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The Ethos of the Brand in Digital Times. Implications for Copywriters’ Work

Abstract: Copywriters have always been trained to search for a communication style that would differentiate a brand from its competitors. A well-known writing technique in advertising is for the brand to ‘speak’ in the voice of an implicit character that embodies the values and lifestyle of the target audience. In this way, a feeling of communion between the brand and its (potential) customers can emerge, which might translate into brand messages being received with more interest and openness by these audiences. The novelty brought by the digital era is that this communion between the brand and its audience can be taken to a performative level, with new platforms for direct-response on the part of viewers. Today people no longer settle for being at the receiving end of the communication spectrum, they want to participate, to contribute, to comment, to be co-producers of content or co-advisers of product improvements. Given that this willingness is not always tied to a high level of competence for such interventions, the emerging dialogue is often challenging for the brand-atmosphere that copywriters would want to create and maintain. In the midst of such difficulties, copywriters are required to rethink of their job in a dialogic manner, one that would still keep the style of the brand alive, but would allow enough room for consumers to bring their own input in the public spaces occupied (physically, virtually, or conceptually) by the brand. The *ethos* of the brand – the implicit personality that shines through the brand messages – is a construct that can be used to guide copywriters in their wide-ranging efforts to cope with this emerging dialogue. In broad lines, *ethos* refers to the ethical core of the personality that the brand is trying to project. This article addresses some of the features that a copy should have in order to help build brand *ethos*, and it discusses the practical implications of (not) employing these features.

Keywords: copywriting, the *ethos* of the brand, user-generated content, direct-response copywriting, *thick* brand values, paratextual advertising

1. Challenges for copywriters in a direct-response world

Copywriting – the production of advertising texts written on behalf of a brand – has never taken so many forms as it does in our era (Hackley and Hackley 2018, 6). There are multiple hybrid media creating new opportunities for the engagement or the distraction of consumers and a variety of touch points a brand can establish with its audience. Most of these touch points need copywriting services to a certain extent, each involving a different (and often improvised) advertising format.

Today, a street advertisement can draw our attention and instantly “take” us on a visit to the sponsored brand’s website by means of a quick response code inscribed to it that we can scan with our smartphone (Krevelen and Poelman 2010, 11). In such cases, copywriters would have to think of the text that would stimulate the willingness to visit the web page, and another echoing text to reassure the audience that the landing page is what they were searching for. Static billboards and magazine covers can have moving images and voice recordings attached to them (Pavlik and Bridges 2013, 28-30) by means of augmented reality technology that synchronizes the display of pre-recorded virtual content with elements of physical reality. Copywriters need to ensure the continuity of a brand voice throughout these hybrid forms of media content, keeping clarity and consistency in the messages that need to be sent on behalf of the brand, while taking advantage of the particularities of each medium that is used to convey the message, and of the interplay between them.

Transmedia storytelling is now a major challenge for copywriters who need to stimulate the audience to recompose pieces of a brand story, pieces that are distributed through different channels. Yet, in all this narrative adventure, copywriters need to ensure that the brand atmosphere, style, and characteristic tone-of-voice are maintained and that the brand messages are well-placed inside these stories, being seamlessly woven into the action so as not to seem intruding on viewers’ entertaining experience.

A digital arena devoted to entertainment such as YouTube is now heavily distributing advertising content, with the option to visit the

advertiser's site. Shopping and enjoying brand-sponsored entertainment, once distinct activities, can now happen almost simultaneously. The line between informative and entertaining content continues to be open to negotiation, with frequent transfers from one side to the other, according to brand communication needs and consumer preferences.

In a sense, almost everyone involved in copywriting today seems to be in the direct-response business. There are so many opportunities for instant reaction on the part of consumers: likes, shares, follows, comments, co-production of brand stories, heavy critique addressed to brand managers. Consumer behavior studies online show that people are in search of a quality conversation with like-minded peers, they feel good when their opinions are echoed, they feel they solve major problems of humanity by posting a comment on the topic, they participate in contests, they work on their personal brand online by displaying symbols of brands they support or by boycotting companies who have let them down. Brands need to learn to be part of these conversations, even if often people are not brand enthusiasts (Kozinetz 1999, 258-259) and they are keen on answering, replying, counter-arguing – sometimes with good reason, at other times with irrelevant interventions.

