

Five tones of voice

A guide for corporate communicators

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The human project

In the last thirty years, despite apparent advances in corporate commitment to good communication, the relationships which communication is conceived to improve have mostly got worse, with trust falling across the board (cf measures like the Edelman Trust Barometer).

This isn't simply a communication problem. It reflects the truth that few businesses have found a way to love their customers, while those customers themselves have come to view business with increasing cynicism. Meanwhile for employee communication the chasm between management and staff self-interest has grown wider, with typical engagement scores stuck at around 30 per cent, and productivity stubbornly static.

There are many factors in play here, and communication in itself can't change the underlying realities, but poor communication can and is making things worse. Business (and political) language has become a strange thing, infused with jargon and Orwellian newspeak.

If they want to improve their relationships organisations must learn to speak as humans, as the individuals within them would speak if left to themselves. This isn't as easy as it sounds, because we must acknowledge the pressures that have pushed organisations to be as they are, as well as challenging the overwhelming weight of received and muddled wisdom which drives our common practices.

Here is a fundamental truth about good communication. It's not simply about the words you choose, but critically about the quality of the thought behind your words. The human project is a means of rethinking common and misplaced assumptions about our diverse audiences, about what they think, what they expect and will accept. It's a way of asking what it is we're really trying to achieve, and how we expect it to happen. This guide is part of that project, a plea to think harder about what we mean by tone of voice, about how it can work, and the primary importance of understanding context when seeking to build better relationships.

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Introduction

Here's a practical guide to help you put together tone of voice guidelines.

I'd like to say that it's going to be a no nonsense jargon-free explanation of the things you need to do when establishing corporate tone of voice, but let's start by noticing that "tone of voice" itself is a bit of jargon.

If you already know what I mean specifically by "tone of voice guidelines" it's likely you're working in some form of marketing communication (or possibly internal communication). You'll know that such guidelines are a regular part of any brand toolkit, and you may well have seen a few of them, probably demanding that the organisation's tone of voice needs to be positive, expert, surprising, or whatever, giving advice about how you should achieve this.

This advice routinely consists of some sensible, generic best-practice guidelines, and then a list of brand-supportive vocabulary and turns of phrase.

As a professional writer I find these guidelines typically useless. I want to help you to help you address that guideline requirement more intelligently, whether you're commissioning it or writing it.

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How to use this guide

At the heart of this guide there's practical advice about how to manage feasible variations in corporate tone of voice.

It will help you make the most of that advice if you also read what comes before it. First there's a section making a few important points about how written tone of voice works, generally. You'll need to think about these things if you want to avoid some of the worst potholes on the road ahead.

Then there's a section of direct advice about basic good practice. These things apply whatever tone of voice you're aiming for, and you should hold them in mind while you're looking at the individual tone guidance.

Along the way I'll have raised some necessary points about brand, identity and consistency, so I've written some notes at the end which push these ideas a little further. I've also included some practical reflections on how you can best hope to influence tone of voice in the different parts of an organisation.

Finally I've included an appendix about grammar and rules (including a sidebar on apostrophes). There are lots of popular misconceptions about grammar, and some people may try to push misplaced ideas they've picked up along the way as if they were canonical. Well, I'm not a linguistics specialist, but I have a first in English Literature from Cambridge, and I've been writing professionally for a long time, so I can speak with some knowledge, and here's some myth busting which may or may not be useful.

My aim here is to improve everyday practice, as well as stirring necessary debate. If you want to use parts of my text in your own I'll almost certainly agree to this, but please ask first and acknowledge the debt.

Why tone of voice matters

context is always important, and manipulating tone of voice is a way of thinking about context

the one thing written words are missing is a tone of voice. They are silent

If you restrict your ideas about “tone of voice” to the limits of brand jargon you won’t understand what you’re working with.

(If there’s one idea running through the core of this piece it’s that you can never afford to stop scrutinising your assumptions.)

Brand people tend to see tone of voice as a tool for identity, for recognition, achieved through consistency, but tone of voice is about much more than this. It’s fundamental to the way words work on us.

Tone of voice is just one of the things you need to think about when building good sentences, though it is always important. It’s important because context is always important, and manipulating tone of voice is a way of thinking about context (not to mention the possibilities of meaning).

Tone and meaning

If tone of voice is a piece of jargon within the limited contexts of that jargon it can serve as a shorthand, a quick reference. That’s fine as a label, a quick reference, but it’s not a particularly accurate description of the thing it’s referring to.

That’s because the one thing written words are missing is a tone of voice. They are silent.

(You can see the truth of this in the development of emoticons.

Email and other forms of messaging have meant that most people are writing far more than they ever did, without any increase in their skills. This is probably why offence is so often and so easily given in electronic messaging: people are missing the intended tone.

Emoticons offer a shortcut to tone, as well as making things instantly informal and so less likely to be taken seriously.)

Look at these two sentences.

You must go to the doctor.

You must see Citizen Kane.

“Must” is an imperative in both cases, and the sentence structures are identical. But if you were asked to speak the words you would give them quite different tones.

In the first case you’d want to give the “must” the force of an order. In the second it’s more an expression of enthusiasm.

variations in spoken tone of voice are themselves an important guide to meaning, just as meaning itself will suggest the tone of voice

Good verbal communication depends on recognising the demands of different contexts and getting the tone right

consistency of meaning is more important to written identity than the obvious features or style of your language. Tone of voice guidelines should focus as much on what you say about the organisation as how you say it

There's nothing about the choice of words themselves to guide us about their tone. We might "hear" the tone in the written words, but this really is a matter of understanding the meaning, understanding the likely difference in purpose between a visit to the doctor and a trip to the cinema.

If you were trying to describe this difference in a guideline you'd struggle, apart from noting the importance of meaning (which is what I've just done).

Elements like vocabulary and sentence structure will have a bearing on possible tones of voice, but variations in spoken tone of voice are themselves an important guide to meaning, just as meaning itself will suggest the tone of voice.

As humans speaking we need to vary our tones of voice, depending on what we want to say, and who we're addressing. There are times when we need to be formal, times when we need to be friendly, times when we want to be serious, times when we want to amuse. Good verbal communication depends on recognising the demands of different contexts and getting the tone right.

The same is true of written communication, though without actual tone of voice you have to be more careful.

You also have to think again about what you should be aiming for when you seek consistency in your corporate tone of voice.

After all it can't really mean you must use the same tone, or even the same vocabulary, in every context. Indeed if you actually did this you'd sound like a robot and people would switch off.

Consistency still matters, but in the light of how we actually use language consistency of meaning is more important to written identity than the obvious features or style of your language. Tone of voice guidelines should focus as much on what you say about the organisation as how you say it.

If you can frame a good core narrative for your organisation, frame it so it's memorable and real, this will do far more for the way you're perceived than any tricks or tropes of your language.

Indeed, the fact that people could tell a corporate story in their own words would be a benchmark for success.

Good basic practice

in business writing ambiguity is a luxury you can't afford

Short sentences won't always make for stylish reading, and they'll make it harder to express complex ideas or relationships, so they are not the answer to every writing need

In the broadest possible terms, you'll usually want anything written in the name of the company to be clear and well-mannered.

The advice that follows should help you achieve this. It will also lay the groundwork for any variations in tone that you want to achieve.

It is advice, not a rule book. Seasoned writers should not need to be told any of this, and indeed if you know what you're doing you can push beyond the basics. But if you're going to do this you need to do it for a reason, and this guidance should help to provide a framework against which you can judge the words in front of you.

Keep it short/simple

The simplest route to clarity lies in keeping sentences short. This means it's always going to be easier to keep your subject, verb, and (usually) the verb's object in a self-evident relationship, so limiting the scope for ambiguity or confusing constructions.

