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A Tag Line That's Got What It Takes

(In Sales & Service Excellence: Make it a Selling Machine)

“Tag Line” is a trifling term for what used to be, not long ago in branding history, one of the most powerful, shimmering tools in the marketer’s tool kit.. Today, its art and application seem all but lost. The term has indeed become what its name implies-- a pleasant sounding slogan *tagged* onto a brand or pasted below a logo. A feel-good aspiration or superfluous throw-away. It need not be.

In the hands of the brand masters of the 1950’s and 60’s, a “tag line” was designed to be a precision-cut selling gem, the catalyst for a singular, Dominant Selling Idea for the brand. It infused your name or logo with instant selling power *on sight*. It was your core idea gift wrapped in a magic word package, signed, sealed and delivered to the customer’s mental doorstep. Any place it appeared became an instant selling place—a billboard, the side of your building, your logo, golf shirts, business cards, the employee kitchen wall or the refrigerator door. It was a golden brand asset.

For too many companies today, tag lines have evolved to a different state, as evidenced by the following lines that were ripped from today’s advertising pages:

*With You All The Way. Driven to Excellence. Ideas for Living. Leading the Way.
Expect Something Extra. We Mean Business. A Passion to Achieve. Inspired to Do Great
Things. Putting You First. Doing What We Do Best.*

If you're not sure whether these are worthy of greatness, or the ten cent table at your next tag sale, here's a quick mental test you can do whenever you see one to decide if it's a selling idea or a just another fluff ball. It's doubly important to ask when you're creating one for yourself:

- 1) Does it directly state, or support a unique selling idea? (Read: does it promise a specific, tangible difference I want to buy?)
- 2) Is it ownable--i.e., could another product substitute their name for yours and say the exact same thing?
- 3) If answer is yes to 1 and 2, then is it evocative, colorful or phonetically memorable?

Most of us would agree that the lines above fail questions one, two or all three. In fact, most come across as corporate self-congratulation for some positive character trait that's positively forgettable for everyone but the company's CEO and Chief Marketing Officer.

Now, into the tepid broth listed above, throw in:

"Join the Navy and See the World."

"Please Don't Squeeze the Charmin"

"Federal Express: When It Absolutely, Positively, Has to Be There Overnight."

"Ivory: 99 and 44/100 Percent Pure."

"National Enquirer: Inquiring Minds Want to Know."

"Perdue: It Takes a Tough Man to Make a Tender Chicken."

"Bounty: The Quicker Picker-Upper."

"Johnson's Baby Shampoo: No More Tears."

“A Diamond is Forever.”

“Rocky(the movie): His Whole Life Was a Million-to-One Shot”

Specific, colorful, superlative, important, memorable. They rarely make ‘em like they used to. And judging by what you see at the end of print ads, commercials and logos these days, most companies don’t know what they’re missing and can’t get it right. But now that you know, you can.

Fail-Safe Ingredients for a Great Tag

Take the three core message parts of what we call an “idea centered brand” and blend them together. It makes differentiating substance nearly inevitable, as long as you cover all three. The three ingredients are: 1) Your unique, ownable category or specialty, (*Poisonless Roach Trap, SUV- Wagon, Jumbo Jet, Heat Pump*) 2) Your articulated positioning statement (*We’re the company that’s best at_____*). 3) Your exclusive name (*Wet-Ones, Cheez-its*). The exact recipe proportions are left up to the cook’s taste. But if you’ll examine the famous classics above, you’ll discern the three core ingredients in all of them.

Having these core ingredients in-hand *before* concocting your tag line is a positive sign that you’ve given yourself the most crucial advantage in branding by default: It means you’ve articulated a definitive, own-able positioning and a unique, memorable name *first*, before attempting any other down stream expression like a tag line. Power positioning and naming are beyond the scope of this three column article. For, us, they required the scope of a full length book. The point is, having positioning and naming in

your quiver automatically sets you up for a great tag line, if you then stay focused on the ingredients.

Here are some additional tips:

1) The “tag lines must be short” mandate is a myth. Look at one of the best DSI Tags Ever, Fedex’s original *When it Absolutely, Positively Has to Be There Overnight* which originally put them on the map. Or Vicks Nyquil: *The Nighttime, Sniffing, Sneezing, Coughing, Aching, Stuffy Head, Fever So You Can Rest Medicine*. At 14 words, Nyquil is obviously an extreme. If you can say it in two or three words, say it. But what’s important is that it works, not that it works in three words or less.

2) Rhyming and other tenets from 8th Grade Poetry class are good. Some people stick their noses up at rhyming. Tell that to William Shakespeare, Dr. Seuss or any bard who’s defined the culture or been around for 500 years. Rhyming is a musical, memory trick that’s as old as time. Alliteration, consonance and other simple poetry devices add to smooth satisfying feelings to the ear and tongue. People love them.

We should all be so lucky to come up with a tag like *Takes a Licking and Keeps on Ticking*. Or *The Whole TV Scene in One Magazine*.

3. Putting your brand name in the tag is not always required. It’s a case by case judgement, based on the context and structure of the line. *Join the Navy and See the World* is a natural to include the brand name. *Please Don’t Squeeze the Charmin* is another one. *It’s not TV, It’s HBO* is a third. But VISA doesn’t require it. The line is simply locked under the logo: *It’s everywhere you want to be*.

The most famous of all times is M&M’s: *The Milk Chocolate Melts in Your Mouth, Not In Your Hand*. It was such a complete, evocative, statement of a selling

proposition, it's not only lasted for over 60 years, it is a total selling package all by itself, inextricably linked to the name every time you hear it or even think it. You're messaging job is 90% done, before you've even begun.

All in all, when it comes time to find your tag line, it's nice to be Shakespeare but you don't have to be. You'll get 95% of the way there by adhering to the proprietary guideposts of your positioning, your category and your name. And that's 95% better than *Passionately Inspired to Achieve Inspiration*.

Bill Schley and Carl Nichols are the principals of david, inc., a strategic branding firm in Southport, Connecticut. Their latest book, *Why Johnny Can't Brand: Rediscovering the lost art of the big idea* from Penguin Books is due out in November, 2005. You can find them at www.davidid.com