Brands put most of their marketing efforts into visual content, but this inundation of images means an instantly recognisable 'verbal identity' is just as important to giving communications consistent personality.

By Mindi Chahal

It is often said that a picture is worth a thousand words but today there are millions of visual cues grappling for consumers' attention. Marketers are therefore increasingly looking at nuances in their use of language to differentiate their brand and connect with consumers beyond predominantly graphical means such as advertising.

‘Verbal branding’ is about adding a personality to communications so that consumers can distinguish between competing brands. It enables the public to connect with products and services based on language, tone of voice and stories that go beyond a logo or image and, importantly, touch all aspects of the business.

Rob Gaitt, brand director at Fred Perry, says: “There’s so much noise in the world and you’ve got a very small window to initiate a conversation with people. If people aren’t interested in what you have to say, they’ll go elsewhere.” He believes it is “nearly impossible to convey depth and emotion via a two-dimensional image alone” and therefore Fred Perry puts as much emphasis on verbal branding as it does on visual (see Q&A, page 20).

What is a verbal brand identity?
One aspect of verbal branding is tone of voice, and getting it right can be valuable to brand owners.

After rewriting 30,000 words of call centre scripts, BT has been able to save £6m, according to head of brand language Jon Hawkins. He admits that measuring the effects of having a verbal brand identity is “one of the hardest parts of the job”, but there are ways of overcoming the challenge, including brand tracking and focusing on the areas where the identity is applied.

“Measurement is fiendishly difficult but you measure depending on where you are applying the guidelines,” says Hawkins. “In call centres, you can measure the average length of a call [if] you make the call concise. [Then] reduction in average call length translates into millions in cost savings.”

The brand, which works with agency The Writer, follows a clear set of principles for verbal identity that it rolls out through workshops to marketing teams and agencies.

[It’s] 80% good writing principles and 20% [what] we can own in our writing style that makes us distinctive,” explains Hawkins.

“The 80% [asks]: does this writing sound like a monolithic corporation writing to a faceless customer or does it sound like one person writing to another?” He adds.

The other 20% is about personality as BT looks to get “elements of boldness, ingenuity and warmth” across in its writing, which Hawkins says is “about using interesting vocabulary, analogies without slipping into clichés [and] using interesting turns of phrase.”

According to new research by The Writer, which is based on the views of 197 people involved in their company’s visual or verbal brand identity, more than 90% who claim their organisation has a tone of voice say it is used in most or all parts of the business and 60% value it as much as their
visual identity. The vast majority (80%) of businesses with a tone of voice say it will remain equally critical or become more important over the next few years.

Changing voice of brands
The way brands talk to customers is evolving, though, and the conversation needs to change depending on the audience and where it is taking place. Whether you are a consumer brand or a business-to-business company, the way you make a person feel through verbal communications matters.

Arabella Preston and Charlotte Semler, co-founders of beauty brand Votary, chose to develop their business in "a modern way" that involves having direct conversations with customers, since they believe social media is critical to brand building and is revenue generating.

Prior to setting up the business, Preston worked as a make-up artist for high-profile clients and was keen that the verbal identity of the brand showcased her skincare knowledge, but did so in an accessible way.

"It's essential to make that sale to the individual consumer; they are buying because we are in conversation with them. They trust our expertise," says Semler.

Votary uses its verbal branding in communications across all channels, from the label on a bottle and leaflets to in-store signage and video content online.

Semler says: "Everything goes through the same process. So if we are writing a tweet or a headline on our homepage, we know what it needs to look like, what it needs to do and how it needs to feel because that has been clearly defined."

The business owners were able to name an entire range in 20 minutes because the verbal identity was "nailed down". Semler adds: "We know what's right for the brand and what we are doing. That was immensely satisfying from an efficiency point of view."

The brand works with agency Verbal Identity, whose founder Chris West argues that "visuals attract and verbal engages". Building a rapport with consumers and putting them at the heart of communication has also been essential for Chester Zoo, which worked on its verbal brand identity with agency Music ahead of launching its 'Islands' campaign to promote a new £40m attraction last year.

The zoo's marketing manager Jenny Tegg says: "We didn't want it to feel like a big brash extension to the zoo, so the campaign was created from the point of view of the visitor."

The zoo's membership rates have gone up 22% over the past 12 months, which Tegg believes indicates that people are engaging with the brand on a more personal level thanks to the changes it made to its verbal identity. She adds: "[Consumers] have felt that sense of connection to us as an organisation [and] that is important. People are choosing us because they feel we are talking directly to them."