In creative writing controlled ambiguity is one of your most potent tools, but in business writing ambiguity is a luxury you can't afford. Your readers will probably have limited patience or attention spans. Everything needs to be clearly stated and immediately understood. (See the "formal" tone of voice for a discussion of legalese and ambiguity.)

Short sentences won't always make for stylish reading, and they'll make it harder to express complex ideas or relationships, so they are not the answer to every writing need. They are more like a starting point. A skilled writer can play with sentence lengths, and will know how to inject anticipation or drama by keeping certain ideas in suspended animation or have them developing before your eyes.

But you have to be skilled to do this. You have to know how to use things like relative pronouns (that/which), and be able to deploy main, subordinate and coordinate clauses coherently.

(I imagine most people reading this will understand these terms but if you're not sure send me a mail and I'll try to help.)

You'll also need to match this craft knowledge with clarity of thought, clarity about what it is that you want to say, and also (critically) what your audience might be thinking or assuming.

Here's something that's just fallen into my inbox, in which Microsoft wants to talk about changes to the terms and conditions of my Microsoft account. It describes three reasons for the changes, the third of which is transparency.

Transparency – We are using straightforward language so our terms of use and Microsoft Privacy Statement are easier to understand. In addition, we've put key privacy information all in one place, so that you no longer have to cross-reference several documents to understand the big picture. While this consolidation eliminates redundancies and simplifies the structure of the information, we continue to provide service-specific details to allow you to make informed choices about how you use our services. We've also added some additional privacy information about new features and functionality we'll soon roll out, like those you'll see on Windows 10.

This gets hopelessly clotted, which of course is ironic in a paragraph about transparency. I'll quickly improve it with some light amendments.

Transparency – To help you understand our privacy policies we've put all key information in one place. We use straightforward language throughout. We continue to provide service-specific details so you can make informed choices about how you use those services. We've also added privacy information about new features and functionality, like those you'll see on Windows 10.

I hope the original was not written by a professional, because it falls headlong into the most basic trap, losing sight of what does and what doesn't matter to a reader; we all know people who tell stories badly because they relate everything that happened, reflecting every turn of thought, rather than considering significant detail.

The third sentence in the original is the worst offender, to the point where it actually makes little sense. We've already been told the aim is to be straightforward, so what's the relationship between "redundancies" or "structure" and the need for "service specific information"? It's somewhere in the writer's mind, but not likely to be something occurring to the reader.

I've also stripped out redundant and possibly patronising clauses. You don't need to spell out the expected consequences of making something straightforward ("so our ...xxx.. are easier to understand"). Readers can also be left to themselves to understand why putting all pertinent information in one place could be an improvement.

I've taken out other tautologies to reduce the word count by almost a half, without compromising any of the information in the paragraph, and making it more transparent than its original form.

Looking at some of the longer sentences might have helped the hapless writer become better aware of these problems, might have helped him or her see that things were not really joining up, or adding anything.

The example in the sidebar (left) suggests that writing shorter sentences can be a useful critical discipline.

At the same time the root of the problem is not really sentence length. You can use longer sentences if your thinking is clear. With every sentence it might help to ask "could I make this shorter, or split it into two?" but behind that question there needs to be a more basic one: "what am I really trying to say here?"

The basic guideline remains: stay focused on a single idea in each sentence, which will probably mean keeping those sentences short. You can add qualifying ideas and dependencies as long as you keep them in clear relation to the main idea, and you have the grammatical or semantic skills to do this.

But as the Microsoft example in the sidebar shows, writing clearly also demands clarity in your thoughts, about what you want to say and what you want to achieve.

Active and passive

Keep sentences active, or at least, only use the passive mode when there's a good reason.

You need to do this because it will make for livelier writing. The passive mode ("it was said" rather than "he said") imposes distance, detachment. There are times when this might be a good thing, but usually you should avoid it.

Not least this is because you'll generally want to engage your audiences, and to do that you have to take responsibility for what you're saying, so people can respond to your presence fully, and properly.

Direct address

As part of the same imperative for engagement you need to use the second person ("you") to address your readers directly. Your first thought might be to write "we value our customers' feedback" because that's what you might say to yourself. But if you're writing something for your customers or staff to read then they should be addressed directly, as "you".

Note this can cause some trouble when you want to write "we", because that "we" needs to do two things. On the one hand "we" is

you need to use the second person (“you”) to address your readers directly

As a general rule follow George Orwell’s advice: if you can leave a word or phrase out without affecting your meaning, then do so, always bearing in mind that “meaning” may depend on tone

the natural pronoun to use if you’re writing on behalf of the company and being direct and responsible, as recommended above. On the other hand you’ll also need to use “we” when you want to align yourself with the reader, when you’re trying to describe what might be a position or idea you hold in common.

Whatever else you do you’ll need to construct your paragraphs carefully to avoid any confusion. It’s quite possible to move between the two meanings without confusion, but you need to make sure it’s clear who or what you’re referring to, a clarity you’ll need to set up before you use the “we” word.

Redundancies and tautologies

We routinely pad out what we have to say with redundant phrases and tautologies. I do it myself, feeling the need to protect ideas with phrases like “in truth” or words like “really”, “simply”, or “actually”.

When we speak we often use these words to give ourselves a little more time to think, which is fair enough, even if they don’t add any meaning.

They might still have a place in written work, because they can help to relax the tone, can make it conversational. But use them carefully, self-critically, and don’t overdo it.

As a general rule follow George Orwell’s advice: if you can leave a word or phrase out without affecting your meaning, then do so, always bearing in mind that “meaning” may depend on tone, and you might want that conversational tone.

Be ruthless when you need to be, because verbiage will not give you the right tone of voice, ever. For instance here’s a station announcement you’ll hear booming across the platforms at many London rail termini.

“CCTV surveillance is installed for the purposes of safety and security.”

This could be better.

“We’ve installed CCTV for your safety and security.”

By using “for the purposes of” when all they meant was “for” the railway people manage to sound ponderous and pompous. The passive mode doesn’t help either. I imagine they didn’t get a professional to script these announcements, perhaps thinking the

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it's important to think from your audience's point of view, rather than where you are. Don't introduce ideas that might seem natural in your world but are alien to your audience

People will not listen to you properly, because they will be hearing a mouthpiece rather than a human being with something to say

words unimportant. They probably are less important than getting trains to run on time, but where there's scope for improvement you should usually use it.

As ever it's important to think from your audience's point of view, rather than where you are. Don't introduce ideas that might seem natural in your world but are alien to your audience. I've noticed businesses lately talking a lot about their desire to "meet your needs" when all they mean is something closer to "help you". "Meet your needs" sounds obsequious (which isn't honest or good) but also misdescribes the relationship.

No doubt the business would like to think it's honed its marketing to the point where its products match known customer needs, but that's the problem: the phrase reflects the intrusion of a marketing vocabulary which is inappropriate for the uncertainties of a dialogue with your customers, and "needs" is just too broad a description of my interest in a fridge, or anything I want to buy.

Being credible: show don't tell

There's a widespread belief in communication circles that if you say something often and loudly enough, people will come to believe it.

This is at best a half truth, because its acceptability depends heavily on how much counter-evidence there might be available, and how people see you.

If you follow this belief you might well create more widespread awareness of your big idea, but you risk it becoming an unengaged awareness.

If you force what is usually a form of slogan into ordinary sentences it will show. You will sound like a corporate wonk bent on a private agenda. People will not listen to you properly, because they will be hearing a mouthpiece rather than a human being with something to say.

Though it might well be important to embed a particular idea about where the organisation is going, you need to find a better way of doing this than simply repeating that idea in its raw form at every opportunity. You need to get the words right for the context, and they need to sound like natural, compelling words.

a repeated form of words is no substitute for the change you want to see, and an unsubstantiated claim can easily weaken rather than strengthen what you're trying to say

Don't boast. Stick to the point. If you're trying to introduce a new product or service, focus on what's interesting in the proposition, rather than bald claims of how good you are

Find something more interesting to say about yourself than the fact that you're big, or innovative, or a "leading" something or other. Rather than saying you're innovative, create a context in which you can show what you've invented

There's a bigger truth lurking here, the old truth that you need to show, not tell.

