

MEANINGLESS SLOGANS LEAD TO WEAK BRANDING

By Stephen Winzenburg

After wading through the recent onslaught of holiday ads I've come to the conclusion that many major businesses do a poor job communicating their identities by using meaningless phrases in taglines or slogans.

I first noticed this when I saw an odd commercial where a baby was hitting a button that said "easy" on it. As items fell off store shelves the TV ad made no sense if a viewer didn't understand what store the button represented. When Staples was mentioned it seemed like an afterthought. Advertising copywriters probably thought they created a clever concept, but there was not a unique connection between the store and the slogan "that was easy" (which oddly appears in all lower case in the print ads).

Then I started glancing at some of the newspaper inserts and most had slogans that meant absolutely nothing. "Do Stuff" could come from just about any place but the company that thinks those two words helps its image is Radio Shack. Our regional department store Younkers says "Come to the Right Place." JCPenney's is the worst with "Every Day Matters," about as innocuous as a phrase can get. This is the department store that used to say "It's All Inside," another worthless statement.

"Save Money. Live Better" is the poorly-punctuated phrase from Wal-Mart that is probably not what tumbles off the lips of those entering the superstore ("Hey, Trish, let's save money and live better"). The old "Always Low Prices" was much better because it communicated exactly what the chain was all about.

Generic phrases abound. Kohl's says "expect great things." Gordmans, a Midwestern discount chain, uses "give the unexpected". Underneath the Sears logo it now says "where it begins." Not only are these phrases interchangeable, but what's the deal with all using lower case? Do they think they are more "personable" that way? It just looks like a mistake when compared to other ads.

Some try to use slogans to give a flavor of what the company is about. World Market's is "One World. One Store." (Funny, I thought that was Wal-Mart!) The Figi's catalog truly offers "Gifts in Good Taste." Dunham's Sports says "Get in the Game" (though it now sounds too much like a High School Musical song!). Hershey's "Making Memories for a Lifetime" doesn't work as well as the old-fashioned "Say it With a Kiss." Oral-B uses "Brush Like a Dentist," but how many of us have ever seen him clean his own teeth?

Historically the best slogans or taglines have communicated the uniqueness of the brand. AT&T's "Reach Out and Touch Someone" tied an emotional connection to pushing phone buttons. "Finger-Lickin Good" turned the messy negative of eating Kentucky Fried Chicken into a tasty positive. "The Pharmacy America Trusts" clearly states that Walgreens deals in prescription drugs, is available across the country and is a secure place to go when sick.

Some companies are proud of their attempt at branding, such as Office Depot screaming “Taking Care of Business” throughout print and broadcast advertisements. The problem is that from a consumer standpoint, there’s no way of knowing if the song is talking about Office Depot or competitor OfficeMax. The slogan is appropriate for the product, and the song is a classic for the middle-aged audience, but it’s too easy to get the two business stores confused—even more so because OfficeMax doesn’t apparently use a slogan.

Home improvement stores are more successful at making distinctions. Home Depot’s slogan simply says, “You Can Do It. We Can Help.” Lowes is slightly sexier with “Let’s Build Something Together.” But often simple is best, such as regional Midwestern dealer Menards using a unique logo with a chubby font and broadcasting ads that end with the jingle “Save Big Money at Menards.”

Others that come across well include “The Magic of Macy’s,” something that creates an emotional image while using the store’s name. The 2008 Honda CR-V ads say “Something New to Crave,” finding a clever way to sneak the car’s name in the slogan. Target just needs its red and white logo to make young shoppers salivate. “You’re in Good Hands with Allstate” is still strongly comforting. And people here in farm country will never tire of standards like “Nothing Runs Like a Deere.”

Slogans won’t necessarily increase business but they can be used to make a company stand out or improve an image. If advertisers really want to “Expect Great Things,” then agencies are “Where It Begins,” where “Every Day Matters” for copywriters who will “Live Better” if they “Do Stuff” that is distinctive or memorable. It’s that easy.