



What's all the fuss about tone of voice?

You've spent weeks in agency meetings and creative sessions and finally.... the rebrand is finished. The new logo is launched, there's an exciting new 'look and feel' for everyone to look at (and feel?) and the brand colours have been carefully selected and applied to everything. There's even a new strapline and some pithy brand values for everyone to get behind.

So what's the problem?

Simple: translating brand values into a brand language is easier said than done. Lots of businesses spend time and money agonising over the right visual image. Logo designs, pantone colours, library shots, brochure layouts... But image isn't everything. If the tone of your written communications doesn't match your look then the slick image starts to lose some of its sparkle....

This is a common problem. After the pomp and ceremony of the brand launch has finished, marketers and customer facing teams across the business are left trying to apply the brand values to their day jobs and in their written communications. Having listened attentively to the launch presentation and read the new corporate brochure it's easy to get an impression of how the new tone of voice is *supposed* to sound. But is everyone's interpretation the same? And how should they go about applying that to a customer letter or a product leaflet? In most cases staff are left to get on with it. Occasionally, they have a few lines in the brand book section entitled 'tone of voice' which simply refer in general terms to being 'approachable' and 'engaging' and bringing 'energy' into their words. Easy to say: not so easy to do. So what happens? In the absence of any clear guidance, everyone simply reverts back to their usual writing style....

Everything *looks* fresh and new. But it *sounds* old and tired.

What can be done?

Actually plenty – and it's not that complicated either. But before you do anything, first forget sounding like Innocent or other popular examples of a zany, 'best buddy' tone of voice. This approach really only suits a few (possibly only one) – and it works because it genuinely reflects the personality of the company and its staff, as well as the way it operates. One of the major banks tried it and most agree failed.

Remember some brands have a very specific brand attitude and audience profile. So they can narrow their tone of voice to fit that attitude and profile; they can opt for a particularly distinctive way of putting things. However, most businesses don't operate in such a tight niche. They need to be more inclusive – so anything too much in one direction will actually work against them.



So firstly, make sure your expectations are appropriate for your organisation and your target audiences – then you can follow these four simple steps to a new tone of voice.

1 Get the basics right

Actually, here we mean the basic rules all your written communication should follow. Things like the level of formality you adopt. But don't forget, pretty much every man and his dog is opting for a more informal and approachable tone of voice so don't expect this to make you stand out too much.

Also, give some thought to use of person (first or third) and tense (present or future) as well as any particular rules around language, common descriptions about what you sell, how you operate etc. Getting these copy rules in place will help achieve greater consistency across the board.

2 Follow a process of elimination

Instead of trying to tightly define what the right tone of voice is, try communicating what it *isn't*. Explain what not to do, how you shouldn't sound. For example, if humour doesn't fit with your brand, say so. By giving some definitive guidance to your internal writers as a starting point it is possible to avoid that jarring feeling that occurs when you read text that is blatantly not 'us'.

3 Leave plenty of room to manoeuvre

Try to avoid turning tone of voice into some kind of marketing straitjacket. It needs to be flexible enough to be applied successfully to different media and different messages as well as by different writers. Being too prescriptive can have an adverse effect as the writer focuses on tone and not on the communications objective or the constraints of the medium. It can also make everything sound the same.

4 Offer practical help

If writers are to adopt a consistent tone of voice – and continue to use it – they need more than a simple definition to get them started. Guidance notes (not just on what it is by *why* it is), training sessions and plenty of examples to refer to: these are all practical ways to support your communicators.

With clear guidance and support, it is possible to make your tone your own.