Though there may be a time and place for reinforcing particular perceptions of a situation, of reminding people of what you're doing and why, a repeated form of words is no substitute for the change you want to see, and an unsubstantiated claim can easily weaken rather than strengthen what you're trying to say.

How many customer service messages have some kind of variation on the phrase "we are committed to delivering the highest levels of customer care"? This is verbiage, and misjudges its context. I'm not interested in your commitment; I want to see the delivery, and if I see the delivery and like it, you can start talking to me about something more interesting.

Don't boast. Stick to the point. If you're trying to introduce a new product or service, focus on what's interesting in the proposition, rather than bald claims of how good you are.

We find boasting distasteful in our ordinary human relationships, so why do businesses think it's going to go down well? Find something more interesting to say about yourself than the fact that you're big, or innovative, or a "leading" something or other. Rather than saying you're innovative, create a context in which you can show what you've invented. Let others come up with the adjective, because then it will have a real force.

Talking of adjectives, use them carefully. If you want to say something is important, let alone ground-breaking, then be prepared to explain why it's important. Adjectives will certainly colour your sentences, but as anyone who's ever played with plasticine will tell you, mash up those colours indiscriminately and you'll end up with a purple greyish blob.

Punctuation and conventions

See the note in the appendices about grammar and convention generally, but note that punctuation is bound by stricter rules than vocabulary.

Punctuation won't save you. Punctuation exists to clarify meaning, and often works by emphasising aspects of your sentence structure. But if your punctuation starts to get complicated it's likely your

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*Capitals should only be used on proper nouns
(names) and at the beginning of sentences*

sentences are getting too complicated. Step back and restructure.

Commas are particularly open to misuse. Commas can be useful but they are weak marks, and if your meaning depends on a comma's placement that's a danger sign and you should consider reworking your sentence.

People often throw in commas to link what should be separate sentences. Don't do it. Have the courage to use a full stop.

Don't use commas to interrupt uncompleted thoughts or ideas, because that's the orthographic equivalent of overacting. Sentences can't be separated from their meaning, and punctuation that forces a meaningless pause becomes a meaningless gesture where you can least afford it.

Because punctuation and orthography only apply to the written language the rules change more slowly, are better defined than many other aspects of language and demand strict observation. Apostrophes aside (see the appendices) I'm not going to attempt to give any detailed explanation of those rules here. If you don't know them you'll need to read a primer or ask me to come in and explain them.

As I've suggested there are strict rules, for instance governing where you should place a full stop in relation to parentheses. But be aware that other areas depend on optional conventions. These areas include things like how you write numbers and dates, and for the sake of consistency you need a style guide to set out which conventions you're going to follow.

That guide will also be a good place to address more contentious issues, such as capitalisation.

Capitalisation illustrates the danger of citing historical precedent to justify modern usage. Look at an 18th century book and you'll find it strewn with capital letters, but modern English usage is reasonably clear about this.

Capitals should only be used on proper nouns (names) and at the beginning of sentences. So job titles and collective nouns like "the company" should all be rendered in lower case unless they happen to fall at the beginning of a sentence.

Things get confused because people sometimes feel that when

you should define your norms in your style guide and stick to them

Business writing is crammed with the simply dead, with phrases like "in today's fast moving environment". Avoid these phrases (like the plague)

ordinary nouns like "prime minister" or "government" refer to particular individuals or institutions they should be given the force of a proper noun. I'm not convinced, but the important thing is that you should define your norms in your style guide and stick to them.

Clichés: what happens when you stop thinking

Cliché comforts us with the ring of familiarity. But it can also kill the vitality of language (stone dead).

As usual this doesn't mean there's a hard and fast rule against cliché. Cliché tends to become part of the everyday fabric of our language, and so it can be useful when you want to sound friendly or conversational. Reanimating cliché, by twisting the familiar slightly, is also part of the stock in trade of advertising copy.

But you need to be vigilant. Business writing is crammed with the simply dead, with phrases like "in today's fast moving environment". Avoid these phrases (like the plague). They are a sure sign that you're not really thinking, not being careful enough.

The five tones of voice

You can't expect to be recognised by your corporate tone of voice. You can hope to be recognised for behaving well, for saying the right thing, in the right way

between them the five tones should help you think about the range of characteristics you can reasonably expect to convey

At the beginning I noted that spoken tones of voice are about sensitivity to context, rather than projecting your identity.

Corporate interest in tone of voice sits at odds with this truth, which is why tone of voice guidelines often try to suggest characteristic, on-brand vocabulary, or even idiosyncratic turns of phrase. They seem to believe that these turns of phrase can somehow be like a logo. This is simply not true. Outside some very narrow contexts you can't expect to be recognised by your corporate tone of voice. You can hope to be recognised for behaving well, for saying the right thing, in the right way. The distinction is not even subtle, and getting it right is what tone of voice is really about.

In the real world there are probably as many tones as there are voices. For corporate purposes we can discount the "negative" tones; it's hard to imagine a business wanting to sound angry, distressed or desperate. Indeed for corporate purposes I'm going to reduce the number of tones we need to consider to just five.

These five are like building blocks. They also represent a spectrum, so there's a degree of overlap between them.

I'm not suggesting that you copy and paste them as they are into your tone of voice document (if you want to that's fine as well, as long as you ask me first and acknowledge the source). But between them the five tones should help you think about the range of characteristics you can reasonably expect to convey.

That's because whatever you think you should sound like will entail some combination of the tones included here. It's also because these guidelines have to deal in broad gestures. You can still have nuance or subtlety in your written tones of voice, but such nuance will depend on the skill of the writer, and you can't dictate these effects from a guideline document.

So you might decide that you want to be "bold". What would that look like as a guideline? In practice it will mean some combination of the "exuberant" and "funny" tones below, perhaps with a bit of "expert" thrown in.

Perhaps you'd want to seem quirky. That's likely to mean a mix of "funny" and "friendly". Perhaps you want to be enthusiastic: "friendly" and "exuberant" will get you there.

Formal

formality is a tone reserved for occasions when you want to maintain a distance

You need to maintain a tonal neutrality, so be rigorous in excluding any emotive language

Let's start with the tone you're likely to use least.

Formality was once the norm in business communication, but then it was mostly normal to address even colleagues you knew well by their surnames. We live in different times, and formality is a tone reserved for occasions when you want to maintain a distance, for instance in a disciplinary communication, or because you're doing something functional like terms and conditions.

Formality will keep your distance, but then it's likely that you'll also still want to be properly understood. (If you don't want to be understood, to get over some information, then why are you trying to communicate at all?) So you'll still need to work for clarity, keeping sentences short and direct.

In this light it's ironic that the most formal language of all, legalese, is commonly justified as the avoidance of ambiguity. It's nothing of the sort of course. It's just another jargon, designed to protect the status (and fees) of the legal profession.

Any sentence written in legalese can also be written in plain, clear English, and will be less ambiguous for it (ambiguity is no friend of clarity). It's one thing to grant your legal department a say over the content of anything you want to publish. There's no excuse for giving them editorial control, even in terms and conditions. Force them to express any concerns or priorities, and make sure you capture those concerns in clear simple and unambiguous language.

It doesn't have to be stylish. It does have to be grammatically correct. It doesn't need to be friendly but you should take responsibility for what you say (which means you still need to avoid passive constructions).

You don't need to be friendly, but equally there's no point in being rude. You need to maintain a tonal neutrality, so be rigorous in excluding any emotive language.

(There are of course formal forms of address which if you step back would appear to include an emotional element: "XXX and XXX request the pleasure of your company" etc. However these clichés are so familiar, so automatically absorbed that they carry no emotional force at all.)

