

You can ask questions in chat in Zoom. Please direct all of your questions there. I will turn it over to Katherine Spivey. Katherine, take it away thank you so much.

You are very welcome. We are really looking forward to this brand voice discussion because I see this topic more and more on social media. I am looking forward to learning a lot from Leslie during this period. Of course, I've been thinking of the phrase, don't look at me with that tone of voice. [applause] So over to you, Leslie.

Thank you a lot, Katherine. I am really happy to be with you today. And to offer this webinar, how to develop an agency brand voice that connects with customers online. I encourage you to ask questions or share your opinion on the chat box. There are two times in the webinar that I will ask you to chat in with an answer. And then Katherine will share some of those. I will offer my email address. My tweets are about writing and plain language. Now for a very quick introduction. My company is called E Write. Now I'm sharing the presentation.

This is a classic consultant page that has a lot of logos on it. I wanted to say that I have developed my business helping companies write in their brand voice by working with a variety of airlines. Their communications with passengers before they fly are often in one voice. When they receive complaints from passengers after they have flown, airlines often show the flaw of communicating in another voice altogether.

Today's webinar is in the same context. We need to communicate with the people who read our content and care about it in the same way even before they have worked with us and after they have worked with us. When they are happy with us or were frustrated. When we need to simply explain something to do to them and how we want to solve a problem.

Here is the shape of our webinar. These are the topics I intend to cover. I am eager to hear what your questions are.

Topic number one: what is brand voice?

Number two: how do companies govern brand voice?

Number three: exercise where you personify your brand voice. That would be best for the web content that you manage or overall an entire site if that is what you manage. I will talk briefly about what kinds of problems and inconsistency brand voice can cause. And that I hope I will leave you on a can-do note about the steps you can take to ensure that the content you write is written in a consistent voice and the same language.

Part number one: what is brand voice?

I am pretty sure that if you signed up for this webinar, you already understand what brand voice is. The government agency or company or association--every entity has a brand personality that is shaped by all of the decisions that I have listed here. What is your advertising like and what images do you associate with your company? What's the color palette? If you publish materials, what do they look like? If you sell products, how are they packaged? What do your retail

buildings look like? We know that really matters.

When your agency uses words to convey its brand personality, that is what we call brand voice that comes through words. Obviously your logo may not have any words, but when your brand personality take shape in words that is called brand voice.

Here is a government example for us to look at. This is the farmers.gov website. It is pretty new. It is a subsite of the USDA. I am showing you the homepage here. It has this photo of five people on horseback in the beautiful rolling fields and plains. It has a logo that incorporates the name of the site.

Let's look at the personality that is shaped by the words. This is just a screenshot. I think this is about one-third of the homepage. Even with this very little bit of writing, a voice takes shape. They start with "Grow with us." It is a very conversational and kind of connected brand voice.

On the left, the "2018 farm bill created a new program for dairy producers". That does not have very much tone but if you look at the right, you'll see "this is how to get started" simple. This is upbeat and the friendly personality has a friendly voice to go with it. **We know --**. This has your documents in the community. Under market facilitation program updates. they wrote "Are you a farmer or rancher whose commodities have been directly impacted by foreign tariffs? The market facilitation programs were created to help." This is conversational and identifies the audience it is talking to and it ends with the words created to help.

The voice is a connected friendly voice, and it comes through strongly even on the homepage.

Right here I have grabbed two social comments from farmers.gov. On the left you see a tweet and on the right is an Instagram post. "No summer barbecue would be complete without delicious corn on the cob. Thank you, all the farmers producing corn for our picnic tables." There is that very strong sense of community.

And in the lower right, "This Friday, swipe left to meet Savannah Gates, hydroponic farmer in Amarillo, Texas, who literally lives at the crossroads of hope and farmers, and lives by the connection of those words, too. Her path in life hasn't been straight, but every course she's taken led her to building her farming business into what it is today." This comes through strongly.

So the next -- here's one more. On the farmers.gov website, the recovery page--even here it sustains that voice. This content is written for farmers: "Agriculture is a risky business. USDA is here to help you prepare, recover, and build long-term resilience to natural disasters."

This could be a hug. How does farmers.gov make this voice consistent? I've been showing you the materials page and homepage and the social media post. That is what we are here to talk about.