Adding a human voice to communication is perhaps even more important for service-
Q&A ROB GAITT, FRED PERRY
BRAND DIRECTOR

What does verbal branding mean to Fred Perry?
It is nearly impossible to convey depth and emotion via a two-dimensional image alone, so the right words are integral to communicating a story to the viewer. There's a lot of authenticity at Fred Perry, so we're lucky that we don't have to make up our stories; the trickiest part often is what we choose to leave out. It's about curating these stories and our use of language reinforces the brand spirit.

How has language helped create a brand ethos, tone of voice and identity for Fred Perry?
We still communicate the way Fred did - clear, simple, abrupt at times but always true. This runs across internal and external communications. It's important that we have consistency of messaging and that means we use the same vocabulary and sentiment. We're definitely not aiming for big shiny corporate messaging - we prefer meaningful conversations with real people, sometimes just one-to-one.

How do you use language to differentiate the brand across channels, online and offline?
The topics we talk about don't change and that's an active decision. The evolution of how we can talk with our customers has changed, though. Our approach is simple: we look to how our fans talk to us and one another and how we make it feel. It's important we speak as equals. Marketing is about repeating yourself without becoming boring. For us, that means exploring the subtle nuances and emotion behind our product. We're less about telling people the 'what' and more concerned with the 'why'.

Is verbal branding as vital as visual communications?
Brands have always been obsessed with what they look like and that's not going to change. The ones doing it well are obsessed with all facets of their brand and ensuring how they talk and what they have to say is aligned.

FRED PERRY EXPLORES SUBTLE NUANCES AND EMOTION BEHIND ITS PRODUCTS

Rob Gaitt
What does verbal branding mean to Fred Perry?

TONE OF VOICE IN NUMBERS

£116,000
The average amount businesses spend on developing a tone of voice

5 years
How often most businesses refresh their tone of voice

£1.6m
The size of the UK tone of voice market

£26m
The size of the potential market for tone of voice in the UK

SOURCE: THE WRITER

Based businesses since they can be regarded as faceless, according to Anne Hobson, head of customer communications at United Utilities. She was keen to create verbal branding that was about the "people, not the pipes".

"Our people are caring and spend the majority of their time trying to put our customers first," she says. "Our verbal identity needs to reflect that, so we look at all of those touchpoints, whether that is on the website, via a leaflet or letter, speaking to us on Twitter or walking past a site where we are digging up the road - we want them to feel we are honest and straightforward."

Similarly, B2B telecom company XLN has overhauled the language it uses to appear more approachable to customers. As a B2B group, company brand director Julian Przygodzki, says it is important that it uses the right tone of voice as "XLN is the same as the people we are selling to".

The company has also created what it believes is a distinct personality through the language it uses, and has created a radio ad that Przygodzki hopes is instantly identifiable as XLN. He says: "I want people to hear us on the radio and without hearing what the brand is [I believe] people can recognise who [we are by] the way [we] express [ourselves]."

XLN works with agency Calling Brands, which created a quiz reducing brands down to words to see if the industry could tell them apart based on mission statements, web copy, boilerplate text and campaign lines.

For example, Worldwide Cancer Research, Cancer Research UK and Macmillan Cancer Support are similar charities, but when looking at their straplines consumers can quickly work out which belongs to each charity because of the language used and tone of voice.

Worldwide Cancer Research’s ‘Cancer knows no boundaries. Fortunately, neither do we’; Cancer Research UK’s ‘Look out cancer, we’re coming to get you’; and Macmillan’s ‘If you’re living with cancer or love someone who is, we can help. Don’t face cancer alone’ are all quickly recognised.

Consistency across the business
A consumer can come into contact with a company through a variety of brand communications and can also buy via a number of channels, so the language and tone of voice must be consistent across all aspects of an organisation.

If the personality and service conveyed through language on a print advert does not match the experience a customers gets when speaking to a representative in store or on the phone, it can be problematic.

Hawkins at BT describes this as the "knottiest problem" and says he works harder on the other aspects of a customer journey than on the marketing because it is about "how to make language ‘zing’ within a call centre".

He adds: "It’s about working out how you make the language principles that you are trying to embed within the organisation stick. They have to stick [in conversations with] call centres, when customers get their bill and when they read terms and conditions on their bill. What a company is really like comes out in [these] interactions."

Likewise, Tegg at Chester Zoo says the brand has an end-to-end commitment to tone of voice. "It’s the way we talk about recruitment, the digital experience, online content, advertising, email; it’s in the promise of every single piece of communication because we don’t want that disconnect between what we promise and what we deliver," she adds.

Consumers’ lives are becoming increasingly cluttered, so content that is just visually attractive is not enough. In order to be truly engaging across all channels, brands need to create a clear verbal brand identity that is instantly recognisable and will hold customers’ interest in the long term.