There's never any reason to be grovelling or obsequious. If you've

be correct, unemotional, and clear. If you feel the need to be anything else you're moving beyond the realms of formal language



done something wrong apologise, and do whatever you can to make amends, but don't turn this into an excuse for saying dubious things about yourself, about how important your customers are, or how much you care. As ever, these are things that need to be shown, not told.

So be correct, unemotional, and clear. If you feel the need to be anything else you're moving beyond the realms of formal language.

An example

This is to notify you that the last payment of your mortgage will be due on the 23rd October (next month). We will take the payment as normal, at which point we will make arrangements to place the deeds to your property with you or your nominated representative. Please let us know within the next three weeks of your preferred option, so that we can make the transfer smoothly and in a timely way.

Expert



Professionalism demands some formality, but it doesn't have to be cold

You'll be reassuring because you're in a different position, from which you can help. You need to be sympathetic, not empathetic

An example

If you've never owned a smartphone there are a few things you need to think about before deciding on which model, or indeed which platform to go for. "Platform" here means the basic software operating system used by the phone. You've probably heard of Apple's iPhone, which uses Apple's own iOS software, and only available on Apple hardware. The other most popular choice is Android, owned and maintained by Google, and used by best-selling phones from the likes of Samsung. Some way behind is Microsoft with its Windows Phone system, though those who have used it tend to like it very much.

This voice is actually about reassurance. Use it when you want to suggest you know what you're doing.

If you're talking to others in the same profession or line of work some jargon might be acceptable, a signal that you share a specialised common vocabulary. But you need to be very confident about your audience to risk this. If you stray outside that community jargon gives exactly the wrong signal. It suggests at best that you're hiding behind a professional barrier, at worst that you can't be bothered to think about who you're addressing.

You may need to use technical terms here and there. Always explain them (unless you're absolutely certain they will be understood by your audience).

Professionalism demands some formality, but it doesn't have to be cold. Think about the tone you'd want to find in a leaflet from a hospital explaining an operation you were about to go through.

It should usually be friendly (see below). Be friendly but keep your distance. Don't suggest you're somehow in the same boat, because that's not the relationship you're trying to emphasise with this tone. You'll be reassuring because you're in a different position, from which you can help. You need to be sympathetic, not empathetic.

A professional or expert tone depends very clearly on what you say as well as the way you say it. In this respect it's important to show, not tell. It's no good saying "we're really good at this", because if I'm feeling in need of reassurance why would I believe you? I need to hear stories, examples, to know that others have benefited, in whatever field. Keep things factual, and free from sales talk, exuberance or enthusiasm. If you want to express an opinion, make it clear that this is what you're doing, and why you have that opinion.

If this manner of address is going to be truly reassuring it must be direct and personal, talking to "you" rather than third person forms like "patients", "clients" or "customers".

Though friendly you need to stick to formal and correct grammar. Write complete sentences, with conservative punctuation. You can use contractions, to maintain friendliness, but be aware of the line you're walking between formality and friendliness, and keep things balanced.

Friendly

you want to use this tone to draw people in, to make them feel you are approachable, but you can't assume the confidence that exists between real friends

Take the time to express things as simply as possible

be sincere ... shun words like "passion" which are easy to say and even easier for your audience to doubt

Who wouldn't want to be friendly?

Friendly people are approachable, helpful, likeable. As humans we are most ourselves when we are friendly. This is true even of unfriendly people.

To be truly friendly we need to be relaxed and at ease with ourselves as well as the people we're talking to (unfriendly people struggle to reach this ease, though this doesn't mean it's beyond them).

"Friendly" is (unsurprisingly) the way you'd write to a friend, up to a point, and you need need to be very thoughtful about that point. In reality you want to use this tone to draw people in, to make them feel you are approachable, but you can't assume the confidence that exists between real friends.

So you need to be relaxed and informal. Use contractions (didn't, won't etc). Don't use complex punctuation. Colons and semi-colons are pretty much a no-no.

Use colloquial expressions as I just did (an appropriate use of colloquial language is the readiest way to set a friendly tone).

But you can't be matey. That's a step too far, when you don't know in advance how your readers might be feeling about you. Whether they are customers or employees, they may well appreciate warmth and openness from you, without wanting to be friends (because friendship also makes claims on us).

You need to be confident, not tentative, exactly because friendly people are at ease with themselves. That doesn't mean you have to know it all. Confident people are happy to admit when they don't know something (though it's usually a good idea to suggest you know what to do next).

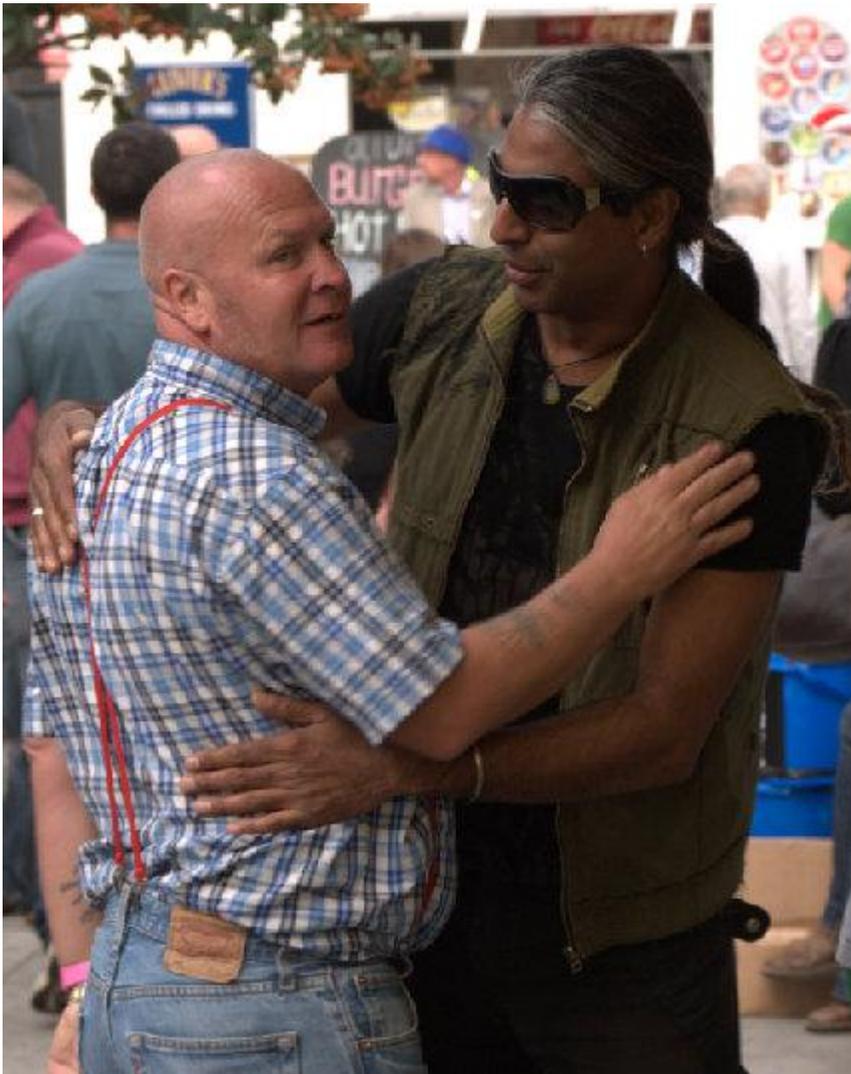
Avoid circumlocution, or any verbosity. Take the time to express things as simply as possible.

Above all be sincere. This applies to all five tones, but is particularly important to friendliness, because friends don't usually lie to each other, or hide behind platitudes. If you want to come over as friendly you can't afford to sound corporate, so you'll have to be vigilant about corporate cliché, and shun words like "passion" which are easy to say and even easier for your audience to doubt.