Here we are at a different USDA website. This is not farmers.gov and the question is this: Does the U.S. disaster assistance program page use the same brand voice as farmers.gov?

The readers are probably some of the same people. Remember I just showed you the recovery page, and so I am showing you the disaster assistance page. I want you to notice how different the brand voice is on this page.

It says “USDA offers a variety of programs and services to help communities, ranchers, farmers, and businesses that have been hard-hit by hurricanes” and so forth without including how we can further assist you, visit this page for more information, etc.

They could have written “There are a lot of ways we can help you.” This page has a brand voice that is somewhat chillier. And in the box I copied and pasted the extended offer for help. “Have questions?” which is pretty casual, and they say “Maybe we can help.” I think that is one of the most lukewarm offers of help I have ever seen. This is very aloof and not very engaged.

At two different parts and at this other one, the brand voice is really different. And in my opinion, the brand voice on farmers.gov is far likely to cause outcomes that they are hoping for. Then this brand voice that we are seeing right here.

Part two, how do companies govern brand voice? I could ask this question a different way. I am certain this was a lot of effort for farmers.gov, and I don't have any insider knowledge about that website. The voice is consistent and we know a lot of work went into it. Most organizations that consistent brand voice when they sound the same throughout are relying on brand voice guidelines that they have published somewhere.

Here on this page I can give you this coverage of four different brand voice guidelines from well-known organizations. And I also posted this resource website. You can download these too. There is nothing exotic about finding these. Just Google brand voice guidelines.

- On the right on the top is The World according to Skype. Skype does not have this voice anymore. This was Skype before Microsoft.
- In the bottom left is the Boy Scouts of America brand guidelines.
- And then Arthritis Foundation. Talk about how well or weakly such a document can help or people can write in their organization and their agencies brand voice.

This is a screenshot from the Skype guidelines. As you can see, they describe the tone of voice. Humor is an important part of the Skype voice. That is what they said on the left. This is page 26 and 27.

On the right they gave an example, and these are worth their weight in gold. If you want people to write in a brand voice, you must give them examples.

For instance, you could think of us as that overly generous aunt who insists you have a third helping. We prefer to think of ourselves as a big brewpub, even as a present. Yes that's it, we're a present but without the ribbon. They want the people who write content to use that voice.

Here is page 16. They had a list of words we like and words we don't like. This is a common type of brand voice content. We like the word free and share; we don't like the word avoid.

Here is the page from the Boy Scouts guidelines. This is an example of a guideline where they explain write this, not that. You can see on the left there is some advice about tone of voice. On the right they have a before and after version. The before is not written in the brand voice, so the actual one is in the brand voice. This would serve as a good model. It would also serve as a lot of help for managers who can tell people their draft content is not ready to be published because it is not written in that brand voice yet.

Overall, the advice on the left from the Boy Scouts of America is okay. Honest-to-goodness, who does not say that. The stuff on the left is so common that everyone says it. Would the content contributors need the advice presented on the right? The before and after.

This is from United Way. This was not great. This is what we sound like.

And then sometimes it is helpful to think of a brand as a person. How do they talk and how they make people are they -- I love that start but they sure have finished it. If you want to give a guideline to the people who write your content, then go ahead and personify. That is like a person and for writing times it is really important to finish the thought about what person they are. So then they continue.

United Way is not fabricated -- what brand voice is fabricated on that? Even though a really exclusive brand like, I don't know, like a Rolex would say, we don't want to sound ungrateful and vague. These guidelines are only moderately useful.

And last but not least I am showing the Arthritis Foundation. With all the love, this is useless reinforced guidance. This is only useful for maybe the people who worked in PR agencies and can finesse their writing and suggestions and how they suggest. What we found or some like we sound realistic and practical but not clinical. Maybe. I could file that maybe.

We found serious but not somber. I don't know what to make of this. I don't know how to follow it. This makes it me a little bit sad. They want to offer guidance, but these guidelines are not practical. They are not easy to follow. So if you are thinking about creating those guidelines, I highly recommend that you do it -- there are numerous templates that you can download. Definitely, use exemplars and show not this but that. Show it, don't just describe it as we are seeing here.

