



Slogan as a Brand Précis

By Max Sutherland

How do you come up with a great brand slogan? Its role is broader and more fundamental than just communicating a benefit claim or an advertising sign-off. A slogan should précis the very meaning of the brand and act as a verbal watchdog to help maintain its future focus.



A brand name is a 1 or 2 word advertisement.

When the key image attribute is infused into the name, this works well. Examples are the wonderfully descriptive car seat called 'Safe and Sound' or brands like 'Lean Cuisine' and 'Sealy Posturepedic'. However, brands that can stand-alone as compressed communication like this are exceptional. To be able to communicate the essence of a brand in one or two words is rare.

That's why the **brand slogan** has a key role and is often deputized to help out.

The implied benefit of safety is infused into the brand name "Safe and Sound". So too is there an implied benefit in 'Lean Cuisine' (slimming) as well as Sealy Posturepedic (kind to your back). With the Energizer battery there is also a vague benefit implied but just in case there is any doubt as to exactly what it is, the slogan makes it clear: *"It keeps going and going and going"*. Another example is Karry-Lite luggage. If there was any doubt about its benefit claim, it is clarified by its slogan *"Takes the 'lug' out of luggage"*.

The role of a slogan however is broader and more important than simply a benefit claim. If you précis, in your slogan, what the brand stands for, it performs its most valuable role not as a claim but as a commitment. Let me explain.

Role of the Slogan

Some brands are passionate about what they stand for. Others don't stand for much at all and regard slogans as merely sales hooks. The chief marketing officer at Avis once [commented on](#) their slogan 'Avis, *We try harder*' saying *"It is not a slogan. It's the DNA of the place"*. A truly successful slogan, if it is to continue to stay successful, précis not just a benefit but a commitment – what the brand stands for.

Similar commitment is also evident in Allstate Insurance and summed up in the slogan: *"You're in good hands"*. Federal Express summed up theirs in the famous slogan: *"When it absolutely, positively has to be there overnight."* When the slogan conveys the brand's DNA, it doesn't just communicate a benefit, it helps lock in discipline and corporate commitment to deliver that benefit.



Who is the slogan aimed at? Most people would say the customer. However the slogan as a précis of the brand's DNA will target not just customers but management and employees. The truly great ones are designed to mirror and reinforce a workplace commitment to brand delivery. They remind management and employees as well as buyers. They are aimed internally in the organization as much as they are aimed externally at the buyer. They are a verbal watchdog that helps guard the brand against straying away from what it stands for.

Dr. Max Sutherland's column is published monthly and posted on the web at www.sutherlandsurvey.com.

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Brand Discipline

This watchdog perspective is crucially important for managing the brand over time. It helps lock-in discipline and focus. Each time you communicate some aspect of your brand (via a TV ad, a radio spot, a print ad, the Web or PR), it should relate back to the brand DNA as précised in that slogan. Each communication should be more memorable because the message links to that slogan and reinforces that slogan. The slogan acts as a linch-pin and provides an easy mnemonic - a bridge to get from the brand to all those aspects of the brand that have been communicated over time.

Fidelity: Remaining True

Allstate with its DNA précised in the slogan *"You're in good hands"* is an example of a company that has remained disciplined and true over time to what it stands for. It has retained the same slogan for nearly half a century. Likewise BMW has remained loyal for the best part of half a century to its slogan *"The ultimate driving machine"*.¹ On the other hand, Coke has had [105 slogans since 1886](#) and Pepsi has had more than 30 since 1903. Smirnoff changed 14 times in 40 years and Burger King switched repeatedly until returning to the old *"Have It Your Way"*.

Discipline means keeping sight of the need for each message to reinforce previous messages and to reinforce the précis of the brand's DNA. In this way the communications mutually reinforce each other and consistently build on what the brand stands for as expressed in that slogan.

This takes discipline not just on the part of the initial brand manager but also the *next* brand manager and the next and the next. Further, it takes discipline by the various ad agencies that construct messages for that brand over time.

