Taglines Are Dead: Who killed them, and how we can bring them back to life

By Ryan Millbern


Most higher education taglines are Weekend-at-Bernie’s-esque lifeless husks that do little more than reflect the pool of generispeak in which they float. While there are some shimmering linguistic pearls in the sea of stank tagline clams, even great taglines appear dead by association, their luster clouded by the oily excretions of their counterparts. But how did the tagline sea get so polluted with garbage? Or, if I can mix metaphors, why did taglines flat-line?

Fear kills bold, distinctive taglines—the fear that a core message will not be conveyed, that a constituency’s needs not be met, that a concern raised in a focus group go unaddressed. To assuage these fears, institutions of higher education turned to generic language. Why? Because generispeak is safe, it’s familiar, and, by saying nothing truly distinctive, colleges and universities imagine that they can say everything to everyone (or I would argue, nothing to anyone).

But the safety of vague and all-encompassing words like “community” and “character” alone did not kill taglines. Our attitude toward marketing messages fired the first shot; writing-by-committee fired the second; group testing, the third. In this autopsy of taglines, we’ll further examine these causes of death and then pull a Dr. Frankenstein and jumpstart their hearts.
Challenged to Feel: A Problem of Cultural Climate

While taglines were originally created to elbow out space in a crowd of messages in an attempt to appeal to shorter attention spans, we’ve evolved beyond that epoch. Our attention spans have shortened, and at the same time, the number of taglines has multiplied exponentially. Now, in this cacophony of taglines, yours could be dead by association.

Woe is we in our information-saturated world. We are the recipients of a flood of marketing messages, all challenging us to feel, to pay attention, to take action. And though we often are moved to feel sorrow or pity or joy, though we are occasionally motivated to change the way we live, we just as frequently feel overwhelmed, confused and anxious. Rather than act, we give up. Rather than drink in, we tune out. As a result, many of us feel obligated to protect our attention and our mind-space—and rightfully so.

We go on the attack, ready to tear down the claims made by this storm of language and images, ready to disagree, or better yet, disengage. The first step in salvaging precious consciousness is to drop out of the deluge. By virtue of the energy and attention required to extract meaning from words—those subtle signifiers, those glam-less signs—they are the first to be overlooked and undervalued. Subsequently, taglines too fall by the wayside.

High Expectations

Many taglines die at the hands of the people who want to see them succeed the most—namely, the marketing communications staffs of colleges and universities, the presidents, the board members, the devout senior professors who have helped build the academic reputation of an institution through years of tireless service. These well-meaning individuals often commit the cardinal sin of tagline creation—they expect a single phrase to communicate every subtle nuance of their institution’s complex character, its rich heritage, its founding principles.

While great taglines can and do reflect, in part, the mission, personality and vision of a college or university, we can’t expect them to communicate everything. Some messages must be articulated elsewhere—through body copy and headlines over the course of a campaign, through compelling photography, through conversations between admissions counselors and prospective students. Particularly now, in an overwhelmingly visual culture, taglines must give up part of the ghost.

As a result of these high expectations, people often insist that more words be added to the tagline to ensure that every strength is highlighted, every goal from last year’s strategic plan echoed, every core value communicated, every constituency’s interest represented.

Crafted by Committee

No surer or swifter death ever befell a tagline than to feel the fingers of admissions, advancement, the president’s office, the internal marketing staff and the external marketing firm prod and shape it into a lifeless blob. A tweak here—“Can we work in the word ‘excellence’?” asks the president—a revision there—“The board would like to see an option that includes the word ‘commitment’”—and soon, what started as a musical, smart and most importantly, coherent tagline has its spine crushed, its heart ripped out and its brain squeezed into a grey neuron graveyard.

The Futility of the Rubik’s Cube Approach

I call this prose massage—this tinkering, tweaking and word-swapping—the “Rubik’s Cube” approach to writing taglines. I have to admit that I stole this from one of our clients, who, after witnessing two tagline options test poorly in a focus group with alumni, offered this analogy: “It’s like a Rubik’s Cube,” she said. “We have these five words and we’re trying them in different combinations to find out which combination fits and then resonates with our audiences.” Needless to say, my heart sank.

This isn’t the way memorable taglines are created, I thought. There’s no formula. A successful tagline should never be weighted down by two or three “required” words, nor relegated to the world of mathematical puzzles.

No, your tagline must sing.
You’re Not Just a Number Here.

Everyone here is so friendly.
...No, Really!
It’s different here.
People really are friendly.

The food is terrible.

Parking is inadequate/too expensive.

You’re not just a number here.

Our professors are so dedicated.
They even post their office hours outside their doors and give us their home phone numbers.

Our students learn how to become leaders.

Top Ten Things We Hear on Every College Campus

Everyone here is so friendly.
...No, really!
It’s different here.
People really are friendly.

The food is terrible.

Parking is inadequate/too expensive.

Our professors are so dedicated.
They even post their office hours outside their doors and give us their home phone numbers.

Our students learn how to become leaders.

Try these two exercises:

1. Pretend these 10 statements are completely off-limits. What would you say about your organization if you could not say these 10 things?

2. Try taking one of these statements and illustrating it through a specific (and ideally, true) story. Doing so will move the claim from the realm of the generic to the particular—so that you can be certain no one else will be saying exactly what you are.

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