Here is the one-question quiz. Does publishing brand voice guidelines mean everyone writes and everyone writes in their agency's brand voice? The answer is no. You have no right to

complain that you are not getting content that is written in your brand voice. The guidelines may not really be a long section -- maybe a few pages where one really useful parking space online for this content. Just like any other will do.

The guidelines do not cause people to write in the brand voice, but the absence of the guideline means no one has a destination to move towards. You must have the guidelines if you have the goal of using a consistent brand voice.

Now let's try an exercise. This won't be hard, but you will have to write a little bit. I am going to ask you to personify your brand voice. Describe the brand voice that you would like your organization to use by making it human or if you prefer -- I will probably challenge you to make it human.

Before we engage in this activity, I would like to tell you about one of my own clients and how we worked with this. The client that I'm mentioning is the National Alliance on Mental Illness. I worked with him several times. When I worked with them, they had many pages describing different mental health conditions, and they were written in a very medical and clinical and rather aloof brand voice. And they had the goal to write them in a way that would help them connect to low readers better and make that more useful.

What we did is I challenged them to say who would you like to be to your readers? who are you to your readers? This is how you personify that brand voice. They came up with the idea that they wanted to sound like a friend. Of course this can be quite difficult when you write about mental health conditions. There are some clinical concerns, so writing as a friend would not work. It is a mismatch of the brand persona and the type of content they want to publish.

They thought about it more and more, and we held meetings to discuss it and in the end they decided to pick the friend part of the brand voice that allowed them to sound like someone who was relatively close to you and someone you could trust. Someone who has your best interests at heart and someone who could convey hope. And they all agreed for everyone to use that brand voice they all agreed to strive to write their content in the voice of a knowledgeable friend.

For example, friends do not write as per our recent discussion. Friends write as we discussed. Knowledgeable friends could cite -- but they still could write in that type of brand voice.

Let's take a look at a sample first. Right here I'm giving you the home page to look at. This is the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and I am asking who is the CFPB ? I'm asking you.

On the following page I copied and pasted some of the content and make it larger so you can see it. I will give you a moment and you can please read the featured content it. I will be quiet for about 15 to 30 seconds and then I will ask you to chat into Katherine. The question is who is the CFPB to its customers. I need you to write a noun. I gave you the example of friend. That was a person noun. Not like resources. I gave you the example of friend and there are many other choices. This is me being quiet. And then I will ask for your answers.

Great. Answers are rolling in. Could you share a couple of them?

I will try. When I say they are rolling and -- I will try to share them. When they roll in, I lose the scroll. A lot of people say trusted advisor like a librarian. Counselor or someone said banker mentor and financial planner. Okay. This is great: advisor and the banker and mentor.

If I were helping them to find their brand voice, we would have to have one of those long meetings because advisor is one persona and librarian is another persona. We can't move forward until we agree. That means some people might not get the persona that they think is best. And if we want to sound alike, we have to agree on what that persona will be. Usually when we do this activity we list a whole bunch of options and then it gets real. We have to agree which one is it and which persona we are taking.

I think CFPB will love it that somebody suggested mentor. I think they might have expected that many of you suggest advisor I think we could get into one of those discussions about whether there is some difference between counselor and advisor. And if there was we would choose the one we really believe in.

Now it is your turn. I am thinking if you signed up for a webinar on brand voice, you either are concerned that the content at your site is written in a voice that is not consistent, or you are thinking yes, it is consistent, but is not the brand voice we should be using. I am going to be quiet, and I would like you to personify the brand voice that you believe is the right one for your content. Whether it is the one that you use or the one you believe you should use. I will be quiet for a short time, 10 seconds. There are no right or wrong answers. I'm just curious about what you are thinking. Being quiet now.

This is Katherine. These are some great answers that I am seeing. Expert educator and customer service, trusted friend, benevolent provider. It is really interesting the words that have been pulled out for this. Advisor, authority, tutor, trusted advisor and friendly expert. I will tell you you guys are knocking it out of the ballpark with these adjectives. Very interesting all of these. Public health protector.

You got ahead of me and how wonderful that you did. The next step in this exercise of personify your brand voice is to add the adjective. When Katherine was reading them, some of you had already paired that adjective with a noun. So if you have advisor, that could imply some sternness or some punitive type or a high standard type of authority. One of you paired the word trusted with advisor. That is beautiful.