David Ogilvy used to advise all copywriters who were keen on 'creativity' (understood as artistic embellishment of a message for the sake of art and not for the consumer), to take an internship in the direct-response department of the agency. He was convinced that upon coming back in the copywriting department after this internship, their texts would be more relevant for the consumer. It is clear that David Ogilvy was not thinking of "direct response" as we understand it today – engagement with brand ideas, values, and conversations. When he said "direct response", he meant "sales" – that is what the term used to mean in those days. Although sales remain an essential outcome of good copywriting, today the engagement with brand content online is also an important form of response that has to be leveraged for brand purposes.

Of course, building a brand by means of continuous dialogue with the audiences is not an easy task. But it never was. Brand meaning has always been an open field of symbolic negotiation between the brand meaning-makers and their audience. There never was a comfortable time when all advertiser promises would be received with trust and enthusiasm by the audience. There was always skepticism, there was talking back. Yet, there is a significant difference that makes things more difficult today: now it is *all* in public, both relevant and irrelevant commentary, both true and false interventions from the public. Viewers

often see the added comments at the same time they see the initial text produced by the copywriter, and they rarely go deep into a problem to find out the truth on the matter. This means that a commentary may be taken for granted, and even approved, liked, and distributed further, even when the commentator (un)willingly launched a fake piece of news on the brand.

The fact that direct-response copywriting places a major emphasis on the relationship with its audiences means that copywriters need to get better and better at listening, for real, and at answering with patience both competent and incompetent commentary, while providing enough proof to support claims made on behalf of the brand. A lot of diligence and long-term thinking is needed to handle the pressure of building a brand-atmosphere with copywriting resources, while knowing that it can be ruined at any moment by a flow of commentary from people who are not fans of the brand – with good reason or not.

Even copywriters who are dealing strictly with the “off-line” component of brand communication need to take into account the new behavioral patterns of consumers in what regards the consumption of information and entertainment. People have habits that have been developed online, but that are now widespread in all their interactions with the world, even the physical, “offline” ones: most people are hungry for novelty, for ‘interestingness’ and have little patience to dive into a subject and explore it in depth (Carr 2012, 163-167). At the same time, they seem more willing than ever to be active participants in public debates and co-producers of content (Pavlik and Bridges 2013, 48). Even if this combination (shallowness of information-processing, combined with strong opinions expressed in public) sounds lethal for the intellectual quality of public deliberation, brands need to take this reality as it is and find ways to enter a fruitful dialogue with consumers.

One way to stand out in this environment is to develop a suitable *ethos* of the brand – an implicit personality that is open to public contributions, friendly and self-correcting, all the while maintaining a style that cannot be easily copied or mistaken for somebody else’s (especially one of the competitors of the brand). *Ethos* can be understood as the spirit, the moral spine, the heart of the brand. The manner in which copywriters address the audience matters a lot for the construction of brand *ethos*. The content of the texts written, the style adopted, the degree of openness to consumer contributions, are all elements that can make or break brand *ethos*. In what follows, I discuss some of qualities that a text should have in order to build an appealing *ethos* of the brand.

2. Clarity of the text – the building block of brand *ethos*

An important aspect that makes a brand be perceived as ‘open’ to consumers is clarity of expression: clarity of contractual conditions, clarity in outlining the services and the offer, clarity and specificity in defining what the brand is and what the brand is not (Godin 2018). Efforts of continuous clarification are needed every time technical jargon or preposterous corporate language is included in a brief received from the client. Adopting a brand language that is clear sends a good signal about the brand and creates the premises for an authentic dialogue with consumers.

Yet, sometimes, technical jargon seems inevitable. In medical or banking areas, for example, the presentation of the services involves a certain amount of technical language, not easily understood by someone who is not a professional in this area. In these cases, it may seem childish to offer informal equivalents to the officially accepted terms just for the sake of building a ‘friendly’ brand *ethos*.

But the coexistence of the technical term with its ‘translation’ is easily achievable in a digital context: the technical term can be hyperlinked, for example, or its explanation can be accessible at the touch of a user-friendly button asking “(what is this) about”. When clicking on it, the reader can find a short explanation expressed in accessible language. This explanation could be accompanied by further links to multimedia content providing (where needed) additional information to help the reader understand the subject. Being careful not to overwhelm the consumer with too much information at a time is just as important in these cases as it is not to leave the consumer in the dark about the meaning of the terminology used (cf. Benartzi 2015). Allowing for a step-by-step exploration of the subject means that the readers can stop wherever they feel they have got enough information, but also that copywriters can ensure the quality of the content that consumers read on the topic. Providing all the necessary explanations in a progressive manner will make reading an enjoyable and cognitively-rewarding experience and will prevent people from searching for these answers on other non-professional platforms that seem to be thriving on the Internet in our days. Saying “they can find these explanations everywhere, we live in the digital era” is often not the best approach to web copywriting.

