

# Establishing Your Company's Voice

by Lauren Smith

Imagine you're attending a large party. The air is filled with the clinking of glasses, loud music and a cacophony of chatter. Somewhere from the midst of the noise you recognize the voice of an old friend. It's coming from across the room but there's no mistaking it because it's a voice so distinctive and familiar you'd know it anywhere. In today's competitive business environment can your company's voice be so easily recognized above the din?

Today, companies pour millions of dollars every year into putting their messages before the public trying to be noticed in a communication-saturated world. But often these messages just don't resonate because it is not immediately clear who the company is or what it stands for. Often this is because people are getting only half the message. The most effective messages transmit on two simultaneous channels. The first, and

most obvious, contains explicit communication. This is information either in the form of words or graphics designed to inform or educate. Explicit messaging communicates on a cognitive level. Most companies do a good job transmitting on this channel. Just as important, but often neglected, is the second channel which contains implicit messaging. Implicit messaging communicates to people on an intuitive, emotional or psychological level. It is when the messages on these two channels work in concert that communication is most effective but, unfortunately, corporate communications rarely take full advantage of it. They often develop communications materials that do a good job communicating explicit messages but they are ultimately less effective because little consideration is given to the implicit messages. Or even worse, they confuse their readers by presenting an implicit message that conflicts with the explicit communication.

Companies that learn to synchronize these messages often enjoy great success. There are numerous examples of this but one that has always stood out for me is Starbucks. While the company's success can be attributed to a wide variety of factors, they have done an excellent job of creating a communications design system that communicates equally well explicitly and implicitly. Their communications are clear, focused and articulate while at the same time employing a rich visual vocabulary that distinguishes them and appeals emotionally to their target demographic.

Implicit messaging tends to make the explicit message "stick" because people are much more likely to believe



conclusions they've drawn for themselves over what is told to them by someone else. When an explicit message is "packaged" in implicit messages that prompt one to draw the right conclusions for oneself it makes a powerful impression.

### **Establishing a Communications Vocabulary**

Just as implicit messages are built from a vocabulary of words, numbers, and visual symbols, implicit messages draw from a rich vocabulary all their own. Symbolic and cultural references, color and texture, and style are but a few. In order to communicate effectively and consistently, a unique vocabulary must be defined, codified and applied to all corporate communications. A communications vocabulary may consist of the company logo, a system of colors and type styles, a unique approach to photography or illustration—even the type of paper used for printing.

Careful consideration should be given to every component in the mix to be sure it conforms to the communications criteria and is consistent with the company's explicit and implicit messaging. When implemented consistently it will not only ensure a seamless presentation across all communication vehicles but will give the public a sense of the company's essence or personality and core values. It should express at a glance who you are as a company and clearly separate you from your competitors.

### **Defining Your Company's Essence**

How does one define this intangible corporate "essence"? While the process is largely intuitive, it can be objectified somewhat by addressing the following fundamental questions. This undertaking requires objectivity, honesty and a good deal of soul searching.

#### *1. Who are your audiences?*

Most companies have a number of audiences to which they communicate—customers, employees, shareholders, subcontractors, the media etc. The larger the company the longer the list. It is important to define not only who your audiences are but what their concerns are and how the company wishes to be perceived by them.

#### *2. What are your core values?*

What do you stand for as a company? It is important here to avoid the obvious clichés such as quality, service, and customer satisfaction. These values may be accurate for you and should be considered as a part of the mix but they are not unique. Try to dig a bit deeper and define precisely what these and other values mean within the context of your business and marketplace.

#### *3. What is your corporate "style"?*

Does your company have a conservative posture or are you entrepreneurial and creative? Are you quiet or brash and colorful? Somewhere in between? Where in the spectrum do you fall? Are you a Ford, a Mercedes or a Ferrari? Are you caviar and champagne or a burger and fries? An Armani suit or Polo shirt and jeans?

