



Book Powerlines

Words That Sell Brands, Grip Fans, & Sometimes Change History

Steve Cone
Bloomberg Press, 2008
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Recommendation

“Powerlines” aren’t just thick black wires carrying electrical current. They also lend their name to the jingles, slogans and taglines that have proven powerful enough to make a long-lasting imprint on the collective consciousness. If you’ve ever found yourself humming, “M’m, M’m, Good,” as you open a can of soup, or telling yourself, “Just Do It!” when you go for a run, then you are familiar with this phenomenon. Author Steve Cone ponders why some phrases stick while others live fleetingly and make no impression. He identifies several factors that give powerlines their punch, such as inserting unexpected words, telling a story that resonates with the listener, and using rhythm, cadence and music. Strangely, the book lacks in-depth instruction on how to compose a powerline. Cone prefers to dwell on his favorites, packing the book with quotes and examples, which makes it a fun read for those who want to take a nostalgic stroll down Communication Lane. *BooksInShort* recommends this enjoyable book to media and political buffs, advertising students, marketers and campaign managers.

Take-Aways

- Powerful words can move you to vote a certain way, buy a particular product or change your thinking.
- Powerlines create awareness, build a brand promise and motivate consumers.
- Powerlines are truthful, relate a benefit, suggest an action or promise satisfaction.
- To make your powerline effective, include it in every touchpoint. Never change it.
- Since the American Revolution, the U.S. government has used slogans to propagate its agenda.
- Many phrases that began as dialogue in movies have evolved into powerlines.
- Radio and television are the ideal vehicles for bringing slogans to a mass audience.
- Jingles are powerlines set to music, which makes them even more memorable.
- Being generic, pretentious, untrue, ambiguous, confusing or mundane can make a tagline fail.
- Taglines are more relatable when uttered by a spokesperson or by a character, either real or imaginary.

Summary

“Car 54 Rides On”

Ask any American man of a certain age if he can recite the theme song from the popular early ’60s sitcom, *Car 54, Where Are You?* and he’ll most likely burst out singing:

There's a holdup in the Bronx, Brooklyn's broken out in fights. There's a traffic jam in Harlem that's backed up to Jackson Heights. There's a scout troop short a child. Khrushchev's due at Idlewild. Car 54, where are you?"

“Companies, candidates, countries, and cultures can rise or fall on powerful lines, mottos and sayings.”

Why do such lyrics endure? Catchy phrases that combine music and words to deliver a message are memorable. Such “powerlines” become part of each person’s individual memories and makeup, as well as the cultural lexicon. Powerful words can awe, inspire and move you to vote a certain way, buy a product or change your thinking. Unfortunately, new millennium marketers have not yet produced the caliber of powerlines that dominated advertising in the mid-20th century.

Powerlines and Brands

Powerlines follow six basic rules:

1. Powerlines must be honest, and portray a real or invented but accurate experience. They should differentiate a product from its competition.
2. If a powerline works, don’t change it.
3. Powerlines should relate a benefit, demonstrate how the product can enhance the user’s life, suggest an action or promise some kind of fulfillment.
4. Powerlines work best when set to music.
5. Powerlines should move when displayed visually.
6. To implant a powerline, marketers must include it prominently in all of their advertising and make it easy to read.

“Most companies that have been market leaders over long periods of time employed taglines that built their brand promise into a powerful motivator for consumers to react to and purchase their products.”

The best product powerlines ever written include DeBeers’s “A diamond is forever,” Philip Morris’s “Come to Marlboro Country,” Coca-Cola’s “The pause that refreshes,” Nike’s “Just do it,” McDonald’s “You deserve a break today” and Morton Salt’s “When it rains it pours.”

To have true impact, a tagline should tell a unique story, use creative wordplay and call upon emotion or attitude. One of today’s most successful taglines comes from the City of Las Vegas. “What happens here, stays here,” has attitude, and captures the soul and excitement of the gambling city. Such lines create awareness, build the brand promise and motivate the consumer.

Powerlines and Marketing

What makes powerlines different from other phrases? First, they relate a gripping, influential story. Second, they impart a universal, recognizable truth. Third, they engage the listener’s emotions with sound, either spoken or put to music. As their use grows, they gain more power through repetition. The human brain is programmed to remember stories and phrases that help it survive. To navigate the present and predict the future, people amass and recall an infinite number of songs, jingles and rhymes. That’s why Federal Express’s, “When it absolutely, positively has to be there overnight,” is so moving. The tagline rang true to the thousands of people who were frustrated with the slow package delivery options that predated FedEx. This powerline appeals to the listener’s primary concern, survival, because it promises to make life easier by removing a common worry.

Powerlines and the Media

Radio brought the spoken word into people’s homes. By 1931, almost half of all Americans owned a radio, and by the late ’30s, they had radios in their cars as well. President Franklin Roosevelt was one of the first to recognize the power of radio, which he used for his “Fireside Chats.” After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, his speech to Congress was broadcast via radio, giving birth to the powerline, “a date that will live in infamy.” The use of the unusual word “infamy” gave the line its jolt and resonated with Americans. Advertisers quickly learned radio’s value and launched many memorable powerlines, such as:

- **“Lucky Strike Green has gone to war”** – The Lucky cigarette package had a signature green color. When the military diverted green dye for the war effort, Lucky changed to a distinctive red and black pack, and advertised about it to show its patriotism.
- **“More doctors smoke Camels than any other cigarette”** – What better way to calm the public’s fears regarding smoking than to use trusted authority figures.
- **“Pepsi-Cola hits the spot”** – The first line of this jingle was played on radio more than 300,000 times.

