

Make your pronouns personal

 By Leigh Crymble

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If the last time you thought about a pronoun was in a high school English class, it's time for a refresher. These delicious parts of speech exist in two extremes: under-utilised in the branding and marketing world or over-used to the point where consumers find the messaging inauthentic.



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So, how should pronouns be used in marketing communications and why is the (strategic) use of them so important when it comes to persuading consumers to feel and act in certain ways?

WIIFM (What's in it for me)

As marketers, we often ascribe personalities and other human-like qualities to brands in an attempt to personify the brand and create consumer-brand connections. Pronouns, by their very nature, imply intimacy and can be used to create a sense of closeness between consumer and brand.

Over the past decade, linguistic psychologists have demonstrated that the type and number of pronouns used as a proportion to the total number of words in a text can reveal psychological states, intentions and social relations between the text producer and the text receiver. In fact, pronoun use is often more predictive of these variables than any other content.

But, choosing the appropriate pronoun, in the appropriate context, is the challenge. Where first-person singular (I, me, mine) is suited for moments where certainty, commitment and truth are being emphasised, first-person plural (we, us, our) indicates psychological closeness and bonding. Second-person singular (you, your, yours) helps an audience to quickly connect your copy to their own lives with “you” making them part of the story and not just an observer.

The psychology in consumer-brand relationships

These subtle wording changes in marketing communications play a significant role in affecting people's evaluations of real-world brands, and audience segmentation is just as critical here. This was best seen with a linguistic experiment done with Wells Fargo Bank.

As part of the experiment, researchers asked participants to read a passage of text taken from a print advert for the bank. They were then asked to rate their attitude towards the bank and their likelihood of recommending the bank to others. The text was the same for all participants except for one small difference. The pronoun. One version used the phrase “Together, [you and Wells Fargo] make whatever decisions necessary to ensure your life goes uninterrupted” while another used “Together, [we] make whatever decisions necessary to ensure your life goes uninterrupted”. As a control, a third version used “Together, [Wells Fargo] makes whatever decisions necessary to ensure your life goes uninterrupted”.

The version that led to the most favourable attitudes toward the bank wasn’t a simple we/you answer. It depended on if the participant was already a bank customer, or not. For existing customers, the “we” message got the best results with participants reporting that they felt a reinforced sense of closeness with the brand. For non-customers, the “we” version fared badly as participants found the promise hollow and insincere.

In the same way that we use more distance-implying language when we meet a stranger, communicating with prospective customers should be just as cautionary. Forced intimacy, too soon, raises just as much of a red flag in human interactions as it does in brand ones.

The next time you’re reading marketing copy, pay attention to the pronouns. The more human, and sincere, we can be in our marketing efforts, the better our audience will connect with us.

ABOUT LEIGH CRYMBLE

Leigh Crymble is a behavioural linguist and language practitioner and founded BreadCrumbs in 2019 - South Africa's first Behavioural Linguistics firm that is rooted in behavioural theory and combines sociolinguistics, psychology and marketing principles to create personalised and persuasive communication.

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