You could say to people, "I see you drafted some content. You got the advisor part done really well, but you don't sound too affable; you sound angry."

The exercise is not to do whatever we did during the webinar; it is meant to help you going forward. I am not going to pause for you to report these. I want you to add the adjective today.

You have a pair of words: the adjective and the noun. If you can get a little tension before then, the pairing will be more useful as you go forward. You want like an approachable expert. Okay. So if you think oh my goodness, I need to organize this exercise for my department and my agency, I would be glad to talk you through that. If you email me or call me I would be glad to tell you how I have done that and plan how to alter it. Everyone has to agree. This is what we decided to go with. Okay.

You may like the practical helper bathed in yellow, but I certainly hope you did not come up with the brand voice weary gatekeeper. Even she doesn't want to read it. When the brand voice is described and when there are exemplars or samples showing write this, don't write that. Then we move forward and publish in other channels without too much work.

I don't think given the time we can do this activity right now. We could try it. Here is a bit of a press release about CFPB and I have given you two of the three paragraphs. This is about their participation in Money Smart week. This is the Chicago Federal Reserve program. It is about what they did. If we were to move forward to write this tweet about CFPB's participation, we would have trusted advisors and experience mentor and our mind and writing that tweet would be a bit easier. In the interests of time--I just caught the clock--I don't think we will do this one right now. If you do it, you can email it over and I will give you feedback lightly.

I thought why would someone sign up for this webinar? I imagine a lot of you know that you have an inconsistent brand voice. It does not sound like it is coming from the same organization. That is what I'm imagining brought you here. But I have experience and what I have heard from the government folks who responded to my request for samples about brand voice before this webinar is most people hear that inconsistent brand voice and they think we are Jekyll and Hyde-ing our customers. That means that something is one way on one page, and another way on a different page.

Most people think this inconsistent brand voice is the biggest problem. Maybe on one page you sound like farmers.gov and then you sound like a very bureaucratic system on another page. I don't know.

Let's see what we think here at the Peace Corps benefits page. Are they Jekyll and Hyde-ing us? This sounds like an honest and personal brand voice. This to me does not sound like a parent. It sounds like a mentor or somebody someone may idolize asking you hard questions. And this is a little bit of what we said:

The Peace Corps provides each volunteer with housing and a living stipend that enables them to live in a manner similar to people in their community of service.

Or in another words, if you volunteer, they will provide you with housing that enables you to live in your community. Unlike other international programs, there is no charge.

You will not pay anything to participate in the Peace Corps.

I see a little bit of Jekyll and Hyde:

Student loans are your responsibility really while you are in service.

It is personal and candid.

I don't think that most government agencies struggle from an inconsistent brand voice. I think they consistently sound like the student. And this is a problem. It is not that the voice is inconsistent; it is just not personal enough and connected enough or alive enough. That is the problem.

I think if you are planning to journey out and you raise inconsistencies, you better make sure that is a problem. We should sound like her. I have never given her name. She looks friendly and approachable. She seems kind of practical. She is not so fussy. If you sound like this, this is what you go after. You need to work to define your brand voice and give guidelines for writing and that brand voice, and you as a person who is the advocate of the consistent brand voice will not worry so much that there is too much variety.

What you should be concerned about is whether your brand voice is too stale or too bureaucratic and aloof. What problems occur if you use a "Reginald Froggenhall" brand voice? When you sound like the DMV, people act towards you that way. It can cause uninterest in your agency or program. Smart Money week is not inherently interesting **even** to people who benefit from it.

An inconsistent or stale brand voice lament. People don't trust what you tell them, and they are not motivated to read it. They don't put in the effort it takes to understand what you have to say. They ask you for help instead. If you are saying it in this voice, your content is impossible to repurpose. That stale stuff will not fly in social media. We have a crack correction mechanism, and we write for social media. We realize everybody can see this. Everybody can see that and what is more is everybody will talk about it. If it goes too stale or is difficult and unfriendly, we are reluctant to use it. So it will not work and that channel where everyone is invited to discuss it.

I hope this slide has pushed your awareness from despair to action. I hope you did not linger in despair too long. If it is not alive or connected, there are these problems that can cause problems.

