross-cutting concepts that are reflected in all its content and that highlight the “customer-centric” strategy implemented by the company. The most interesting thing is that, despite being a virtual brand, it does not only apply its tone of voice to advertising campaigns and its social media but also to all the brand’s points of contact - the welcome letter sent to customers, router, call center guidelines, etc. - to create a coherent and memorable brand experience.

That consistency in the use of its own language is precisely what has enabled it to stand out from other competitors in a market saturated with similar products, where brands become the main distinguishing feature for companies.

The tone of voice of the brand has enabled Lowi to launch campaigns such as this latest one during the COVID-19 situation focused on social media: “If you stay at home, we’ll stay with you”. Why? Because the brand has already built a personality that is perceived by its customers and that enables it to launch initiatives aimed at achieving engagement and strengthening its position without jeopardizing its legitimacy. In the campaign, Lowi identifies the social insights emerging from the crisis, such as sharing, balconies and messages of encouragement, and adapts its tone of voice to each social media.

1. VOICE TONE

This is the way in which we express what we want to communicate. It encompasses the verbal, visual and attitudinal aspects of the brand that express what the company is like. It manifests through WHAT IS SAID by the brand (values and personality traits) and through HOW IT IS SAID (words, structures, expressions, idiosyncrasies). A tone of voice guide contains all the linguistic resources needed to express the company’s attitude in any message, in any of the brand’s communication channels and consistently over time.



2. BRAND MANIFESTO

this is a key component because it consists of a public declaration of a company's intentions and the strategic pillars on which it is based. It is an inspiring, emotional and courageous piece of communication material because it reveals the commitment made to others by the brand (to society and/or its customers). It is a "war cry" through which the brand conveys its vision and seeks to mobilize internal and external audiences to join forces. To develop a brand manifesto, you need to consider the values, personality and attitude of your company and respond to the role it plays in society.

However, a brand manifesto is not enough on its own because it is merely one piece of a larger jigsaw for which it must be a perfect fit. Those brands that have a powerful manifesto are those that have successfully made themselves stand out from their competitors and unequivocally transmit a unique personality with which consumers identify. This is the case of **Estrella Galicia**, a Spanish brand of beers that seeks to be a "Love Brand": the most-loved brand.

“Those brands that have a powerful manifesto are those that have successfully made themselves stand out from their competitors and transmit a unique personality with which consumers identify”

Estrella Galicia has a well-built identity and has successfully identified and consistently held on to its distinguishing characteristics: authenticity, traditionality and Galician quality. A part of its success lies in its ability to distance itself from the inherent standardization in the market and differentiate itself from other strong beer brands. How? By looking after its product and by its vindicating and rowdy attitude. Estrella Galicia has perfectly enshrined this attitude and purpose in its brand manifesto.

Fragment from the Estrella Galicia Manifesto

Through its manifesto, the brand addresses those consumers who share its lifestyle philosophy. Unlike other companies that speak to everyone while running the risk of not mattering to anyone, Estrella Galicia takes courageous decisions. As the saying goes, "strategy is the art of sacrifice" and sacrifice is essential in a brand manifesto in order to make safe bets.



3. MESSAGING MATRIX

It will be key to illustrate the messages that the company should send with examples, guaranteeing communication that is in line with the brand identity and that generates recognition in the market. This matrix consists of standard messages aimed at training other people at the company and agencies to generate content while guaranteeing consistent communication. The success of any messaging matrix lies in knowing how to adapt tone of voice concepts to each communication channel and stakeholder group, because your brand should be flexible and capable of adapting itself to different audiences without losing its essence.

As an example of a brand whose global recognition can be largely attributed to its strong verbal identity, we have chosen Dove. In every country where it operates, this brand launches consistent messages centered around its concept of beauty: real beauty.

Dove's voice is one of a brand that encourages women to create a world in which beauty is a symbol of confidence, not frustration or concern. One of the keys to its success is based on the ability to consistently apply its unique and recognizable tone of voice regardless of the specific circumstances in question. The content and form of the messages used by the brand are undoubtedly the brand's insignia: uniform, positive, encouraging and focused on real beauty.

The fact that Dove not only has a well-built identity but also actively operates its brand in line with that identity has enabled it to achieve an indisputable market position. The brand has taken decisions, such as to stop using models in its campaigns and commit to training in order to improve the self-esteem of women and girls, that only further bolster its image.

Amid this Coronavirus crisis, Dove has launched its "Courage is beautiful" campaign to pay tribute to healthcare workers. This campaign seeks to stress that courage is beautiful and to continue challenging the aesthetic standards created by the media. Only a brand like Dove, which has built credibility and a unique space through its verbal identity, can launch such a campaign without seeming to be opportunistic.



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cslerE0578w&feature=emb_title

4. NAMING SYSTEMS

The set of names used for your brands, products, services, campaigns, hashtags, etc. says a lot about you to internal and external audiences. Have you ever thought about the ecosystem of your brand's *naming system*? Does it enhance your value promise? Is it coherent across the board? You will most likely find *naming systems* in different languages, classifications and appealing to different semantic territories. This merely distorts your brand image. Creating any naming system involves a strategic-creative exercise that considers multiple aspects and is so profoundly important that we will dedicate an entire paper to correctly cover this topic and explain the benefits of having guidelines on the creation of names.

