

Every Brand Needs a Distinct Tone of Voice. Here's Why—and How to Create It

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Like people, companies make impressions. And good impressions pave the way for solid business relationships.

At the most substantive level, how an organization *behaves* can make all the difference. Think of the oft-cited Tylenol poisoning scare in the 1980s. Johnson & Johnson, the drug's manufacturer, protected people first and its own brand second, halting all advertisements for the pain reliever and immediately recalling the product at a loss of more than \$100 million dollars. Those were highly effective actions.

But how a company *communicates*, particularly in written form, is also key to the impression it makes. Does a hip, edgy fashion brand sound stuffy, flat, or—even worse—just plain stupid in its content? Does the promotional arm of a serious news organization sound glib, flighty, and uninformed?

Brand tone of voice is vital to expressing your brand identity.

The correct tone can help a company distinguish itself from competitors, reinforce the brand's personality, and underpin the brand's promise to its customers.

For instance, a toy company that focuses on educational products might want to adopt a somewhat formal tone, whereas one that focuses on novelty entertainment would benefit from a more casual, fun voice.

In addition to expressing your brand's personality, your tone of voice needs to be consistent: Whether a customer hears your ad on the radio, scans the About Us page on your website, or reads your blog, the same recognizable voice needs to come across loud and clear.

What Is Brand Tone of Voice?

A brand's tone of voice encompasses the types of words used, the way sentences are constructed, and the way language flows. Tone of voice is used in all communications across all divisions, departments, and countries—so that everything your company writes sounds like the

same brand language.

The way a company writes is one of the most powerful ways to communicate its vision. When organizations write in a distinctive and consistent tone, people want to start—and keep—working with them.

One consistent voice throughout all content helps build a strong brand. And, ultimately, everything a company does is about strengthening its brand to win business.

Which Companies Need Tone of Voice?

Every company should take a thoughtful approach to its tone. *Every company.*

How often have you heard the phrase "It's not what you say, it's how you say it"? It's a common saying because it's true.

Global brands with business and employees around the world, in particular, need a coherent global tone that works in different languages. The same holds for companies that use a lot of outside writers and those with hard-to-explain technical services.

Five Steps to Creating a Distinctive Tone of Voice

These five steps appear reasonably simple, but each requires a well-thought-out plan. And the first unwritten step is to know what needs to be done for—and to plan how your organization will complete—each of the following five steps:

1. Know your brand's DNA

Identify your company's values—the qualities that you and your colleagues hold dear and stick to, no matter what. They are the essence of who you are. And they are the qualities you want to imply or expressly state in all your communication and content.

Acting responsibly is an integral part of the Disney brand. IBM is about "making a new future for our clients, our industry and our company." And Google's mantra is "Don't be Evil." All three companies reflect those values in the way they write.

2. Establish your tone of voice 'characteristics'

Once you have identified your company's values, determine two or three tone of voice characteristics that reflect those values and the personality you want to convey.

A leading-edge research company that prides itself on turning complicated research data into bold insights that customers can use to build their business, for instance, might *stand for* innovation, expertise, and trust... but they want to *sound* intelligent, energized, and relevant.

3. Conduct a content audit

Look at the content and promotions your company has created. Try to identify their tone of voice. Is it in keeping with the characteristics you've chosen to support your brand's values? Is the tone consistent across platforms, target audiences, and countries? In essence, are you pleasantly surprised or does the content's tone make you cringe? If it's the latter, you will have lots of examples of what not to do when writing your *Tone of Voice Style Guide*.

4. Create a style guide

Once you have defined your tone of voice, it is vital to make sure it's used in all written communication, consistently, across platforms and countries.

One way to help ensure that happens is to create an easy-to-understand style guide for all employees and freelancers. Explain what tone of voice is and why it's important. Explain the details of your chosen tone of voice characteristics.

For example, if you want your tone to be "energized," explain what that actually means when they sit down to write. Active, not passive, language? A conversational flow? However you define your chosen characteristics, make the definition clear and easy to follow. A good place to start is by providing before-and-after examples of writing. Use a "Write Like This" and "Not Like This" structure, for example.

Whenever possible, use examples of actual text from your content audit. Doing so helps anchor how you are asking employees to write in the real-life communication your company uses.

5. Communicate, communicate, communicate

Typically, lots of people write on behalf of a company. Creating content is not always limited to the marketing department.

Once you've completed your Style Guide, make sure it is read and understood. Conduct training sessions with all marketers, either in person or via a webinar. Create webcast or video for folks to access as needed. Make sure every freelancer writing for your company has a copy.

How to get the word out will be different for each company, but the guiding principle is this: Don't let your style guide sit on a shelf, unread!

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Creating a brand tone of voice may initially seem a daunting task. But it's not if you follow a structured process. And it is worth the effort.

If it's done right, everyone who writes for your brand will have clear directions about how to write in a way that supports who you are, what you stand for, and why people should do business with you.

And it will simply become the way they write.