

In Corpoetics Nick Asbury turns the glib pronouncements of corporate websites into strange and revealing poetry that challenges brands' attempts to own the language

TEXT BY
NICK ASBURY

A small revolution has taken place in the world of copywriting. Once a neglected backwater, the written word has become a central part of the branding landscape. Few brand guidelines documents now appear without at least a cursory nod towards 'tone of voice'. Language has become an accepted tool of differentiation, in much the same way as colour or typography.

At least, that's the theory. Visit a few company websites and read their corporate overviews and you find the same words appearing with alarming frequency. Global. Vision. Strategic. Passion. Team. Deliver. Results. For all the hefty consultancy fees that go into creating differentiation, there's a pervading sense of sameyness – as though each company is drawing on an identical palette of words, just applying them in a different order.

As one of many writers who fight a daily struggle against this creeping uniformity, this is a disheartening state of affairs. It was in this state of mind that, about a year ago, I found myself cutting and pasting some 'mission statement' text from a corporate website and idly rearranging it until a poem appeared. It felt like a subversive exercise, born out of a sense of resistance. It soon became an addictive practice, like a perverse form of Sudoku.

Various blue-chip brands came in for the treatment. Halliburton's corporate overview was scarily dehumanised in its original form, and even more so once you mix it up:

*We operate in broad array,
starting with production –
finally to infrastructure and abandonment*

Transformed into a limerick, Goldman Sachs still sounds unmistakably like itself:

*You wish to submit a concern?
A concern regarding the firm?
Who are you? Are you new?
You will learn who is who.
You will learn to submit to the firm.*

Other brands revealed hidden depths, Lastminute taking on an unusually mournful quality:

*You've got that dreamy look on your face.
You want to career down a mountainside
in a perspex ball:
shake up the days, dazzle the world with
your escapades.
You wake up here, in a shabby career,
in a perspex ball, not travelling at all.*

I'd been dimly aware of writing in a tradition of found literature extending back to Ezra Pound and TS Eliot, through the textual 'cut-ups' of William Burroughs, and up to the present-day Found Poet Laureate, Donald Rumsfeld. His mystifying pronouncements famously take on the air of poetry even before you scramble them. All it takes are a few line breaks:

*A Confession
Once in a while,
I'm standing here, doing something.
And I think,
"What in the world am I doing here?"
It's a big surprise.*

May 16 2001, interview with *The New York Times*

A more familiar reference point was the trend for found graphics documented in *Found* magazine, the increasingly popular *Ephemera* Society Fairs, and an ever-growing network of design blogs. Ace

Jet 170 (acejet170.typepad.com), which is hosted by Belfast-based designer Richard Weston, is one of the earliest and best examples. Weston talks of the thrill of finding beauty in unexpected places: "You find something surprising and interesting, you want more and you're compelled to search for it. It's a fruitful compulsion for a designer, fuelling your attempts to be 'original' in some way by triggering inspiration from things others aren't necessarily looking at."

There is something in found objects that taps into this child-like curiosity in all of us: a sense of serendipity and fascination with a half-glimpsed backstory. Using these objects to create something new sets up a dialogue that enriches the finished piece. American writer Annie Dillard talks about the doubling effect you get in found poems. "The original meaning remains intact," she writes, "but now it swings between two poles."

But what does all this say about brands? I came away more convinced than ever that a brand's soul lies in the words it uses. I tried taking Innocent's prose and turning it into something sinister or unlikeable. It didn't work. There's something hardwired into the vocabulary that keeps it sane: the simple, Anglo Saxon, monosyllabic words. Conversely, faced with the Latinate abstractions of Halliburton, it's almost impossible to write something with any warmth or charm. In the

*"This was an exercise in gentle rebellion
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corporations to control language –
something with which I'm complicit"*

BELOW: Napat ntint riora
rioraintui urque nimus otoqu
cagat rolym oecfu iunto ulosa ui
urque nimus otoqu cagat rolym
oecfu iunto ulosaui urque
nimus otoqu cagat rolym oecfu
iunto ulosaui urque nimus
otoqu cagat rolym oecfu iunto
ulosaui urque nimus otoqu
cagat rolym oecfu iunto ulosa

former case, Innocent has built its reputation on an enlightened awareness of how words affect people's perceptions. Halliburton is at the other end of the scale: a company that uses words as a screen to hide behind, rather than a window to reveal.

At root though, this was an exercise in gentle rebellion against the continuing attempts by all corporations to control language – something with which I'm complicit in my day-to-day work. We all shift uncomfortably when we hear McDonald's campaigning to change the definition of a McJob, as though meaning is something that can be bought or imposed by decree. The text we read on websites is subject to subtler commercial pressures, ruthlessly 'optimised' until its relevance to a search engine marginalises its relevance to the reader. Meanwhile, few brand owners and consultancies overlook the chance to trademark a word or phrase, before policing its usage via Google Alerts – those embedded spies in the linguistic system.

Maybe there is something equally questionable in this idea of creating an ownable 'tone of voice'. Tone is something you can be alive to, but it's not something you can own. Language can't be pinned down that easily, because it's like herding cats. Words are inherently mischievous things that refuse to be corralled, and can quickly turn against you. To use another piece of found text (from the poet Derek Walcott): "The English language is nobody's special property. It is the property of the imagination: it is the property of the language itself." ■

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Thu, Sep 25, 2008 14:23

Subject: Lastminute.com
Date: Thu, 25 Sep 2008 14:20:55 +0100
From: <Nick Asbury>
To: <creativereview@centaur.co.uk>

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shake up the days, dazzle the world with
your escapades.
You wake up here, in a shabby career,
in a perspex ball, not travelling at all.

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Date: Thu, 25 Sep 2008 14:20:55 +0100
From: <Nick Asbury>
To: <creativereview@centaur.co.uk>

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