Because when you're friendly, when you try to draw people in, you're raising the stakes in the relationship. You're promising honesty, plain speaking, authenticity even. You had better be ready to keep that promise.

An example

We'd like this to be the beginning of a beautiful relationship. If you need to talk to us we want to make that process as easy as possible. Yes, like any other large business we use call centres, but we won't patronise you by blathering on about how important your call is to us. Instead we've set things up so queue times are as short as they can be, and we work to make sure that when you get through you'll be speaking to someone who'll listen properly and will know how to help you.



Funny

Humour can be scathing, but its real power as a corporate tone of voice lies in being inclusive, in marking out shared ground and understanding

*You don't have to be funny all of the time...
There's even some danger that if you can carry on harping on the same string you'll become predictable, boring*

Being funny is the armed wing of the friendly movement. It's not going to be for everyone, and it carries risks to match the big benefits it's capable of bringing.

Being funny isn't the same as being friendly, because it can easily be aggressive. All the same, if you want to be humorous as a business it's likely that you'd be doing so to make yourself distinctively human, with many of the attributes we'd associate with friendliness. Humour can be scathing, but its real power as a corporate tone of voice lies in being inclusive, in marking out shared ground and understanding.

There's no short cut or real trick to being funny. You've got to come up with good jokes. They don't need to be laugh-out-loud jokes, because a little smile is all you really need to raise. You don't need to worry too much that people have different senses of humour, because as long as people can see that the writing might be funny they'll get the point.

Irony, parody, even satire, can all help to build a sense of shared understanding.

If delivered with all due aplomb it's fine to work with clunky Christmas cracker jokes, because a shared groan is also a kind of smile. But you are depending on your audience being well enough disposed to you to accept what you're saying, to laugh with you rather than at you.

Most of what I've said about being friendly still applies. Keep things direct, personal and (unless it's part of the joke), unpretentious.

You don't have to be funny all of the time. Some brands have built recognition by using irony and humour where you'd expect something flat and boring, most prominently Innocent Drinks on its packaging. But Innocent had the luxury of being a small "challenger brand", with a clean slate to draw on, and success expands the range of tones you'll need to command. There's even some danger that if you can carry on harping on the same string you'll become predictable, boring.

Some product categories seem to lend themselves to humour, such as beer brands. Carlsberg for instance has been trading on an ironic use of "probably" for decades in its UK advertising (and elsewhere for all I know). It started as a kind of in-joke, a nod to the caveats

(your) internal audience is in quite a different relationship with the business and speaking to your staff as if they were customers will only push them away



advertisers are legally required to insert whenever they seem in danger of making too big a claim for something. It would be surprising, though not necessarily disastrous, if Carlsberg produced an ad which didn't work this way. However it's unlikely (probably) that the company would want to trade so heavily on this irony for its internal communication. Though there are always going to be times when you actually need to sell something to an internal audience (for instance a pension plan), for the most part that internal audience is in quite a different relationship with the business and speaking to your staff as if they were customers will only push them away.

As ever it's about judgement, about achieving the kind of consistency which allows people who like you to feel the comfort of familiarity, but this doesn't mean you can't surprise them from time to time.

An example

We wouldn't say we're passion-led or values-driven, because frankly, we don't think our managers' holiday reading should show up quite so nakedly in the way we speak of ourselves. On the other hand we think it's part of our job to make sure that when you get up in the morning you feel good about coming to work, excited even, or at least enthusiastic.

Exuberant

the problem with “punchy” copy is that few of us like being punched

if you present yourself as a stereotype, you risk being written off as a stereotype

Computer game aficionados will smile if I mention Monkey Island, a pioneering classic of the point and click adventure genre, and perhaps smile again to recall the character of Stan, purveyor of previously owned things. Stan would always come onto the screen with his arms waving wildly, his teeth gleaming and with a staccato patter to batter you into a purchase.

Stan was the archetypal American secondhand car salesman, simultaneously emollient and aggressive. While we may all get the joke, and understand that there are better ways to present ourselves, this way of speaking remains influential in tone of voice prescriptions, or those briefs that demand “punchy” copy.

There are cultural differences between the US and the UK, with the former seemingly happier to accept the most aggressive sales patter, but for the most part we all know how to read this kind of sales talk, to cut through its hyperbole and look for information we can actually use. I'd argue generally that this makes the exaggerations and exuberance of sales talk worth avoiding, because such a tone actually pushes people away (the problem with “punchy” copy is that few of us like being punched). It's better to stay in the friendly zone and solicit a more engaging conversation.

Exuberance is tricky as a written tone, not because it's difficult to achieve, but because of the assumptions it rests on.

You can signal it with lots of exclamation marks, with fulsome empty adjectives (like “big”, “important”, “major”, “passionate” and so on). These will be carried in short sentences, sometimes so short that they are not actually sentences, but then this kind of copy doesn't need to be strictly correct (grammatically speaking). Everything will be positive; this isn't a world where you need to reach for the euphemisms of “challenges” because that would be to admit too much doubt.

The problem lies in the way a tone of voice can summon ideas about identity, not so much as to be useful for recognition, but within very limited and stereotypical boundaries. And if you present yourself as a stereotype, you risk being written off as a stereotype.

In real life when we meet exuberant people their evident humanity will mean that we can imagine in other circumstances they might speak differently. We're not having to fill in that background,

it really does limit what you can hope to achieve; at best it will be a transaction, because you're presenting yourself as no more than a business with predictable designs on your readers' cash

There's still a place for exuberance in corporate writing, but you need to be very confident about your context

because in a sense it's a given of how people are. We'll note the exuberance, and deal with it as a reflection of the moment, or even of their predominant personalities, without assuming this limits who they are.

But with disembodied words it's more natural to stop with first impressions, so if our first impression is "ah, more sales bullshit" we won't go further than that.

This isn't the end of the world, if your readers are in a place where they expect to be sold to. But it really does limit what you can hope to achieve; at best it will be a transaction, because you're presenting yourself as no more than a business with predictable designs on your readers' cash. You could say there's an honesty in this, but it's an honesty which depends on low expectations. If your readers are not in that primed place they'll just feel irritated.

In any case, as noted above, you'll write more persuasive copy if you stay within the bounds of friendliness, good humour and modesty. As identity stereotypes go, (and identity in corporate writing must deal in stereotypical broad brushstrokes) a friendly good humoured and modest person is more engaging than someone who's brash and over the top. If as readers we don't have time or interest to think beyond the obvious, then it's better that the obvious should be a set of likeable characteristics.

There's still a place for exuberance in corporate writing, but you need to be very confident about your context, confident (for instance) that if you have some good news you want to share, your audience will itself be happy to share your excitement. As ever, if possible it's better to show than tell, more powerful to point with happy modesty at other people's endorsements or acclaim for your achievements than risk seeming to boast.

So just as you need to keep your legal team at arm's length from your copy, so too you should resist pressure from sales or marketing teams to write in the clichés of sales language, because those clichés will not serve their ends.

This guide is about tone of voice so I'm not going to attempt to write a primer for good sales copy, but it's interesting to note that generally sales copy should not start with any notions of corporate identity. It has to start by speaking of the imagined reader's state of

You must demonstrate your empathy not by saying "we understand" but by articulating the reader's own possible feelings



mind, her aspirations and possible desires. The corporate "we" should become as invisible as possible. You must demonstrate your empathy not by saying "we understand" but by articulating the reader's own possible feelings, the feelings that could lead to your proposition.

In doing this you might well want to employ friendly or expert tones, but if you shade into exuberance, let alone bullshit, you'll only be calling attention to yourself as a corporate entity. That attention needs to come later, when you're providing after-sales support, or customer service, or when you're not in a sales relationship at all but are talking to your colleagues or other stakeholders.

An example

Wow! The dust has hardly settled on last week's conference but what a difference that week has made!

