DEFINE YOUR BRAND’S PERSONALITY

What is your brand’s personality?
And what kind of relationship do you want to have with your audiences?

At the beginning of this book we said that tone of voice is personality expressed in words. And that’s true.

Successful brands — to a large extent — act like people. They make plans and decisions based on a set of beliefs or values. They have goals in life, and rules of conduct to guide the way they achieve them.

They give you a consistently clear sense of what they do, how they’re going to do it, and what they’re going to be like to deal with. And this allows you, as a consumer, to decide whether you want to form a relationship with them, based on a reasonable expectation of what it will be like.

When you deal with IKEA, for example, you’re probably expecting friendliness and a creative, can-do approach. In fact, you might be very disappointed if you don’t get that.

Yet if you deal with a budget airline, you might expect a different relationship where you’re prepared to accept a no-frills relationship that often dispenses with courtesy.

In the same way, you’d be surprised if Microsoft tried to go all funky and down with the kids. You’d probably be a little distrustful of them if they did.

Successful brands communicate in ways that consistently express their personalites.
Because brand language is rooted in personality, the first step to creating a tone of voice is to think long and hard about what your brand's personality really is.

We often come across tone of voice guidelines that are unhelpfully vague. They'll tell you that the writing needs to be "friendly" and "accessible." But there are many, many ways of being friendly, ranging from formal but agreeable, all the way through to matey and over-familiar.

To create a tone that's right for your brand, you need to be more precise. If your brand is friendly, what kind of friendly do you mean? If it's professional, what kind of professional? Stuffy and old school? Or technically proficient? Or do you just mean someone who'd wear a tie to work rather than a T-shirt?

Be true
When you're writing down words to describe the personality of your brand, keep it real.

If your organisation is staid and traditional, it's no good trying to make it something it's not.

You'll just end up seeming like a middle-aged man trying to dance the Lambada at a family wedding. He thinks he's strutting his stuff just fine, but everyone watching is thinking, "Ah, middle-aged man having a moment." They know his true self is most at home in an armchair listening to Gardeners' Question Time.

Your brand's words need to fit. They need to feel right. And that's only going to happen if you're honest about your personality.
YOU NEED to ASK YOURSELF ALL KINDS of QUESTIONS

- What kind of clothes would your brand wear?
- What would it do in its spare time?
- What kind of newspapers would it read?
- Which TV shows or films would it watch?

- Would you be friends with your brand? Or would you look up to it? Or go to it in times of crisis for reliable and trustworthy support?
- If you wrote a lonely hearts ad for your brand, how would you describe it and what would it be looking for?

Be consistent
Remember that for the successful brands – the IKEAs, Googles and Apples; it doesn't matter how many divisions or departments they're made up of. They always write and talk in the same way, consistently conveying the same personality. And that's a large part of what allows their consumers to bond so powerfully with them.

And because consumers expect to have conversations and direct interactions with brands, communicating in a consistent voice is really important. If your brand doesn't, you are diminishing its ability to form relationships with your audiences.

Tip
It's often useful to say what your brand isn't, as well as what it is. For example, Brand X is professionally friendly. It's not aloof and stand-offish – and it certainly isn't matey either.

Tip
Inconsistency puts consumers off, because they don't know what they're dealing with. So you should use a consistent style of language across your marketing materials, your terms and conditions, your receipts and invoices or your contracts for new employees. Every piece of written communication is an opportunity to reinforce your brand.
And what if the personality of the brand you’re working with has already been defined?
If you’re working with a brand that has already defined its personality, you could skip this step altogether.

However it could be worth checking that the existing information gives you enough to go on.

We’ve seen many descriptions of brand personality that either just say “friendly and accessible” — or they set out an unhelpfully long list of words.

To be able to create a tone of voice, you need a better handle on a brand’s personality than this — so just go ahead and define it yourself.

A note on brand values and personality
Other brands will point to their values and tell you to work from them. But values are not a description of personality.

Two people can share the same values. They may both think, for example, that it’s morally wrong to avoid paying tax. They may also think that it’s a good idea to give money to charities every month.

But that doesn’t mean they’ll have the same personalities. One could be a fuss-pot control freak who stresses over details and never leaves the house in clothes that haven’t been recently dry cleaned. The other could be so laid-back their house is a tip and they can’t remember to keep appointments.

These people will communicate in different ways and you would relate to them differently, because despite the shared values, they have very different personalities. And it’s the personality that drives the communication style — not the values.

So how are we going to define the personality of Lil & Jasper’s?
LIL & JASPER'S PERSONALITY

Our healthy pizza brand is an invention — but then, so are a lot of brands. Some come with a real back story, others have to make them up. In our made-up healthy pizza land, Lil and Jasper are childhood sweethearts who got married and decided to turn their passion for food into a career. They opened their deli in Portland, Oregon and word soon spread around the neighbourhood that their food was healthy, delicious and convenient.

So they came up with the idea of making healthy deliciousness even more convenient and launched their frozen pizza range.

We know this much about Lil & Jasper's — but you can be healthy, delicious and convenient in a huge number of ways. So let's find out more about the personality of Lil & Jasper's.

