
The language manifesto

How changing your language can improve your brand, culture & communication.

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Peel back the marketing & what are you left with?

Most companies' marketing is pretty slick.

Carefully crafted messages, hand-picked by artisans to deliver salivating customers ready to buy. And a steady stream of employees ready to jump on board.

So, as customer or employees we lap it all up – the flagship phone, the pension promise, the career move to end all career moves.

Then one day you have a question. And you ring up and hear:

“Your call is important to us, please hold...”

Do you actually feel important?

Or when you have to complain and are told:

“This oversight is being taken very seriously and has been brought to the attention of senior managers.”

Do you believe it's being taken 'very' seriously? And what's an oversight, anyway?

Or the door you were about to fling open has a notice saying:

“Access to this room is strictly prohibited without permission. Unauthorised persons will be subject to disciplinary procedures.”

How welcome do you feel?

The truth. Revealed

What do all these examples (which are all real by the way) have in common?

Each one unwittingly reveals their organisations' attitude towards their customers and employees.

“What?” I hear you say, “surely they're just standard? The things we hear and read day-in-day-out?”

Well, yes they are, and that's what makes them so interesting.

The people writing them probably didn't give them too much thought.

But when we write for our organisations, we unconsciously give clues to what our organisation truly believes.

As soon as you've sliced through the marketing veneer you're left with all the real stuff, in every nook, crannie and legal statement.

And that's what gives the real game away.

Let's translate:

“Your call is important to us,
please hold...”

is really saying

“We want to look after you,
but customer service people
are expensive...”

or, if we were to be harsh

“Customers are an inconvenience.”

“This oversight is being
taken very seriously...”

says

“We don't really care. But we
need to look like we do.”

“Access to this room is
strictly prohibited...”

tells us

“You're not welcome here.”

Change language. Change behaviour

No one sets out to annoy their customers. But somehow systems and processes can make it hard to keep them happy.

Inside the business no one wants to alienate their colleagues. But tricky trading, demanding investors and constant pressure get in the way of thriving relationships.

Language and culture change are related.

You probably want your culture to be engaging, your brand compelling and communication to be more human.

But change is hard. Many change programmes fail because they're difficult to implement and people resist.

That's why language gives you a fantastic opportunity.

What if instead of:

“This oversight is being taken very seriously...”

You said...

“I'm sorry, we made a mistake and here's what I'm doing to put it right.”

Language is the glue holding everything together

Why does language reach so deep?

We express our vision and strategy in language.

We lead and engage people using language.

We manage and bond through language.

Language is in everything from your strategy to your performance contracts. It's all over your marketing, fundamental to customer service and it's enshrined in your ts&cs.

Language is your main tool for getting the vision and ideas in your head into the minds and focus of your organisation.

What signals are you sending?

From your marketing to terms and conditions, everything you say about customers and the way you say it sends a signal about what you think of them.

A signal your people will pick up and act on.

It's the same internally, from every email announcement to the sign shouting PLEASE WASH YOUR COFFEE CUPS. Every time you talk about your people it sends a signal about what you're focused on.

A signal that tells your people what you think about them.

Simply changing your language can have a profound effect on the signals your organisation picks up - about how to behave and what you expect of them.

And change doesn't take an army of consultants - you can start small, with just one communication.

Language improves your brand, culture & communication

When you focus on language, you help everyone connect. Not just employees with professional facades, but as humans.

They're more energised and engaged and more willing to cooperate to overcome barriers.

They feel part of something bigger than themselves, more into your mission.

You help them to be more confident responding to customers' changing needs.

You get your customer service singing in tune with your marketing.

You find it easier to give customers what you promised.

You make your customers happier.

You get fewer complaints.

When you change your language, you change how people behave.

More human.

What to do next

Your language gives you away - it reveals what your organisation really believes.

Your language 'is' your behaviour.

And because language is baked into everything you do, it can be a subtle but powerful tool for change.

So what are you going to do about it?

The great thing is you can start on something small:

1. Look at your email footer, the notices around your office or maybe an email.
2. Think how the tone might come across to an outsider.
3. Decide whether it needs changing and make a start.

Then let me know how you get on at **ben@benafia.com**. And if you see the potential and would like to take things further, read on...

If you want to take things further?

- 1 Choose a key moment in your customers' journey.
- 2 Gather a small group of the people with a stake in that moment - operations, sales, marketing etc.
- 3 Define what how that moment would feel, when you're performing at your best.
- 4 Gather everything your customers experience in that moment - emails, web pages, technical docs etc.
- 5 See how everything you've gathered contributes to that ideal customer experience.
- 6 Identify the gaps and make a plan to address them.
- 7 Take action.

If you'd like any external perspective, or someone to facilitate, drop me a line at **ben@benafia.com** or **+44(0)115 878 9685**.



About Ben Afia

I've helped companies manage their brand and tone of voice longer than most – starting at Boots in 2001, when managing language was just becoming a thing. I created a new brand tone and helped people across the business to get better results working with copywriters.

In 2005, with a first baby on the way and a week from buying a new house, Boots made me redundant. Which seemed like the perfect moment to start my own business.

I've since helped Norwich Union become Aviva, Powergen transform into E.ON and given Google the language to help its advertisers and agencies develop digital marketing skills.

I've helped Twinings name their teas, Vodafone build better relationships with customers, and AirBP to get in touch with their heartbeat. That work was so effective they were still using my words 6 years later.

I was a catalyst and director behind the launch of writers' collective 26. And my claim to fame is helping Ronseal work out what to say on the tin.

If you found this interesting feel free to pass it on to friends and colleagues. And if you have any questions, just get in touch:

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