Eighteen major new international accounts signed and sealed.

His Holiness Pope Francis agrees to become a global product ambassador.

(Ok, we made that one up.)

But seriously we also swept the board at the New York industry awards.

Anyone would have thought we're good at what we do (but only if we tell them).

And that's where you come in.

A human tone of voice



I've been debunking some myths about tone of voice, because they need debunking. Tone of voice has become one of those altars which business managers bow down before, without really thinking what they're doing (which often happens with rituals). It's because tone of voice matters a lot that we need to think about it harder.

For all the ritual, businesses routinely get their tones of voice badly wrong. I'd argue that this is likely to happen when basic thinking about tone of voice is so poor, but it's also, ironically, because of some confused thinking about brand and culture.

That's ironic because "tone of voice" is supposed to serve notions of brand. It's important that it does, but it won't do if you think tone of voice is a matter of vocabulary and sentence structure.

Remember, tone of voice is fundamentally about sensitivity to context, while your underlying identity will be projected primarily by what you choose to say about yourself, rather than how you say it.

Let's take another real example. It's from Microsoft again, partly because it just happens to have fallen in my inbox the other day, partly because Microsoft is rich enough and sophisticated enough to do better. "Kevin Turner", the company's chief operating officer, wrote this to me.

"Listening to customers and partners is a top priority in every activity we do. By taking this 5 minute personalized survey you help us to better understand the needs of our customers and partners in our ongoing efforts to improve experiences across all products and services."

Behind this text is a conversation Microsoft is having with itself. I don't need to know about Microsoft's management priorities in this context, so why does Turner start by telling me about them? The first sentence is redundant, which is a problem when you're writing in a context where people have very limited attention spans. The second sentence is on the face of it strangely verbose: what's all this stuff about improving "experiences"? Actually it's about Microsoft's internal change narrative, because CEO Satya Nadella wants his engineers and support staff to focus on customer experience.

I can't quibble with that ambition, and there's some legitimate thinking at work about the importance of repeating an idea a lot in order to embed it in people's consciousness. But it needs to be

I also suggested there were other less desirable tones of voice, and by far the most common of these is “management robotic”

Every group has its jargon. It’s how the members of the group recognise each other. But it can create real communication problems when we need to reach beyond that circle

“repeated” in the right way in the right contexts. This isn’t the right context. This is a piece of marketing communication, where verbosity is deadly.

I’m sure I’m giving this far more attention than the average reader, and probably more attention than Kevin Turner’s office gave it, but since someone somewhere apparently decided the mailing was an opportunity to say more than “please complete our survey”, then it should have been done properly. I happen to like what Microsoft is doing generally with its Windows system but it’s got its work cut out to win less interested hearts and minds. It doesn’t advance that cause by sounding like a management robot.

When explaining why I’d lighted on five tones of voice (which represent a spectrum of desirable possibilities, depending on the context) I also suggested there were other less desirable tones of voice, and by far the most common of these is “management robotic”.

What I think Turner wants to say is something like this.

“We appreciate that you’re bombarded with feedback requests all the time, but please help us with this one because it really will make a difference: we want to make our products and services work brilliantly for you and all our users, and we can’t do that unless we know what you think and want.”

My alternative text is written so it reads as something any of us might ordinarily say. Its tone of voice is relaxed, friendly, a little casual (hence the word “brilliant”), and human. It’s based on some thought about the likely states of mind of likely readers.

Every group has its jargon. It’s how the members of the group recognise each other. But it can create real communication problems when we need to reach beyond that circle. This is why even our routinely dumb tone of voice guidelines almost always warn of the dangers of jargon, and the most pervasive jargon of the moment is management speak.

If managers want to speak in these strange terms to one another, there’s little harm in it, but depressingly it’s become the way their businesses routinely speak to everyone else.

businesses seem to slip into management robotic when they're not really thinking at all, or it may often be because they've fallen into the comforting embrace of corporate narcissism

management robotic is a tone adopted to help its users behave in what they see as a necessary work-like way, but then it's also about putting up barriers which effective business needs to do without.

In our language, as well as our behaviour, we need to learn to be human again.

Management speak is most easily recognised by its vocabulary, like any other jargon, but that's not all there is to "management robotic", which indeed can plague us even using everyday vocabulary.

The problem with jargon is that you've failed from the outset to consider your listeners, not just who they are, but where they are in relation to you. Similarly businesses seem to slip into management robotic when they're not really thinking at all, or it may often be because they've fallen into the comforting embrace of corporate narcissism.

That narcissism is the bastard child of brand thinking. Businesses have been encouraged to get their "message" across at every opportunity for internal and external audiences, following the assumption that if you say something often enough it will at least start to be perceived as true, and become embedded in the minds of customers or staff. Unfortunately in practice this means they talk about themselves instead of thinking about what would make for a useful or even interesting conversation, then wonder why they fail to engage any possible listeners.

So although Kevin Turner's thoughts are not couched in obvious buzzwords, they've come out of the same unreflective space, where a management agenda has obstructed necessarily sensitive thought about how to have a conversation with people outside the management bubble.

Perhaps some managers go home and speak to their families in much the same way, but I doubt it. At some level I'd guess that management robotic is a tone adopted to help its users behave in what they see as a necessary work-like way, but then it's also about putting up barriers which effective business needs to do without.

In our language, as well as our behaviour, we need to learn to be human again. Nothing else will do.

Our language and our behaviour are mutually influential. By "human" I don't particularly mean humane or kind, though I think both are desirable attributes. I mean thoughtful, careful, concerned to listen properly, and concerned to behave properly (so we're not boastful or talking stupidly about ourselves), in the hope that we're better placed to move things forward in whatever ways they need to be moved.

If you want to avoid the management robotic tone of voice, the first step is to recognise it. The second is to take a formal stand against it

By “human” too I want to emphasise the truth that for better or worse business is a social construct. It’s embedded in society. Management speak, like other jargon, encourages the belief that you’re operating in a closed-off space, where normal rules don’t apply, but this is an illusion, and a very damaging one when it comes to communication.

If you want to avoid the management robotic tone of voice, the first step is to recognise it. The second is to take a formal stand against it, to invest both in training and internal communication materials designed to help people think about better, more human ways of thinking, and speaking.

You might be able to do much of this yourself. After all, it’s about relearning to be yourself. But most would find it useful to have some help along the way. I can help, in many different ways, so talk to me.

paul@brasington.co.uk

What next?

*this means thinking constantly about context
... It means imagining not only what people
think, but how they think*

*It means being able to manage variation as
an expression of your identity, presupposing
that you understand what your identity is*

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At the beginning I suggested that if there's one central idea behind this guide it's that you should take nothing as given, and never stop questioning the words you choose and why.

In particular this means thinking constantly about context.

The question "who am I writing this for?" cannot be limited to a demographic generalisation, or even the useful but crudely functional "what do they think now/what do I want them to think?". It means imagining not only what people think, but how they think, their different possible moods and attitudes towards you.

It means reimagining your own voice, not as the robotic croak of the corporate machine, but as something human, something engaged and engaging.

It means being able to vary your tone of voice to meet these different insights, being expert or funny or exuberant as the occasion demands, understanding all the time that your tone always depends as much on what you say as how you say it.

It means being able to manage that variation as an expression of your identity, presupposing that you understand what your identity is (bearing in mind that your "brand" is only going to be one expression of that identity).

So what you do next depends on where you are. I hope this guide will help you think about the language used in your organisation, whether for internal or external communication. I hope it will help you address some obvious problems, and help you frame the questions that need to be asked.

Or you might want to look deeper into the questions raised here about language and identity. I've only been able to scratch their surface, but there's plenty more to say.

In either case, if you'd like to talk some more then just drop be an email (address to the left). Of if you need help with a specific project, do the same.

