



The Language Landscape

Beyond “What’s It Called?”

Names are primary and fundamental brand-building tools. To attract the attention and interest of your target audience, you’ve got to have an engaging answer to the question, “What’s it called?” As the first point of contact, a brand name makes a powerful statement. But it’s not the last word.

Important as the initial introduction is, lasting brand relationships are based on a total brand experience. A brand name -- corporate, product or service -- inhabits a larger language landscape. That landscape is central to the overall brand experience, providing a context in which your brand name will be understood and appreciated.

The language landscape that surrounds your brand name can encompass everything from other deliberate verbal branding elements -- such as taglines, descriptive product vocabulary, advertising or promotional slogans, and website text -- to more organic verbal expressions, such as CEO speeches, press releases, corporate white papers, and the greeting the public receives on the telephone or in person.

Effectively leveraging all verbal brand expressions to create a coherent, compelling and consistent brand experience is in the best interest of your brand-building endeavor, and will help you establish and maintain meaningful brand relationships.

Where Am I? Clues, Cues... and Queues

“Attention Kmart Shoppers.” “You’ve Got Mail!” “Tall, Grande, or Venti?”

Hear these familiar words, and you’ll be in no doubt as to where you’re shopping, what online service is delivering your electronic mail, or whose coffee you’re about to consume. They are part of the language landscape that surrounds some very powerful brands, and they signal a desire to establish a particular kind of brand relationship.

If you want to make a strong brand impression, providing pervasive and persistent brand identity clues is a good idea. But it isn’t always necessary to hit the audience over the head with your name to further the brand relationship. As these examples show, in the effort to reinforce your brand identity and engage your audience, actually mentioning the brand name is optional. What contributes to strong brand recognition is the creation of a unique brand vocabulary that provides essential clues as to what your brand should mean to the audience.

Kmart’s famous call to action makes it clear Kmart shoppers are offered special values. AOL’s style of email alert makes it clear that you don’t have to be a technology geek to enjoy the information superhighway. Starbucks’ insistence that you order according to their unique size classification makes it clear that that what you’re about to enjoy is no regular cup of joe.



A Coherent Brand Experience

“After my Grand Slam Breakfast, I’ll take the kids for a Happy Meal lunch”

Ask for that particular brand of morning fare at the Ritz, and you’ll probably be on the receiving end of a politely quizzical look at best, a condescending stare at worst. But at Denny’s, home of all-American comfort food, you’ll soon be tucking into a hearty and decidedly non-continental breakfast presented, more often than not, with casual friendliness.

Next stop, a burger joint -- but which one? If it’s a genuine Happy Meal your kids crave, then your next destination should be the home of that very happy clown, Ronald McDonald. While virtually all fast-food outlets offer some version of a “kid’s meal,” not all have been as successful at verbally branding their version because the names given to their products are not indigenous to the brands’ natural language landscapes. “Happy Meal” has become part of the fast-food vernacular because that name is so perfectly in keeping with the brand’s distinctive personality. Hence, what you call the items on your product or service menu should be an appropriate and readily understandable outgrowth of your verbal brand strategy.

Brands Are Organic

The language landscape of your brand presents myriad opportunities to create a distinctive and compelling verbal brand experience that references the value proposition, reinforces core brand attributes, expresses real brand personality, and indicates a particular attitude toward both the message and its intended audience. All this goes to the heart of a brand promise.

A concerted effort to create a verbal context that reflects and supports your brand promise may be less than apparent to the naked eye, but any disconnect in the verbal brand experience of that promise will be duly, and negatively, noted. It’s all about attitude: toward the message, the medium, and the market.

If you want to position your brand as “the voice of a new generation,” then you would be wise to speak to your audience in contemporary language. If you would like to be perceived as “the voice of authority,” then you’d best avoid any tentative turn of phrase and emphasize expertise. If you want to convince me that your products are easy to use, then for heaven’s sake the installation instructions had better not be incomprehensible tech jargon.

Cultivating a Compelling Language Landscape

To be effective as brand-building tools, all your verbal brand expressions have to be properly aligned with your brand’s strategic intent. They should reflect your desired brand image and personality. They should be consistent with the core brand attributes and the unique brand promise captured by your brand name. And they should be communicated in an appropriate and distinctive tone of voice.

The Martha Stewart brand is a stellar example of a coherent language landscape supporting a continuously cogent brand experience. Wherever and however you encounter the Martha Stewart brand, its brand voice and vocabulary are distinctive and consistent, its universe of brand attributes relevant and coherent, and its unique brand promise perfectly clear and compelling.



Whether you are watching the television show *Martha Stewart Living*, listening to the daily radio program *askMartha*, flipping through the magazine *Living*, or shopping on the website *marthastewart.com*, one can't help but recognize and appreciate that the Martha Stewart brand is remarkable in both conception and execution -- regardless of how unrealistic the prospect of actually picking your own Easter basket grass may be.

This brand derives much of its power from the fact that all available language tools are brought to bear in a concerted and consistent verbal branding effort. Every one of the Martha Stewart brand's verbal expressions -- the product names, the language used in tables of contents, the vocabulary of advice or instructions and the tone of voice in which they are delivered -- are effectively aligned with the brand's core attributes. Approachable, optimistic, encouraging, straightforward, and quintessentially American, the Martha Stewart brand takes full advantage of the opportunities verbal branding presents to create a robust brand experience. It's a good thing.

© 2001 *Metaphor Name Consultants*

Metaphor

Name Consultants

articulating brand promise™

582 Market Street

Suite 300

San Francisco, CA 94104

Tel 415•433•6387

Fax 415•433•6389

www.metaphorname.com