The adoption of a clear and specific language in the presentation of a brand’s products or services would help people understand better (and faster) the nature and the scope of the brand’s offer, and it would also help them understand whether they want to buy or not. This respect for their

freedom of choice and this low-pressure persuasive context might make the brand website a rather pleasant environment to come back to.

The digital era does not provide a favorable space for self-aggrandizing messages sent on behalf of brands, for exaggerated promises and for the attempt to hide product weaknesses behind ‘creative’ language. It is a place of modesty and consumer-centeredness, a place where fast and clear answers will be much more welcome by users than obviously fake promises for which advertisers have been so heavily critiqued over the years. Saying “you *may* be interested in this...” (with all the clear details needed to understand the real offer that “this” refers to) is much better than saying “you will *certainly* love it”, with an “it” being purposefully described in vague, unnecessarily creative or commercial terms, or in technical jargon that the reader cannot follow.

But the most important benefit of the continuous efforts for clarification will appear on the level of the relationship between the brand and its customers. This initiative to ‘translate’ difficult jargon shows that the team behind the brand really cares for its customers and understands their needs – these two widespread brand promises that always need to be demonstrated. This would make people feel the spirit of the brand as one that is honest, open, and caring – all of these being invaluable brand assets.

It is unfortunate that in these days, when technology allows for so many enhancements in all areas of clear and user-focused communication, one can still find so many websites that are opaque to untrained consumers. Maybe it is because communion with the audience is underrated, while client ego-satisfaction is often overrated. The client who hired the copywriter does not have to be the most important reader that a text addresses. It is the potential customers, the ones who will visit the page to find out more, that need to be charmed. A brand that is presented through clear texts, with additional options for further clarification, will have higher chances to be charming to the audience than a brand who lets the audience search for that same information wherever they may find it (in the truly *wide* – and often filled with rubbish – web).

3. Copywriting for transparency – a risk worth taking

When it comes to managerial declarations or statements regarding corporate politics, especially in times of crisis communication, copywriters should fight for transparency.

A counterexample here is found on the Ferrero company's Romanian website. After being accused of inappropriate working conditions for some of its subcontracted employees in Romania, they wrote a declaration on their website¹ about the fact that the investigation (that was apparently ongoing at the time of writing) had uncovered certain "inadvertencies" between the actual working conditions and the contractual conditions stipulated by Ferrero.

A major observation here is that hyperlinked information was obviously necessary for the word "inadvertencies" (at least). Knowing what these inadvertencies consist in could have made it easier for consumers to understand the situation. Telling what these inadvertencies consist in could have made it easier for the brand to win back its credibility, by showing transparency and responsibility in this situation, making it clear that they are taking measures to avoid similar situations in the future. If there were difficulties in finding out the truth (given that a deceitful subcontracting firm was involved in the scandal), these difficulties could have been revealed as such, explaining in transparent terms how things are, what type of problems have appeared, and what possible solutions have been developed to find out the truth.

Instead, their jargon-filled discourse leaves readers with a bitter taste, and raises a fence around the organization. This form of jargon that seems to intentionally produce ambiguity and opaqueness raises questions about the brand's trustworthiness and erodes brand *ethos* at its core, perhaps undermining other brand promises that might actually reflect reality. Perhaps Ferrero is a responsible company in general, perhaps it was an isolated mishap, but the overall impression that this text leaves is quite the opposite. The text makes them seem well-trained in avoiding the truth with linguistic methods – and readers will sanction that.

On the level of information-transmission, perhaps they attained the goal of not revealing too much that would compromise them. But on the level of the relationship between the implicit author of the text and its readers, Ferrero loses a lot of points for this approach. They do not seem to be willing to take responsibility for what happened. The investigation was ongoing in November 2016, without clear conclusions (or so they said), but up to this day (two years later) there is no update on their site about the results of the investigation. This is not a brand *ethos* one would want to maintain on the long-term.

¹ The Declaration can be read at <https://www.ferrero.ro/Stiri/> (last visited on December 22nd, 2018).

