More Than Words: a Psycholinguistic Perspective on the Properties of Effective Brand Slogans

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Effective slogans increase brand awareness and strengthen brand attitude. Taking a psycholinguistic perspective, the authors contribute the first ever analysis into how the unique lexical, semantic, and emotional properties of a slogan’s individual words combine to influence slogan recognition and slogan liking.

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A Psycholinguistic Perspective on the Properties of Effective Brand Slogans

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Slogans help define a brand’s identity and strengthen its positioning. Firms across the world spend millions of dollars each year creating and communicating slogans, such as “The Ultimate Driving Machine,” “What’s in your Wallet?,” and “Like a Good Neighbor...” (Edwards 2011). Surprisingly, despite the ubiquity of slogans in today’s marketplace, there is little consensus on what makes for a “good” slogan. (Bradley and Meeds 2002; Dass, Kohli, Kumar, and Thomas 2014; Kohli, Leuthesser, and Suri 2007; Kohli, Thomas, and Suri 2013; Lagerwerf 2002).

We attempt to improve understanding of what makes slogans effective by drawing on the rich literature in cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics. Specifically, we draw on evidence that the lexical, semantic, and emotional properties of individual words influence both memory and perceptions (Cortese, Khanna, and Hacker 2010; Kensinger and Corkin 2003). Whereas previous studies have focused largely on exploring the effectiveness of slogans at the composite level, we investigate what constitutes an effective slogan by examining the psycholinguistic characteristics of each of the discrete words in the slogan. This approach has the unique potential to advance the literature by unearthing key insights into the distinctive word properties of the most effective slogans, offer practical advice into optimal word-choice strategies, and deliver some actionable tools for a manager’s slogan design toolbox.

Effective slogans should increase brand awareness and strengthen brand attitude (Keller 1993). Because memory for marketing communications influences brand awareness, we investigate how the linguistic properties of a slogan’s words influence slogan recognition. Additionally, because the extent to which consumers like a marketing communication directly and indirectly influences brand attitudes (MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch 1986; Mitchell and Olson 1991), we further investigate how consumers’ liking of slogans is influenced by the linguistic properties of a slogan’s words. These constitute our dependent variables in the analysis (i.e., slogan recognition and slogan liking) for which we postulate and test seven hypotheses concerning the influence of eight distinct psycholinguistic variables.

Citing dual process theory (Evans 2003), we hypothesize that the psycholinguistic properties of slogans that serve to increase processing fluency will increase liking, but simultaneously reduce recognition, and vice versa. This would have significant managerial implications for slogan design. More specifically, slogans employing words that require more effortful system 2 processing should be more easily recognized, but at the expense of reduced liking. The reverse should be true for slogans dense in words that facilitate a more fluent system 1 processing. The underlying nature of this dual-process account serves as the key theoretical basis for each of the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Slogans with a greater number of words will be recognized more, but liked less.

Hypothesis 2: Slogans dense in high-frequency words will be recognized less, but liked more.

Hypothesis 3: Slogans dense in orthographically dissimilar words will be recognized less, but liked more.

Hypothesis 4: Slogans dense in concrete words will be recognized more, but liked less.

Hypothesis 5: Slogans dense in words acquired at a young age will be recognized less, but liked more.

Hypothesis 6: Slogans with the brand name included will be recognized more, but liked less.

Hypothesis 7: Slogans dense in positively valenced and arousing words will be recognized more, but liked more.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

We test our hypotheses on a sample of 845 real slogans for brands spanning multiple industries, product classes, and geographic locations. We measured the psycholinguistic properties of each of the 845 brand slogans by breaking each slogan into its individual words, and then used established psycholinguistic databases (e.g., the English Lexicon Project; Balota et al. 2007) to obtain values for each of the eight psycholinguistic variables. We then computed slogan-level averages by taking the average score across all of the words in each slogan for each independent variable (e.g., slogan concreteness = the average concreteness across all the words in the slogan).

We assessed slogan recognition and liking by surveying 594 undergraduate students at a large U.S. university. Participants indicated the extent to which they liked 50 randomly selected slogans and then were presented with a surprise recognition test for the 50 slogans they evaluated with 50 distractor slogans included (see Cortese et al. 2010 for a similar example). Consistent with the hypotheses, brand slogans using words that facilitate faster, less effortful processing were more liked but were less likely to be correctly remembered. Conversely, slogans with psycholinguistic properties that stimulate a more effortful, conscious processing were associated with higher levels of recognition but less favorable liking ratings. Specifically, the results indicate that, on average, slogans employing more common, less orthographically-confusable, and less concrete words are more liked. Keeping the brand name out of the slogan likewise increases slogan appeal. On the other hand, longer slogans that are comprised of less common and more concrete words exhibit higher levels of recognition. Including the brand name in the slogan is also associated with enhanced memorability.

LAB EXPERIMENT

Next we conducted a confirmatory laboratory experiment (N = 252) to test the results of the empirical analysis and improve the liking or recognition of real brand slogans by altering the psycholinguistic properties. More specifically, to improve slogan liking, synonyms that were more common, less orthographically similar, and

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less concrete were sought to replace a slogan’s existing core words. For example, Club Med’s slogan “the antidote for civilization” was revised to “the cure for mankind.” Similarly, to improve recognition, synonyms that were less common, more orthographically confusable, and more concrete were pursued. For example, Toyota’s slogan “get the feeling” was changed to “snag the sensation.” Slogan liking and recognition were assessed on a sample of 252 undergraduate students at a large U.S. university. Results corroborated the findings of the previous empirical analysis. For each of the unique slogan sets the revised slogans outperformed the original slogans in the expected manner.

REFERENCES