What good is building a verbal identity?

The same examples we used before help us understand that only those brands that have built up a verbal identity over time can emerge stronger from moments of crisis.

A verbal identity will help us:

- 1. Position the company in the market** through consistent stories that unequivocally give life to the brand promise.
- 2. Attract, impact, convince and sell.** The way and manner in which the company addresses others is fundamental to creating an impact, being believable and connecting with others.
- 3. Create rules and guidelines** to enable and help teams generate content while guaranteeing brand coherence.



Everything described above are stimuli that will impact externally and, as a whole, will either strengthen the brand position or otherwise generate confusion and noise. **Defining a verbal identity guide will help you ensure your brand is perceived in the way you want, in line with its identity.**

Nonetheless, in spite of the good examples, we are seeing many brands during COVID-19 forget about their personality when venturing away from their usual communication environments. Their opportunity lies in the opposite, in highlighting the value of the brand. Because a generic, incomplete or inconsistent brand identity makes it very easy for consumers to miss the message or confuse it with the messages from other companies. As is the case with people, if we cease to convey what defines us as brands, we will cease to have any impact on others.

“If we cease to convey what defines us as brands, we will cease to have any impact on others”

In conclusion, if, after what you have read here, you would like to know whether your verbal identity is correctly defined, follow these three steps:

1. Conduct a review of recent actions and campaigns. Can you identify your brand's personality in them?
2. Look at the content of your online assets and replace the brand's visual components (logo, font, colors, etc.) with those of a competitor. Would anyone notice the difference between the two brands?
3. Conduct a small survey to reveal the health of your tone of voice. Does the perception expressed by the public about your brand match its personality?

If you have answered “NO” to any of these questions, you have a branding challenge ahead that will become an opportunity to strengthen your brand position once you have successfully dealt with it.



AUTHORS



Ana Folgueira. Executive Manager of the Creative Studio area. Ana Folgueira has a long-standing career in the field of communication. She holds a degree in economics from UAM and a master's degree in creative writing from the Escuela de Letras. She taught at university and worked for several years in venture capital, supervising investments and monitoring start-ups. She is the executive director of Creative Studio, as well as founder of Dreamtellers Foundation (presently LLYC Foundation) and has taken part in over 50 audiovisual storytelling projects for different organizations and companies, including BBVA, EY, Siemens Gamesa, Schindler, Coca-Cola and Campofrío.

afolgueira@llorentycuenca.com



Barbara Ruiz. Manager of the Branding area at LLYC. Specialized in the field of branding. She previously worked in different areas of different companies (finance, marketing and foreign trade) which allows her to adopt a holistic vision of brands understanding it as a promise of value that the whole company has to make real through the brand experience. She has taken part in strategic projects working in consulting firms for brands such as CaixaBank, LaLiga, Hitachi Cooling & Heating, Orange, Riu Hotels & Resorts, Foster's Hollywood, Licor 43, Pernod Ricard, Ron Barceló, among others. She has a Master's degree in Brand Management from MSMK, has studied at renowned universities such as Fordham University (New York, USA), Marquette University (Milwaukee), Johannes Kepler University (Linz, Austria) and Boston University (Boston, USA) as well as at ETEA (Córdoba, Spain) where she graduated in Business Administration.

bruiz@llorentycuenca.com

This article has been drafted in collaboration with **Valeria Rey**, Estudio Creativo Junior Consultor at LLYC.

MANAGEMENT TEAM

José Antonio Llorente
 Founding Partner and Chairman
 jalorente@llorenteycuenca.com

Alejandro Romero
 Partner and CEO Americas
 aromero@llorenteycuenca.com

Enrique González
 Partner and CFO
 egonzalez@llorenteycuenca.com

Adolfo Corujo
 Partner and Chief Strategy and
 Innovation Officer
 acorujo@llorenteycuenca.com

Nazaret Izquierdo
 Chief Talent Officer
 nizquierdo@llorenteycuenca.com

Cristina Ysasi-Ysasmendi
 Corporate Director
 cysasi@llorenteycuenca.com

Juan Pablo Ocaña
 Director, Legal & Compliance
 jpocana@llorenteycuenca.com

Daniel Fernández Trejo
 Senior Director, Technology
 dfernandez@llorenteycuenca.com

José Luis Di Girolamo
 Partner and Global Controller
 jldgirolamo@llorenteycuenca.com

Antonieta Mendoza de López
 Vice President, Advocacy LatAm
 amendozalopez@llorenteycuenca.com

SPAIN AND PORTUGAL

Arturo Pinedo
 Partner and Managing Director
 apinedo@llorenteycuenca.com

Luisa García
 Partner and Managing Director
 lgarcia@llorenteycuenca.com

Barcelona

María Cura
 Partner and Managing Director
 mcura@llorenteycuenca.com

Óscar Iniesta
 Partner and Senior Director
 oiniesta@llorenteycuenca.com

Muntaner, 240-242, 1º-1ª
 08021 Barcelona
 Tel. +34 93 217 22 17

Madrid

Joan Navarro
 Partner and Vicepresident,
 Public Affairs
 jnavarro@llorenteycuenca.com