Appendices

it's important for professional writers that the organisation should define conventions about representing numbers, capitalisation, and all the other issues that regularly feature in journalists' style guides

Helping staff write better English has to be desirable, as is encouraging them to think about clarity and purpose. Demanding that they think about tone as a matter of identity is almost certainly unrealistic

1 Style guides and change

Much of what I've talked about so far, particularly about basic practice, would be covered in a good style guide. Style guides are important, and if your organisation doesn't have one then you should create one. They are often bundled with tone of voice guidelines, but there are differences in their ambition, and you'll need to have a plan for how you're going to present either or both sets of guidelines and how you're going to ensure they get used.

Most tone of voice guides contain advice about avoiding passive structures, using the second person, keeping sentences short and simple and so on (more or less as I've said above). All this is reasonable, in that these things are generally sensible advice for good writing practice, even if they won't do much to establish any distinctive tone of voice.

So let's not lose what's helpful. In fact it's important for professional writers that the organisation should define conventions about representing numbers, capitalisation, and all the other issues that regularly feature in journalists' style guides.

For those commissioned to write, and those commissioning them, it should be a mandatory point of reference. This isn't really about brand, but about professionalism. There are a lot of myths about grammar (see appendix 3), and most professional writers will have found themselves being told by the less well-informed to change things that are in accepted practice correct.

There is much in the language too that is governed by preference or (changing) custom rather than agreed rules. If you can anticipate these points as much as possible it will smooth the delivery of your projects.

Style guidelines, and sensible notes about tone of voice, make sense when you're briefing professionals, but I'd question how organisations expect such guidelines to be used in ordinary working lives. Two different objectives seem to be confused here.

Helping staff generally write better English has to be desirable, as is encouraging them to think about clarity and purpose. Demanding that they think about tone as a matter of identity is almost certainly

it may well be important to make people think harder about tone itself whenever they have written contact with people outside the organisation. It's not really identity that's at issue here, but good behaviour

In everyday life most of us understand that it's better to be sympathetic and friendly than threatening, because most people respond better to that kind of behaviour. And yet many businesses carry on as if this simple truth didn't matter

unrealistic, since it requires a skill with words which few possess (it's why organisations need to pay for professional writers, though I would say that).

All the same it may well be important to make people think harder about tone itself whenever they have written contact with people outside the organisation. It's not really identity that's at issue here, but good behaviour.

If you like you could try to see this through the lens of brand, but it doesn't need to have that complication.

That's because another way of thinking about tone is to see language as a form of behaviour. It can be abrupt, impatient, caring, helpful, and many things in between. It's likely that customer-facing staff will always be encouraged and trained to be courteous and helpful. I'd like to add that they should also aim to be thoughtful.

But much of the written output from many organisations falls far short of this good behaviour.

It's partly a problem of the silo structures that tend to evolve in any larger organisation: managers have their own fiefdoms and often work outside the scope of communication management.

Brand-led identity programmes are supposed to address this, but unless carefully designed to prove their relevance for each silo they can easily make things worse (because people will see them as an imposition and ignore even the good advice they may give).

So many organisations fail to address the small but critical things that influence relationships. So many organisations have processes that lead customer communication away from desirable behaviours.

In everyday life most of us understand that it's better to be sympathetic and friendly than threatening, because most people respond better to that kind of behaviour. And yet many businesses carry on as if this simple truth didn't matter.

For example I've recently seen a communication from a financial institution starting with a threat and only after making the threat admitting that the recipient still had three weeks to comply (to prove that she had a previous no-claims bonus).

If they had started by reminding her gently that such proof was

Saying a word like “valued” doesn't make it true ... and when it's patently an empty gesture ... it's likely to have the opposite of its intended effect

If you're commissioning or producing a guide it's important to think through who's going to use it and how it will fit into their ordinary workstream. It's likely you'll have to work with people in the functional silos to add specific guidance and resources

necessary, perhaps advising her how to get it, and only after being helpful pointing out that they'd have to charge her more if she didn't follow this advice she might have felt in good hands. As it is she's already inclined not to renew her policy when it expires.

This kind of cackhandedness isn't unusual. Typically it will come from an organisational function which doesn't consider it part of its job to think about feelings (though it should be).

But even marketers or sales people themselves, who are supposed to be thinking about persuasiveness, have their common stupidities. I imagine we have all received emails or letters addressed to "Dear valued customer", to which the response has to be "if you really valued me surely you'd take the trouble to find out my name, or at least use software that allowed you to address me properly".

Saying a word like “valued” doesn't make it true, (a point I touched on earlier – cf Show don't tell) and when it's patently an empty gesture it's likely to have the opposite of its intended effect.

So how do these things happen? There are likely to be many reasons, and there are specialist consultancies who will work to bring customer processes in line with stated brand values or ideas. But they are far better at addressing the automated or strictly controllable parts of a customer experience. They are generally far less successful when humans are involved.

This might be because they haven't been given enough scope, or because they don't really have the necessary specialist skills, and too often all they'll provide is yet another set of published guidelines which will sit at only one level below the tone of voice guidelines churned out by the corporate brand agency, and still be comprehensively ignored by the people who need to see them.

If you're commissioning or producing a guide it's important to think through who's going to use it and how it will fit into their ordinary workstream. It's likely you'll have to work with people in the functional silos to add specific guidance and resources, perhaps creating detailed boilerplate texts that cover all known points of customer contact. You cannot expect unskilled writers to craft such material for themselves, and you need to equip people with the knowledge to understand what's at stake, and at the very least where they can turn for help when they need it.

“authenticity matters so now we’ll teach you how to fake it.”

Despite their virtual nature, social media create spaces where human conversations are expected. It's absolutely critical that your agents speak/write naturally, in their own voices

Authenticity

I recently read a piece by a leadership coach who works with politicians, in which she preaches the value of “authenticity”, and then adds advice about using “positive language”, by which she means it’s better to say “we want to” rather than “we have to”, that kind of thing. It seems only certain types of authenticity are to be encouraged, or to put it another way, “authenticity matters so now we’ll teach you how to fake it.”.

This is why politics has collapsed into PR garbage, and why most people have switched off when faced with politicians.

You have to know when to step back. Call centres will need scripts to cover basic information at the start of a call, but it's more important that agents find their own voices in conversations than sticking to a rigid script. This doesn't mean they'll be off brand, because you can still set broad guidelines which shape language without distorting it (see the discussion of brand, identity and language later).

But common corporate practice is littered with empty buzz words which someone has decided are important, and so get pushed into the script, and which will only get in the way of an engaging conversation.

For instance "delight" has become a fashionable ambition: out of the blue an agent might say "how can I delight you today?" Or "I hope I've delighted you today." Several facetious answers immediately come to mind, and the possibility of a human, engaging conversation has already evaporated.

These problems and associated bad practice are multiplying with customer channels. There's a clue in the name of social media. Despite their virtual nature, social media create spaces where human conversations are expected. It's absolutely critical that your agents speak/write naturally, in their own voices, rather than extending the deadening hand of corporate cliché. You want them to represent the company, but not somehow sound like it.

2 Tone and brand identity

We need tone of voice guidelines to encourage everyone, including marketing people, to listen to themselves more rigorously, and think about who else might be listening

it's not true that tone of voice can work like a colour palette. It can't be regulated as part of a brand toolkit in the same way that elements like fonts and logos can be regulated

Most tone of voice guidelines I've seen will stress the importance of "speaking the language of your audience". This is important, and it's difficult because we're often deaf to the specificity of the language, the jargon, in our own peer groups.

It's probably why so much marketing jargon seeps into places where it should never be seen or heard. Marketing people, who in one way or another tend to be responsible for commissioning communication are better at preaching to others than hearing their own tribal vocabulary. We need tone of voice guidelines to encourage everyone, including marketing people, to listen to themselves more rigorously, and think about who else might be listening.