Here is an example that I wanted to show you. What should we worry about. Is the top concern that this content may be written in a different brand voice, or is this something else? This is explaining how to determine the age of ginseng plants. Why would they explained that because it is forbidden to harvest these plants before they reach a certain age. It is saying we will city you if you harvest the plant too young and we will also explain to you how to figure out how old this plant is so you do not harvest it too young and risk a citation.



Should the Fish and Wildlife Service have a brand voice? What should it be? They need to decide. If you want people to follow your instructions, you should motivate them to do that. This is very difficult content to follow after a clear and easy to understand heading how to determine the age of those plants it continues and they can be age before they are harvested.

Right away we need a more personal persona for the brand voice. We need "If you want to harvest these plants properly, you can use one of these two methods to determine how old they are."

I would not spend a whole lot of time worrying about whether the brand voice of this content is different from other Fish and Wildlife Service content. I would wonder if it is the right brand voice at all. This is super hard to read and hard to connect to. Are we worried about Jekyll and Hyde here? I am not. This is very un-motivating to read.

What steps can we take to help or for you to write in a consistent brand voice for your agency. Here are seven. I put a little note at the bottom. These are not in order of priority. I just wanted to be able to refer to them in case there were any questions.

- Develop brand voice guidelines. If you are or have been overwhelmed at the prospect of doing this, please underwhelm yourself. As I mentioned, there are lots of brand voice guidelines and templates that you can customize to your own organization. These guidelines mean illustrate brand voice guidelines with examples. If you feel that creating it is a lot of work and only put a few of them in there, let's stay committed to them and you will have four exemplars.
- Work with your colleagues to personify your brand voice. By that I mean do that exercise where you choose a persona and then you embellish it with an adjective and all agree with the brand voice is. Keep it positive by citing existing content that's written in your brand voice and content that is not. You can take some of the stress out of this task of making your brand voice consistent by acknowledging we do have some pages that are written in this way so we want to use them. That is how I know it is the brand voice we want.
- Decide whether you have a Jekyll and Hyde brand voice problem or a "Froggenhall" problem. As Katherine said at the start of the discussion, brand voice is common now. It's not exotic. I think that is part of that we realize not first-hand that we need to be able to describe how we want to sound because there are so many channels. You can educate yourself by googling around for an hour or two. You'll find a lot of information. Find them and I think Katherine can help with that. I felt very good about my Google sleuthing skills until I tried to find a brand voice guideline from a government agency. [laughter] and that I flatlined. I am not sure. I know Katherine will probably be able to help out or I will.
- This is a 2016 article about the four dimensions of tone of voice. I really love this article. I thought it was a great read and it really helped me. These are the four dimensions of tone of voice:
  - funny versus serious.

- Formal versus casual.
- Respectful versus irreverent.
- Enthusiastic versus matter-of-fact.

He tried to figure out where you fit along that. For brands in the commercial world, they have more options. I don't know too many government agencies that are full-on irreverent, but occasionally they may be.

I recommend that you read that article. They offer some points for you. I played out how would an error message be written according to these four components of voice.

Here is a little brand voice story. Here is the homepage of the US Patent & Trademark Office, and this is the Trademark section. This is a direct voice.

Before you apply you should familiarize yourself with the basics. Determine if you need a trademark or another form.

If you look around at some of the other content they publish, this is 41-minutes long basic facts about trademark and every small business and what they should know.

This actor goes by Mark Trainmen, and he holds a press conference answering questions for the people in the audience. You can see the titling of this content. They should know now and not later. The brand voice is consistent. It does not take itself too seriously or direct.

This is an example of how self-service or customer service content also needs to be written in the brand voice. This is the old version of how much it costs to process a trademark application. This is the old version. Not written in their brand voice. You can see if you skim it there is not a single personal pronoun and that. We have no scannability. It is not written and that -- and here is the new version and it sounds like Mark could have offered it at the press conference. I hope that you can see the connection. This is not written in a brand voice and it does not give customers a consistent experience when they started getting help. This does.

I am about to take questions. I just want to show you one thing. I have listed 11 brand guidelines that I mentioned earlier and three resources. There is an article called Finding Your Voice and there is an article about brand voice also. This is me taking a deep breath and waiting for you to ask questions.