However, it can be counter-argued that transparency is risky, and that managerial decisions cannot always be made public, because the audience is not always knowledgeable of real economic issues and stakes, and might therefore misunderstand the message, or simply ask too much on an ethical level from the corporation. Yet, one must understand that the opaqueness-based attitude is even more risky, on a different level: that of the relationship one succeeds (or fails) in establishing with the audience. People will *know* your text avoids the most important answers to the accusations, and they will draw their own conclusions about corporate *ethos*. And, what is worse, they will make these conclusions known – which, in the digital era, means a lot.

4. Inviting feedback in an explicit manner and making it part of the brand-content

In order to know whether they managed to be clear, transparent, and attractive, copywriters need readers responding to their work. The web has wide possibilities to ask consumers for a question or a suggestion. By reading these messages, copywriters can find important insights into the perception people have about their work. Feedback can be divided into categories such as “your opinion on texts on our website (*one category*)”/ “please suggest information that is currently missing on our website” (another category)/ “please share your experience with the brand (*third category*). Many shortcomings of the brand can thus come to light and therefore have greater chances to be fixed. Needless to say, this feedback-channel can create an additional pressure on brand *realities* and experiences people have with the employees of the company – if people know that such feedback is widely read by colleagues and team leaders, chances are they will be more careful not to give real reasons for complaint.

Apart from this, inviting consumers to write their questions and their recommendations is in itself a proof of an *open* brand *ethos*, especially when these comments are promptly answered to, in a consistent brand voice that is respectful, clear, and free of marketing jargon. This whole endeavor comes, of course, at a high cost: there will be a lot of irrelevant commentaries, a lot of questions that are out of the scope of brand communication, and indeed a lot of frustration for copywriters who may feel that their work is underestimated or largely misunderstood by some of these readers. However, after separating the wheat from the chaff (while politely answering both, of course), one may find truly valuable inputs that can help brand communication.

Providing prompt and well-thought answers to people's comments can become a brand communication tool in itself. In Romania, the Ministry of Internal Affairs has developed a rich communication online by answering to an impressive amount of the comments published on their Facebook page¹. The answers are sometimes witty, sometimes humorous, at other times serious, but always prompt and well-fit to the subject and the interlocutor, demonstrating brand *ethos* in a charming way. It is a delight to read this page for the dialogues that are unfolding. Even when the user comments are disgraceful, the institutional answers are elegant, well-thought, attacking fallacies when it is the case, brilliantly developing counterarguments when necessary, and showing gratitude and generosity in many cases. The input of liveliness and constructive tension that this dialogue provides seems hard to replace by any form of one-way brand communication.

Finally, giving consumers a voice might actually put the copywriter in the (apparently) comfortable position of a moderator, instead of a constant content-producer. "Write your own story about..." can mean that a lot of original content just pours on the brand page without any money paid for creative labor (Duffy 2010, 27), while engagement is ensured by the authenticity and naturalness of amateur content – something that seems to be perceived as a quality *per se* these days.

Although it may seem that there is an intrinsic conflict between authentic experiences shared by users, on the one hand, and brand-relevant messages, on the other, in fact common themes can be successfully found. A positive example in this respect is provided by Romanian chocolate brand ROM, who invited people to write their own story about their experience with the Romanian flag. The chocolate has traditionally adopted the colors of the Romanian flag on its packaging, and this year – when Romania celebrated one hundred years from the Great Union of its territories – they removed the brand name from the package, leaving only the colors of the flag, as a homage paid to the historical moment. This makes it clear why the invitation to write personal stories about the Romanian flag was brand-relevant, although it did not make reference to the chocolate itself.

Many people posted their stories on the ROM website, thus reinforcing the patriotic brand values, while sharing a special episode in their own lives. It is a case when the social values and the values of the brand are brought together to produce engaging content. However, it is

¹ I would like to thank Cătălin Acatrinei for bringing this example to my attention.

not a fortunate coincidence, but a well-thought strategy of communication that has been employed by this brand for years.