1. What kind of clothes would Lil & Jasper’s wear?
   They'd probably wear understated designer clothes with bits and pieces they've picked up in both chain stores and vintage boutiques. Nothing too fussy — frayed Jil Sander jeans and a pair of Havaianas would suit Lil & Jasper’s just fine. The brand wouldn't be seen dead in cheesecloth. It's not a hippy. It's stylish and world-aware.

2. What would Lil & Jasper’s do in its spare time?
   Probably catch a show or a bit of arthouse cinema. It might check out farmer’s markets. Or cook dinner for friends. Lil & Jasper’s likes getting creative and doing things like writing and upcycling. Lil & Jasper's enjoys travel too.

3. What kind of newspapers would Lil & Jasper's read? Or which films or TV shows would it watch?
   Lil & Jasper's gets most of its information online, but it might pick up a New York Times every now and again. It's not big on TV, but it does listen to underground radio stations.

So let's use this information to define Lil & Jasper's personality.
LIL & JASPER'S PERSONALITY

4. Would we be friends with this brand?
We think so. Lil & Jasper's feels laid-back and happy doing what it's doing. We can't imagine the brand being bossy or faddish about food. We don't get the feeling that it's going to lecture us about salt intake. It's just going to prepare good stuff and let us make our choices.

They're only five questions, but they make you really, really think about the personality of your brand or organisation. And it doesn't matter if the brand you're working with is an accountancy practice, a sports center or a manufacturer of motor components — these questions will remain relevant.

They'll help you get to the bottom of who your brand is and what kind of language it should be using.

It can help to boil your answers down to two, three or four words.

5. If we wrote a lonely hearts ad for Lil & Jasper's, what would it say?
Genuine and honest individual, early 30s, into grass roots music, home cooking, design and world affairs. Looking for laid-back soul mate to share passions, adventure and travel.

For Lil & Jasper's, those words would be:
Laid-back,
Optimistic
and
Happy
RELATIONSHIP with AUDIENCES

Every brand or organisation has a defined relationship with its audiences. At Wordtree, we find it helpful to think in terms of the relationships described by transactional analysis.

Which is just a fancy way of saying we all fall into different kinds of relationships with different people. In transactional analysis, relationships are defined as being adult, parent or child.

In a parent-child relationship, the parent protects and looks after the child. And the child takes little responsibility. If a brand took the role of a parent to a child audience, it would essentially be saying, “Don’t you worry about a thing. We’ll take care of absolutely everything. We’re the experts and we’ll look after this.” So this could be an appropriate relationship for a luxury holiday brand to have with its consumers. Or maybe a roadside rescue service. It’s a tricky relationship for brands though, because no-one likes to be patronised — which is what relationships like this can easily fall into.

In a child-parent situation, the brand would need to be the one that was looked after by its consumers. The unspoken dialogue would be, “As a brand, I can’t survive if you don’t care for me.” Which makes it an unlikely model for a successful commercial relationship. Interestingly, some brands that overdo their customer service messaging can stray into this kind of relationship accidentally. Overly subservient messaging can end up sounding like it’s seeking approval and forgiveness.

Child-child is an interesting relationship, and in these recessional times it appears to be falling out of favour a little. In this, the brand says, “Oi! You! Let’s go play together. I’m in charge! You’re it! Ha ha ha!” The brand is inviting you to indulge your inner child and to come and be silly with it. Some lads mags do this. So do a number of food and drink products.
Adult-adult is the kind of relationship that most brands are trying to maintain. It’s where the brand is a grown-up, and you’re assuming its consumers are too. This is a relationship of equals where no-one gets talked down to or fawned over.

So what relationship does Lil & Jasper’s have with its consumers? Lil & Jasper’s has an adult-adult relationship with its customers. It’s an enthusiastic, but generally laid-back friend that’s fun to hang out with. It doesn’t bang on about healthy eating – and it would join you for a beer or a glass of wine if you were offering.

Over to you >>>

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DEFINING YOUR BRAND’S PERSONALITY

So now it’s your turn. Start to think of your brand or organisation as a person. Try to see the brand as other people see it. What is it like? How does it dress? Let’s ask some questions.

1. What kind of clothes would your brand wear?

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Tip
If it helps, cut ideas out of a magazine and make a collage. Anything that helps you to visualise the brand you're working with as a person will help you to create a solid, consistent tone of voice.

2. What does your brand do in its spare time?

3. Which newspapers does your brand read? What kind of movies or TV does it like to watch?

4. Would you be friends with your brand? If so, why? If not, what kind of relationship would you have with it?
5. Write a lonely hearts ad for your brand.

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6. Now sum up the personality of your brand into a handful of words. Don't use more than four, because this will keep you focused and accurate.

1. ____________________________

2. ____________________________

3. ____________________________

4. ____________________________
If you're working with a brand you don't know very well yet, then get researching. Find out everything you can about the way it works, its history and its attitudes towards customers. From the last chapter, you know who its competitors are. Now you need to get to know the brand you're working with, inside out.

Tip

If you're very close to a brand and you know the people who own it or manage it, try your best not to get caught up in their personalities. While it's inevitable that a smaller organisation will reflect the character of its owner (the whole of the Wordtree team is nodding vigorously at this point), a successful brand will take on a life of its own. So describe the brand, not the owner.