

■ Taglines Are Dead: Who killed them, and how we can bring them back to life

By Ryan Millbern

Education. Excellence. Success.
Challenge. Change. Character.
Discover. Future. Culture.

Really. Bad. Taglines.
Treated. The Same. Way.
Don't. Really. Sing.
They. Just. Add voices.
To. The. Cacophony.

Most higher education taglines are *Weekend-at-Bernie's*-esque lifeless husks that do little more than reflect the pool of generispeak in which they float. While there are some shimmering linguistic pearls in the sea of stank tagline clams, even great taglines appear dead by association, their luster clouded by the oily excretions of their counterparts. But how did the tagline sea get so polluted with garbage? Or, if I can mix metaphors, why did taglines flat-line?

Fear kills bold, distinctive taglines—the fear that a core message will not be conveyed, that a constituency's needs not be met, that a concern raised in a focus group go unaddressed. To assuage these fears, institutions of higher education turned to generic language. Why? Because generispeak is safe, it's familiar, and, by saying nothing truly distinctive, colleges and universities imagine that they can say everything to everyone (or I would argue, nothing to anyone).

But the safety of vague and all-encompassing words like “community” and “character” alone did not kill taglines. Our attitude toward marketing messages fired the first shot; writing-by-committee fired the second; group testing, the third. In this autopsy of taglines, we'll further examine these causes of death and then pull a Dr. Frankenstein and jumpstart their hearts.

Challenged to Feel: A Problem of Cultural Climate

While taglines were originally created to elbow out space in a crowd of messages in an attempt to appeal to shorter attention spans, we've evolved beyond that epoch. Our attention spans have shortened, and at the same time, the number of taglines has multiplied exponentially. Now, in this cacophony of taglines, yours could be dead by association.

Woe is we in our information-saturated world. We are the recipients of a flood of marketing messages, all challenging us to feel, to pay attention, to take action. And though we often are moved to feel sorrow or pity or joy, though we are occasionally motivated to change the way we live, we just as frequently feel overwhelmed, confused and anxious. Rather than act, we give up. Rather than drink in, we tune out. As a result, many of us feel obligated to protect our attention and our mind-space—and rightfully so.

We go on the attack, ready to tear down the claims made by this storm of language and images, ready to disagree, or better yet, disengage. The first step in salvaging precious consciousness is to drop out of the deluge. By virtue of the energy and attention required to extract meaning from words—those subtle signifiers, those glam-less signs—they are the first to be overlooked and undervalued. Subsequently, taglines too fall by the wayside.

High Expectations

Many taglines die at the hands of the people who want to see them succeed the most—namely, the marketing communications staffs of colleges and universities, the presidents, the board members, the devout senior professors who have helped build the academic reputation of an institution through years of tireless service. These well-meaning individuals often commit the cardinal sin of tagline creation—they expect a single phrase to communicate every subtle nuance of their institution's complex character, its rich heritage, its founding principles.

While great taglines can and do reflect, in part, the mission, personality and vision of a college or university, we can't expect them to communicate everything. Some messages must

be articulated elsewhere—through body copy and headlines over the course of a campaign, through compelling photography, through conversations between admissions counselors and prospective students. Particularly now, in an overwhelmingly visual culture, taglines must give up part of the ghost.

As a result of these high expectations, people often insist that more words be added to the tagline to ensure that every strength is highlighted, every goal from last year's strategic plan echoed, every core value communicated, every constituency's interest represented.

Crafted by Committee

No surer or swifter death ever befell a tagline than to feel the fingers of admissions, advancement, the president's office, the internal marketing staff and the external marketing firm prod and shape it into a lifeless blob. A tweak here—"Can we work in the word 'excellence'?" asks the president—a revision there—"The board would like to see an option that includes the word 'commitment'"—and soon, what started as a musical, smart and most importantly, coherent tagline has its spine crushed, its heart ripped out and its brain squeezed into a grey neuron graveyard.

The Futility of the Rubik's Cube Approach

I call this prose massage—this tinkering, tweaking and word-swapping—the "Rubik's Cube" approach to writing taglines. I have to admit that I stole this from one of our clients, who, after witnessing two tagline options test poorly in a focus group with alumni, offered this analogy: "It's like a Rubik's Cube," she said. "We have these five words and we're trying them in different combinations to find out which combination fits and then resonates with our audiences." Needless to say, my heart sank.

This isn't the way memorable taglines are created, I thought. There's no formula. A successful tagline should never be weighted down by two or three "required" words, nor relegated to the world of mathematical puzzles.

No, your tagline must sing.

A Test You'll Never Pass

The fastest way to kill a distinctive tagline? Test it.

Never test your tagline. Let's face it, your institution isn't—and shouldn't be—for everyone, and if your tagline is coherently communicating the character of your institution, it shouldn't resonate with everyone either. Presenting tagline options to a group of prospective students, parents and alumni is a great way to turn a quirky, compelling tagline into target practice for amateur critics, or worse yet, an exercise in dilution.

Clear! How to Jumpstart Your Tagline's Heart

We've talked about the ways in which cultural climate, high expectations, writing-with-the-Rubik's-Cube and testing have contributed to the slow-but-sure murder of great taglines in higher education. So now, Dr. Frankenstein, how can we bring them back to life?

Some suggestions:

- Resist generispeak. If you've got complete consensus on your campus, your tagline probably isn't any good.
- Rethink your expectations about what a tagline can do.
- Fight the writing-by-committee approach.
- Trash your Rubik's Cube.
- Trust your weird copywriters.
- Go retro. A great way to discover distinctive language is to return to a time when language was celebrated and savored by all. Revisit the writings of your institution's founders. There are no doubt gorgeous nuggets of lyrical genius in that flowery 19th-century prose.
- Listen for distinctive language on your campus. Then steal it and use it confidently.
- Swim against the current.

Above all else, the challenges to writing great taglines will remain the same: You will still need to find out who you really are, what you do best and how to say it like no one else.



■ **SOUTH BEND**
121 S. Niles Avenue
South Bend, IN 46617
Tel 574.287.8333
Fax 574.287.5333
www.rhb.com

■ **INDIANAPOLIS**
One Jackson Square
233 McCrea Street
Suite 800
Indianapolis, IN 46225
Tel 317.634.2120
Fax 317.634.2140