#### *4. How do your customers see you?*

Try to collect objective comments from people outside your organization that know you well. The more the better. For a small company, collect at least a few dozen comments from a wide variety of sectors. For a large company a much larger sampling of perhaps several hundred comments will be required. How do your customers describe you? Your competitors? This can be a real eye opener. Once collected, organize the comments thematically and see what patterns begin to emerge.

#### *5. Where will you be in 5 to 10 years?*

Keep in mind that decisions you make now about how you present yourself to the public can be far reaching. Will the look you establish now wear well into the future? Once an impression is well established it is difficult and expensive to change.

Once you feel you've developed an accurate idea of your company's essence try expressing it in a short description—no more than a page or two. This can serve as a good platform for your design consultant to begin creating your corporate voice. Or better yet, get the designers involved at the beginning of the process. They can be invaluable in walking you through the process and providing an objective viewpoint.

## **Creating a Communications Design System**

Once the above criteria is established the process of translating these intangibles into a concrete expression of the company begins. Work with a qualified design consultant to develop visual models based on the criteria. Our firm usually presents 3 to 5 different “looks” that we feel do a good job of defining the company. Take care not to be dazzled by the beautiful mockups. Be sure to measure them carefully for appropriateness. Ask yourself the following questions:

### *1. Do the designs “feel” like our company?*

What you’ll see at this stage will no doubt seem a bit foreign to you. It’s to be expected. You don’t buy a suit right off the rack. You try it on, look in the mirror and wear it for a while to see if it’s “you”. It might take a while for any design to feel comfortable to you on a personal level but the important question is does the design feel right in terms of how it represents the company?

### *2. Do the designs meet the objectives?*

Refer back to the criteria. Go over it point by point and ask the designer to justify his decisions. Any designer worth his salt has made every design decision for a specific reason and should be able to articulate it. Of the designs presented which most accurately meets the criteria?

### *3. Are the designs extensible?*

Have the designer explain how the elements of the design can be used as a part of a larger system. How would the look and feel extend to brochures, web site, direct mail, or advertising? What elements of the design would remain consistent across all communications media? The objective is twofold: to accurately represent the company visually and to develop a system that will ensure appropriateness and consistency.

Once an appropriate look has been adopted, it is important that the visual communications strategy and philosophy be articulated so that all company personnel and outside contractors have a clear sense of how to express the company’s voice. This is often done by creating a document that explains the philosophical foundation of the system as well as the specific

components. This is crucial for large companies that work with numerous designers, advertising agencies, PR firms and other creative and production contractors. The purpose of the communications standards manual is to ensure that the product of all of these varied contractors meet the company’s objectives and clearly express the corporate voice. Small companies may be able to achieve this same sense of consistency by working with a single creative firm or agency who acts as the guardian of the company’s image.

The communications standards manual typically contains, although is not limited to, the following components that make up the company’s communications vocabulary:

1. Philosophy statement explaining the company’s values and how they are expressed through the system
2. Examples of specific components of the company’s literature program and web site showing how the company’s look is applied across the system
3. Writing style and tone
4. Color palette for print and web
5. Typographic style
6. Style of illustration and/or photography
7. Graphic symbols library
8. Literature grid system
9. Paper guidelines
10. Environmental standards

## **Considering the Larger Picture**

Our discussion has centered around the application of the voice concept to visual communications because most corporate communications take this form, but in order to be ultimately effective it should be applied even more broadly. The same values and philosophy that drive the company’s visual communications program can and should affect other key areas of the company as well. For example, if your company has a dress policy, how does that fit within the construct of the corporate voice? What about how your offices are decorated or the way your employees answer the phone? How might it effect your selling process or presentations? Remember, a company’s voice is the sum of all the various ways it communicates to the public even down to the smallest and seemingly insignificant detail.

Maintaining a consistent corporate voice has never been more challenging. And the larger and more decentralized the company, the more difficult it is to project a distinctive voice across interdepartmental, national, international and cultural boundaries. A voice that is effective and consistent in both its explicit and implicit messaging.

It is an unprecedented challenge for professional communicators but its importance cannot be overstated and the company that fails to rise to it will find itself largely unheard amid the chatter of today's information overload.