[Howstuffworks](#) says the purpose of the slogan in an advertisement is the leave-behind, or the take-away. It is the sign-off that accompanies the logo that is designed to leave the key brand message in the mind of the target and says: *"If you get nothing else from this ad, get this..!"* I have no argument with this except that when you look closer, at what is sometimes meant by the 'leave behind', the reference is to a précis of the *ad* message - not the brand DNA message.

When brand campaign messages proliferate, the brand slogan should not change. If it does, then pretty soon the brand loses sight of its own essence. Buyers get confused and wonder does the brand truly stands for *anything* if it keeps switching?

Consider Pepsi as an illustration because it stands in stark contrast to brands like Allstate and BMW. Yet Pepsi as a case study also allows that adaptive change and a refocusing can be positive but only if in refocusing, the brand can *stay* focused.

Pepsi – A Case Study

In 1915 the essence of Pepsi was summed up in its slogan *"For All Thirsts"*. It is rare that an adaptive change in a brand's DNA is necessary but Pepsi is one example of a brand that made a successful change in its DNA along the way. (Change should normally be resisted unless the reasons are overwhelmingly compelling.) Pepsi's change is clearly reflected in its slogans.



From the original slogan *"For All Thirsts"*, Pepsi by 1961 had begun to adapt to the new emphasis on youth and successfully infused strands of youth and new-generation into its DNA. This manifested in slogans such as these:

1961 - *Now It's Pepsi, For Those Who Think Young*

1963 - *Come Alive! You're In the Pepsi Generation*

1984 - *Pepsi, the Choice of a New Generation*

Note that instead of one single expression, Pepsi used what amounted to slogan sequels to express the youth concept. i.e. different verbal expressions of the same underlying concept.

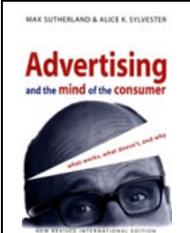
But then in 1992, Pepsi switched to “*Gotta Have It*” (What *were* they thinking?). Then the following year it switched back (to youth) with “*Be Young, Have Fun, Drink Pepsi*”. Then the next year it switched again to “*Nothing else is a Pepsi*”. (Duh!) And then in 1999 it switched again to “*The Joy of Cola*”. And so on.

Pepsi succumbed to using short term campaign slogans that reminded people, not of the brand DNA but the current advertising campaign. The précis is not of the brand’s long term DNA but this year’s big, creative ad idea.

Using slogan sequels, as Pepsi did to express youth and new-generation is not so bad but they do loosen discipline. Once a company accepts changing the form of words of the slogan, even when the underlying concept stays constant, it makes it more vulnerable to further change and further weakening in its discipline further down the track. It becomes easier to slip into thinking of the slogan as a disposable advertising slogan rather than a fundamental expression of the brand’s DNA.

As I said in [Bonding Slogan to Brand](#), today we seem to be caught up in an orgy of slogan switching. When brands are flagging, and even when they are not, it seems advertisers are increasingly tempted to break with last year’s slogan. Each new brand manager seems to want to put a personal stamp on his/her brand so the attachment is often no more enduring than the length of that brand manager’s tenure. That’s a recipe for disaster and we might note that many of these brands (including Pepsi and Coke) are not traveling too well right now.

Jim Twitchell who is an English professor turned marketing professor, likens a brand to a good story. He says a brand is a story attached to a manufactured object.² A mark of a good story is that the gist of it can be easily condensed into a sentence or two. Lousy stories, he says, are unfocused. They have no center. Good ones often whirl around a small nucleus. That’s a useful way of looking at the job of building a brand and using a consistent slogan to précis its brand DNA.

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Notes

¹ In certain regions, BMW has also used “*Sheer driving pleasure*” (e.g. Hong Kong) and it was recently reported (Ad Age) that BMW were changing away from “The ultimate driving machine” but this has subsequently been denied.

² James B Twitchell, “*An English Teacher Looks at Branding.*” Journal of Consumer Research Volume 31, Number 2, September, 2004