It's quite true that certain tones of voice will fit better with the desired brand positioning than others. It's true that in relatively controlled or predictable contexts like advertising you could reasonably want to achieve some consistency, something that would seem right for how people should see you. There will be other contexts in which consistency is also desirable.

But it's not true that tone of voice can work like a colour palette. It can't be regulated as part of a brand toolkit in the same way that elements like fonts and logos can be regulated. Although it offers some ways in which you can usefully think about corporate identity, you can't expect it to promote easy recognition in the same way that visual elements might. If tone of voice guidelines are ever going to be useful, we need to set expectations properly from the outset.

Real humans can command different tones of voice without compromising our sense of their identity, because our sense of who they are depends primarily on what they say rather than the way they say it (which may or may not be distinctive, just as our inclination to notice the style of a speaker rather than substance of what she says will depend on our own mood as listeners).

This variety is important. It's important partly because it's what we expect of a proper conversation, partly because it's essential to context sensitivity.

Do not even think of trying to control or constrain the specific language used by people within the organisation as they go about their day to day business

What you mean, your enduring story, rather than your choice of phrasing, will determine recognition over time

So in your day to day business let people speak for themselves.

Do not even think of trying to control or constrain the specific language used by people within the organisation as they go about their day to day business.

Don't confuse the plausibly useful elements of guidelines for professional writers with internal culture change. Culture change is a big ambition, and you can do things to make people more thoughtful writers without having to address that bigger ambition.

So while you need to encourage people to be clear, helpful, and usually honest in what they write, these are all hygiene factors and you'll only lose clarity yourself if you try to dress them up with brand jargon.

Your corporate identity, if it is real, will come through, because it depends not on quirks of vocabulary or even style, but on what you say over time (just like a human identity). What you mean, your enduring story, rather than your choice of phrasing, will determine recognition over time. Teasing out and framing that story effectively is another project altogether.

There are those who maintain that good or correct grammar doesn't really matter as long as people understand you... (But) good grammar matters exactly as an aid to help people understand you

Apostrophes

Apostrophes indicate something missing, a letter or letters missed out. This is why they feature in contractions like “can’t” or “don’t”.

Their use in contractions is completely straightforward, with the one glaring exception of it’s/its. We’ll come back to that.

Apostrophes also show possession, as in “the children’s book”.

In fact (it’s a kind of fact) they are still marking missing letters. In the Germanic origins of English, possession (what’s called the genitive case) was usually shown with an extra “e” or “es” as it still is in much modern German. As English evolved those “e”s disappeared, but left the apostrophe in their wake.

People seem to get confused between this possessive function and plurals. The distinctions are clear and people only make this mistake because they’re not thinking about that they’re trying to say, about what they could possibly mean.

In the case above, “children” is already plural. There is no such word

3 Grammar and the changing language

Don’t worry, I’m not going to pull out a schoolmasterly cane, but I think it will be useful to make a few points about grammar.

There are those who maintain that good or correct grammar doesn't really matter as long as people understand you. This is to get things backwards. Good grammar matters exactly as an aid to help people understand you.

In many informal contexts, where it's likely there's an existing and friendly relationship you can give yourself some latitude.

I don't mind if greengrocers write "tomato's" on a blackboard because in this context the required communication is VERY simple and it doesn't matter what I think of the grocer's writing skills.

For most professional communication contexts you don't have this luxury. You can't make these assumptions about your audience and you can only stray from good grammar at your peril.

Then again it's important to understand what we can mean by "good grammar".

Grammar is not like arithmetic, or even the laws of physics. It describes the structures and the norms of a language, but language is an evolving thing, so nothing can be set in stone.

This does not mean that anything goes. If grammar is more about convention than rules, the conventions still apply. In most respects those conventions are clear and our ability to communicate with each other fully depends on their mutual recognition.

This is nowhere more apparent than in the dreaded apostrophe (see sidebar). Why it should be dreaded is a bit of a mystery, because its use isn't really complicated. But its position can change the meaning of a sentence. If you simply omit it not only are you making a mistake that's as bad as any spelling mistake, but you're removing a useful way of expressing meaning.

There's also the truth that if you omit it you make yourself look stupid or ignorant to a large number of people. Why would you want to do that? It's no different from spelling, where again convention rules, and if you're going to deviate from convention there needs to be a good reason. Yet there are groups of people,

as “childrens”. The apostrophe and “s” are there to show that the book belongs to the children.

As if to compensate for their uncertainty people often insert apostrophes where they are not needed, in simple plurals. Probably the most frequent example is in dates: 1950s, not 1950’s.

Plurals can be confusing, especially when a legitimate apostrophe is involved, and yet it’s here that apostrophes are most important, making distinctions in meaning. The only way to get it right is think about what you’re saying.

Here are some legitimate variations on a theme.

The rabbit’s eating lettuce.

The rabbits are eating lettuce.

The rabbit’s foot will bring you luck.

The rabbits’ pelts might be valuable.

There are rules at work here, but no easy golden rule. You have to think about meaning, about how the different words relate to each other, and use the apostrophe to clarify that relationship.

The worst sins are those of omission, though it’s not always easy to spot where an apostrophe is needed. The flexibility of English means you can often omit prepositions like “of”, so you might not even realise you’re expressing a genitive (possessive) relationship. So “twelve years a slave” is fine (it’s omitted the “as”, because you can in English) while “seven years’ bad luck” needs the apostrophe because there’s an “of” missing. You need to be vigilant and to think about that lurking “of”.

Finally, just to confuse things, there’s “its” and “it’s”.

“It’s” is a contraction of “it is”. If you’re not sure whether or not to use the apostrophe, try expanding the phrase. If you can write “it is” and still make sense then you need the apostrophe.

“Its” on the other hand indicates possession, as in “the car has had its day”. It’s not particularly logical, but as long as you remember the tip about whether or not you can expand the phrase to “it is”, you won’t go wrong.

including local councils, who have decided that apostrophes are too confusing. Sorry guys, but it’s not up to you, and if you want to turn your ignorance into a flag then go ahead.

Conventions matter, but there’s quite a lot of ignorance about them, so beware the pontificators. If you want to end a sentence with a preposition, then really you can. And if you want to start a sentence with “and”, really you can. These things represent decisions about style, and maybe even tone of voice. They are not governed by rules.

Just as conventions change, so do the meanings of words, both across time and cultures. “Presently” means “immediately” in US English, while in the UK we’d take it to mean “in a while”. In my book “disinterest” does not mean “uninterest”, “refute” does not mean “deny” and “enormity” doesn’t mean “really big” (to take just three common examples), but all are lost causes now.

It can be irritating watching such change, particularly when it seems to be driven only by pretentiousness; why say “refute” when “deny” is there for you and more readily understood?

But because we’re governed by acceptance we have to go with the flow. I’d still use what feels like the proper form, and if I was editing someone else’s copy I would feel tempted to correct these words. But I know full well current usage means they’re barely incorrect.

As a general rule you should err on the side of caution and avoid contentious structures or vocabulary. If you’re trying to explain or persuade it’s best not to risk annoying people.

This precautionary principle also applies to more complex sentence structures, particularly where colons and semi-colons push themselves forward. If you know how to use them then they’re handy, but if you’re not sure you should be able to restructure things so you can do without them (in other words, use shorter sentences).

What if you have a creative urge to bend the rules, or at least the conventions? You need a good reason, and you need to be able to show that what you’ve done is better than whatever could have been achieved within convention. It’s quite likely that it won’t be better, and at least this self-discipline should prove a sanity check.

So ...

I hope you've enjoyed reading this guide. I hope you find it helpful in your work.

I hope you'll think seriously about joining this quiet movement for change, pushing the idea of being human as a better way forward for business and indeed all organisations .

I hope you'll spread the word, and share this guide with anyone you think could benefit.

And if you need some help with writing, or thinking about writing, just talk to me.

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