Amalio Moratalla
 Partner and Senior Director,
 Sport and Business Strategy
 amoratalla@llorenteycuenca.com

Iván Pino
 Partner and Senior Director,
 Digital
 ipino@llorenteycuenca.com

David G. Natal
 Partner and Senior Director,
 Consumer Engagement
 dgonzalez@llorenteycuenca.com

Ana Folgueira
 Partner and Executive Manager
 of the Creative Studio
 afolgueira@llorenteycuenca.com

Paco Hevia
 Senior Director,
 Corporate Communication
 phevia@llorenteycuenca.com

Jorge López Zafrá
 Senior Director,
 Financial Communication
 jlopez@llorenteycuenca.com

Lagasca, 88 - planta 3
 28001 Madrid
 Tel. +34 91 563 77 22

Lisbon

Tiago Vidal
 Partner and Managing Director
 tvidal@llorenteycuenca.com

Avenida da Liberdade nº225, 5º Esq.
 1250-142 Lisboa
 Tel. +351 21 923 97 00

UNITED STATES

Erich de la Fuente
 Partner and Chairman
 edelafuente@llorenteycuenca.com

Carlos Correcha-Price
 CEO
 ccorrecha@llorenteycuenca.com

Javier Marín
 Senior Director, Healthcare Americas
 jmarin@llorenteycuenca.com

Miami

Emigdio Rojas
 Executive Director
 erojas@llorenteycuenca.com

New York City

Gerard Guiu
 Director, International Business
 Development
 gguiu@llorenteycuenca.com

3 Columbus Circle
 9th Floor
 New York, NY 10019
 United States
 Tel. +1 646 805 2000

NORTH REGION

Javier Rosado
 Partner and Regional Managing
 Director
 jrosado@llorenteycuenca.com

Mexico City

Rogelio Blanco
 Managing Director
 rblanco@llorenteycuenca.com

Av. Paseo de la Reforma 412
 Piso 14, Colonia Juárez
 Alcaldía Cuauhtémoc
 CP 06600, Ciudad de México
 Tel. +52 55 5257 1084

Javier Marín
 Senior Director, Healthcare Americas
 jmarin@llorenteycuenca.com

Panamá City

Manuel Domínguez
 Managing Director
 mdominguez@llorenteycuenca.com

Sortis Business Tower
 Piso 9, Calle 57
 Obarrio - Panamá
 Tel. +507 206 5200

Santo Domingo

Iban Campo
 Managing Director
 icampo@llorenteycuenca.com

Av. Abraham Lincoln 1069
 Torre Ejecutiva Sonora, planta 7
 Suite 702
 Tel. +1 809 6161975

San Jose

Pablo Duncan - Linch
 Partner and Director
 CLC Comunicación | Afiliada LLYC
 pduncan@clcglobal.cr

Del Banco General 350 metros oeste
 Trejos Montealegre, Escazú
 San José
 Tel. +506 228 93240

ANDEAN REGION

Luis Miguel Peña
 Partner and Regional Managing
 Director
 lmpena@llorenteycuenca.com

Bogota

María Esteve
 Partner and Managing Director
 mesteve@llorenteycuenca.com

Av. Calle 82 # 9-65 Piso 4
 Bogotá D.C. - Colombia
 Tel. +57 1 7438000

Lima

Gonzalo Carranza
 Managing Director
 gcarranza@llorenteycuenca.com

Av. Andrés Reyes 420, piso 7
 San Isidro
 Tel. +51 1 2229491

Quito

Carlos Llanos
 Managing Director
 cllanos@llorenteycuenca.com

Avda. 12 de Octubre N24-528 y
 Cordero - Edificio World Trade
 Center - Torre B - piso 11
 Tel. +593 2 2565820

SOUTH REGION

Juan Carlos Gozzer
 Partner and Regional Managing
 Director
 jcgozzer@llorenteycuenca.com

Sao Paulo

Cleber Martins
 Partner and Managing Director
 clebermartins@llorenteycuenca.com

Rua Oscar Freire, 379, Cj 111
 Cerqueira César SP - 01426-001
 Tel. +55 11 3060 3390

Rio de Janeiro

Daniele Lua
 Executive Director
 dlua@llorenteycuenca.com

Ladeira da Glória, 26
 Estúdios 244 e 246 - Glória
 Rio de Janeiro - RJ
 Tel. +55 21 3797 6400

Buenos Aires

Mariano Vila
 Partner and Managing Director
 mvila@llorenteycuenca.com

Av. Corrientes 222, piso 8
 C1043AAP
 Tel. +54 11 5556 0700

Santiago de Chile

Marcos Sepúlveda
 Managing Director
 msepulveda@llorenteycuenca.com

Francisco Aylwin
 Chairman
 faylwin@llorenteycuenca.com

Magdalena 140, Oficina 1801
 Las Condes
 Tel. +56 22 207 32 00



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