While they are working on getting the questions, I did see a very interesting note. It was that the word brand itself seems off-putting when it comes to government agencies and employees. Maybe we should strive more for the knowledgeable and trustworthy people. Even though that in itself is a brand.

That is an awesome idea. Why do we say agency voice? Recently I was at a plain language meeting and some people said they stopped calling it that. The brand is the issue and an

obstacle, but who cares. Call it agency voice. And one of the earlier questions if you actually can't help in certain circumstances like how do you set the expectations that maybe you can't help (maybe we can help quote).

I was thinking specifically of the IRS: even goofy writing like "maybe we can help" comes from a good place. Let's take that one by itself. When someone publishes that, they are not swearing on a stack of Bibles they can help. They're saying here is a body of knowledge that you can look at. It is not a sworn oath; it is an offer of help. This is how you can write candidly when you can't help. This is real, and this is why people default to that voice.

What I usually do is I rely on the voice that I would use if I were talking to a real friend or family member. I would honestly say we cannot help. And quickly offer what we can do. So while we can't tell you whether this application will be accepted, we can tell you the status of the application today.

Great. I was thinking exactly of what you said where you said sometimes you cannot help. I get emails like can you help me with Medicare or Social Security, and they give me information I should not have. And I always have to quote our about section. This is what we do; we cannot help you; you have to check with Medicaid or Social Security, and I hope this link helps. This was a quick Google search. I don't know anything else about the problem, but I know I can't help. We have a couple of questions here.

How do you deal with brand voice when you have a few different properties and only one social media, per platform? That is the challenge. I think what you are saying within one Twitter handle you are actually maybe writing in two or three different brand voices. I would probably use the word craft to distinguish the three different brand voices. So you know you are writing in those voices on purpose. I would also probably use imagery to support that a little bit more so people weren't just glancing through the field. One brand voice could be black and white photos. Most of the images could depict people and one can depict pets or plants or something. You will use a visual to help you and carry you a little bit. That may not be a great answer, but that is the best one I have.

There is another question about how to convince people who are resistant to change. They believe their content needs to be extremely specific to the point it is. You probably won't be able to convince them. You could try. They don't sound convince-able.

When I think of the information that would convince me to change my writing is what kind of questions does it give rise to and is it saying what I want to say.

You might say, the heading for the content might be a quick explanation of XYZ. And then they could have content that is labeled a full academic explanation of XYZ. Call it out for what is and publish it.

I can see that a ton of people will be doing that sort of calling out tomorrow.

Two more questions.

Can you talk more about how the wrong brand voice leads to more customer service contacts? Usually a customer service contact happens when a person is unable to find information or has had a bad experience. It is after -- it's their second or third contact with the content.

The first was hopeful, or neutral. If your brand voice is inconsistent, then you increase the chance that the person will get confused and they will be unaware that they've been given the information or that following the process that is published will actually work.

All you have to do is ask the front-line customer service agents to find that people have done nothing to solve the problems. If they say yes, we can tell they have not looked anywhere then there is a good chance that they have not looked anywhere and they would have an inconsistency where they did look and they just are not mentioning it. It was a bad experience.

And one last question: how does a brand voice develop a human-centered design. That is a great question that comes back to one of the things that distinguishes -- do we have a well-defined brand voice or do we just have a voice. Are we Geico or readable civil servants whose content causes no extra wear and tear?

Plain language and brand voice go hand in hand. It is not so much a matter of brand voice, it is a matter of writing why the voice supports understanding of the content that you publish. It is an aspect of user-centered design.

And on that hopeful note, I think we can all thank you very much, Leslie, for this really interesting topic. I can see I have some work to do regarding this. I will look at some of this information about write this, not that. It really helps people when you say this is what we are looking for. This other thing not so much. I just really enjoyed this, and I will pass this on to my team. Probably the strategic communication team as well. Thank you so much. I think I speak for digital.gov. We asked for feedback, and we will be recording this and sometime in the next few weeks we will get this out and we will get this posted on digital.gov and posted not only to the plain list but also a list of attendees. Thank you so much for your questions. I thought we'd have a lot of discussion on this. Have a great rest of the day.

[Event concluded]