

Choose your **words carefully**

I had a depressingly familiar experience last week. A brand manager took me through their fresh brand strategy, and it was terrible. It was, like most brand positioning, pointless. About eight out of every 10 brand strategies have no impact whatsoever on brand equity. And this was going to be another addition to that big book of pointless branding for two reasons.

First, there were too many words in the positioning statement. Three concentric circles confronted me. The central red circle was called the brand essence. In the middle was a blue circle called brand personality. And then around the edge was a circle in yellow, called brand identity. Too much.

I have never seen a great brand positioning strategy that needed more than three words to define the brand. Any more than that and the probability of achieving any kind of impact on the market turns almost immediately to zero.

Remember the game of Chinese whispers. A line of children would whisper a word from one to the other. When the whispering reached the end of the line, the final child would shout out the word. If the first child had picked a simple word, such as orange, then orange would be the word at the end. But if they picked a complicated word, such as Afghanistan, at the end of the line it would sound nothing like the original.

That is the real game of branding. It is not about the brand manager at the start of the line, or the marketing manager or ad agency or salesperson or retailer that follows them. The only place that matters is the final person in the line—the consumer. If you use concentric circles or keyholes or

triangles or anything more than about three words, then you will fail to have any impact on consumers or brand equity. You will feel great because you have a PowerPoint presentation that looks very complex and seems to justify the money and time you spent developing it. But it won't work. The minute you send it down the line, it will be too complex for others to remember, activate and ultimately execute.



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If you don't believe me, go and talk to some of your consumers. Not a representative sample of target consumers, but a smaller tighter group of brand advocates, and ask them why they love your brand. They will be able to tell you because they are advocates. What is more, they won't need concentric circles or a PowerPoint presentation to explain it. They will tell you in about three words. All you have to do is be as

efficient, focused and simple as the consumers you aim to understand and influence.

The other reason the strategy was bound to fail were the words that occupied the circles. All the usual, pointless suspects were there: integrity, excellence, trust, innovation. Any of these words in your brand positioning tells you two things. First, that your brand positioning won't work because it looks exactly like everyone else's. Second, whoever developed it for you was lazy, and should not have been trusted with the job.

Great branding focuses on the two or three things that mark the brand out as different. Great positioning always consists of unexpected words born from research, forged through heritage and destined to differentiate. I cannot tell you what those words should be, but I can tell you that if you are claiming innovation or excellence in your positioning, you will achieve the opposite.

'So what do you think?' asked my eager brand manager keen for feedback. I took a long, deep breath and said: 'There are two reasons why this is not going to work...'



30 seconds on... Chinese whispers

- Chinese whispers, or variants on the game, have been recorded since the **17th century** in the UK. It has several alternative names including The broken telephone, Operator, Grapevine, and Whisper Down the Lane.
- Around the world, the game has different names. In the US, it is widely known as **Telephone**. In France it is

called **Téléphone Arabe**. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia the game is known as Tichá Pošta or **Silent Mail**. There would be some symmetry in China if the game were called English whispers but, alas, its name means '**pass wrong with wrong**' in Mandarin.

- In Las Vegas in 2004, magician **Mac King** set the world record for the longest line of people playing Chinese whispers, with **614 participants**. King began the game by whispering 'Mac King is a comedy magic genius'; 613 people later, the final version emerged as: '**Macaroni cantaloupe knows the future**'.