

Why Three-Word Taglines Don't Work

ASSOCIATIONS NOW, June 2010

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The right tagline can create passion and involvement. Here's some expert advice on how.

More than 9,000 organizations, including car dealers, real-estate agents, and nonprofits, use the three-word tagline "Honesty. Integrity. Service." And hundreds of thousands more use similar forms. If there were any merit at all in the three-word form, you'd think there'd be at least one in the top-100 tagline list. But there isn't. And here's why:

Simplistic. Awkward. Ineffective.

First, a period-separated tagline goes about things backwards. Instead of working to earn the labels and letting people come to their own conclusions, it tries to force qualities into our minds. Sadly, shortcuts rarely work in establishing a brand.

Second, the three chosen words are typically not words one can effectively ascribe to your organization. If you say an organization other than yours is trustworthy, that carries some weight—it puts your own reputation on the line for someone else. However, if you say your own organization is trustworthy, it causes people to question your motives. If I were to introduce myself and say, "Hi. I'm Tate Linden. Trustworthy. Honest. Respected," you'd likely think I was not only socially awkward but also probably lying.

Third, with so many other organizations using similar phrases within a tagline, no one will notice or remember your version. The difference between "Service. Dedication. Trust." and "Performance. Persistence. Honesty." may seem large when the brand is your own, but it is inconsequential to others. Want evidence that they don't work? Try to recall the words I used to describe three-word taglines in italics above. You're in the minority if you can remember more than one.

So, what should an association do instead?

Ignore consensus. A brand that is backed by consensus is beige and unforgettable.

Instead, pursue concepts that get people passionate, involved, and maybe even arguing. Take a risk. Be willing to allow a bit of passionate discourse. In the end, you'll have an identity that pulls in a segment of highly involved members instead of one that just takes up space.

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