ROM has been using shared experiences of Romanians, weaving the brand message into these stories, without letting sales purposes be visible in the discourse – which reinforced the feeling of communion with the audience. Moreover, no trace of idealization can be found in their ads. Actually, in many of them, they promised only “strong sensations” like the ones experiences in the communist times, when ROM was first produced in Romania. Self-irony was well-received by Romanian audiences, and the brand progressively placed solidarity messages of Romanians in their commercials, promoting a sort of fresh patriotism, that was respectful towards the country, but humorous in acknowledging its shortcomings. Such an *ethos* makes this brand well-prepared to cope with the transformations brought by the digital era, because this brand has been built on dialogue and authenticity from its beginning. Now they have the luxury to allow for these user-contributions to actually have a voice on their web platforms, thus producing original content for the brand and making ROM’s patriotism a *thick* one¹, derived from the many nuances that user-generated stories can bring to (ROM’s) patriotism. In this context, *thick* brand values would mean dense, consistent, well-propagated values that are detectable in all the touch points between the brand and the consumer, and are enriched by user contributions, who add personal nuances to these values, by means of their different stories (that are semantically unified by common themes, yet episodically distinct by the concrete details of their lives). By contrast, *thin* brand values would be the ones that are only present in the brand-produced discourse, not detectable in the actions of the company, nor in the opportunities that the company creates for user contribution.

5. Concluding themes for further reflection

Many virtual communities present a huge challenge to classical brand communication, with consumers forming associations based on their consumption preferences that openly and programmatically ignore the major brands. Some of these associations are based on personal recommendations regarding the best (non-industrialized) sources for the desired products, thus excluding classical brand advertising from their

¹ The notion of *thick* brand values is a personal adaptation of the concept *thick description* used in anthropology (cf. Clifford Geertz, 1973, 26-28).

purchase options. Many of them are explicitly rejecting any intrusion of classical advertising in their group (Grădinaru 2017, 37-39).

Apart from this, the opportunity to create user-generated advertising does not always stimulate consumers' approval of brand *ethos*. In many cases, the original content proposed by consumers often expresses a clear dislike of the content classically supported by the brand (Duffy 2010, 31-40), even if the brand is the one that invited users to bring their contribution in the first place.

But perhaps this is the most important lesson that brand communication today needs to learn: the public is an interlocutor, not a target (Kozinetz 1999, 258-259). The feedback copywriters get from the public may sometimes be unpleasant, but it can point to a fruitful direction for future development. However, this development can never mean only copywriting efforts, but improvements on all the levels of brand communication – including changes in the design of the product or service offer if necessary.

Getting consumers' feedback in real time, benefitting from their suggestions for institutional improvement, having the chance to clarify potential misunderstandings or be made alert when something goes bad in one of the franchises is a major improvement for brand communication only if it has consequences on the level of organization practices employed. This is why copywriters who engage in a dialogue with consumers need to be well-informed of corporate practices and preoccupied with the information they can bring back in the company. They are not to be seen as the 'fun' interface with the brand, while real brand experiences are delegated to another department who is basing its actions on completely different values.

Everyone in the organization must be aware of the fact that brand *ethos* is never just a matter of skillful writing. Building brand *ethos* needs to be done on the basis of the real experience that the brand offers to its customers. The copywriter can go at great length in supporting a brand idea that is appealing, consumer-focused, and achievable by the employees of the company. But it is only the employees that will bring this promise to life. The behavior of the employees (Ariely 2013, 117-119) and the atmosphere of the (physical or virtual) location where the brand welcomes its customers must confirm the brand *ethos* shaped by copywriters. Otherwise, all the efforts of the copywriters are in vain.

A *paratextual* approach to advertising in the era of media convergence is recommended (Hackley and Hackley 2018, 5-13) to understand the mutual influence that brand messages have on one

another, even when sent through various platforms and coming from different sources (consumers, copywriters, company managers, competitors, previous users of the brand). Advertising has long been perceived as a *paratext* to branded product experience. Its action has been conceived as paratextual, in the sense in which a review is a paratext for the book, and a trailer is a paratext to the movie. But digital interactions between the brand and its audiences have proven that things are more complicated. Previous experiences with a brand influence the reception of its advertising messages online (Bleier, Harmeling, and Palmatier 2018, 4) and consequently the chances for brand *ethos* to be received with enthusiasm and trust by the audience. Well-written texts (texts written with clarity, transparency, openness to users, adopting a style that can become a brand property) can indeed influence the interest of the user for a direct experience with the product or service bearing the name of the brand. But the reverse is also true. These experiences will in turn influence the reception of past and future brand messages. When they are recounted in social media by (un)satisfied consumers, these experiences will become an important paratext to whatever messages the company wants to produce further.

Copywriters need content – real elements in the life of the organization – to be good at what they are doing and to make it count for the client’s business: real people (employees, customers, managers), real dialogue, real self-corrections, real answers are needed for brand *ethos* to be successfully created and maintained.

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