“To understand powerlines is to understand ourselves – what we value and remember and what we discard and forget.”

With the first 30-second television commercial for a Bulova Watch in 1941, advertisers were hooked on the new medium. TV changed the way candidates campaign for office. Lyndon Johnson’s commercial, “Daisy,” by Doyle Dane Bernbach, showed a little girl picking daisies as a nuclear bomb exploded in the distance. Johnson’s opponent Barry Goldwater, who supported the nuclear effort, fell victim to this powerful, manipulative commercial and lost in a landslide.

Powerlines and Government

When governments use powerlines, many call it propaganda. However, since the American Revolution, the U.S. has used slogans to advance its agenda. Just recall the words schoolchildren learn even today, such as “No Taxation without Representation.” More recently, the U.S. Army successfully used the powerline, “Be All You Can Be,” to get new recruits. The best political campaign slogans are rallying cries. They speak to constituents’ hearts and minds, setting the candidates apart from their opponents and appealing to the voters. The best presidential election campaign slogans include:

- **“Tippecanoe and Tyler Too”** – William Henry Harrison, 1840
- **“Don’t swap horses in the middle of the stream”** – Abraham Lincoln, 1864

- “Keep cool with Coolidge” – Calvin Coolidge, 1924
- “A chicken in every pot and a car in every garage” – Herbert Hoover, 1928
- “Happy days are here again” – Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1932
- “I like Ike” – Dwight Eisenhower, 1952
- “All the way with LBJ!” – Lyndon Johnson, 1964
- “It’s morning again in America” – Ronald Reagan, 1984

“We instinctively pay attention when the message has a cadence, when the words rhyme, or are repeated in the same sequence.”

War also has inspired memorable powerlines, from Caesar’s “Veni, vidi, vici” (I came, I saw, I conquered) to Oliver Cromwell’s “Put your trust in God, but keep your powder dry.”

Powerlines in Movies and TV Shows

Movies and TV shows are the ideal media for verbal expressions. Phrases that began as movie dialogue have morphed into powerlines as they became embedded in the viewers’ consciousness. Musical or verbal phrases can evoke instant recall in the human brain. Movie powerlines have unique inflection and dramatic context, as well as, sometimes, a musical score. Great movie powerlines include:

- “Frankly my dear, I don’t give a damn.” – *Gone With the Wind*, 1939
- “There’s no place like home.” – *The Wizard of Oz*, 1939
- “Here’s looking at you, kid.” – *Casablanca*, 1942
- “I’m gonna make him an offer he can’t refuse.” – *The Godfather*, 1972
- “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore.” – *Network*, 1976

“A powerline is one of the most valuable and powerful tools available to any marketer.”

The push to bring viewers into theaters has inspired hot powerlines in movie marketing, such as:

- “Love means never having to say you’re sorry.” – *Love Story*, 1970
- “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.” – *Star Wars*, 1977
- “Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water.” – *Jaws 2*, 1978
- “In space no one can hear you scream.” – *Alien*, 1979

“With a little bit of thought and the courage to get beyond soulless expressions, anyone can sell attitude.”

Television marketers also have learned how to turn taglines into powerlines. They repeat the tagline the same way in every show to make a promise and then fulfill it by telling a story:

- “Tonight, we have a really big show.” – *The Ed Sullivan Show*
- “Look! Up in the sky! It’s a bird. It’s a plane! It’s Superman!” – *Superman*
- “The thrill of victory, and the agony of defeat.” – ABC’s *Wide World of Sports*
- “To boldly go where no man has gone before.” – *Star Trek*
- “...And that’s the way it is.” – *CBS Evening News* with Walter Cronkite

Powerlines and Jingles

Jingles are powerlines set to music, which enhances their appeal and anchors them in the listeners’ memory. The 1950s were the jingle’s heyday. Current marketers prefer to use existing popular songs to sell their products. These songs are instantly recognizable, but they lack the jingle’s association with a particular brand. *Advertising Age* magazine’s top 10 jingles from the 20th century are: McDonald’s “You deserve a break today,” the U.S. Army’s “Be all that you can be,” Pepsi’s “Pepsi Cola hits the spot,” Campbell Soup’s “M’m! M’m! Good,” Chevy’s “See the U.S.A. in your Chevrolet,” Oscar Mayer’s “I wish I were an Oscar Mayer wiener,” Wrigley Gum’s “Double your pleasure, double your fun,” Winston Cigarettes’ “Winston tastes good like a cigarette should,” Coca-Cola’s “It’s the real thing” and Brylcreem’s “A little dab’ll do ya.”

Powerlines without Power

Hundreds of messages constantly vie for the consumers’ attention, but your powerline can cut through the clutter if you follow a few rules. Emphasize your brand name and highlight a primary benefit. Make it believable and original. Taglines that are generic, pretentious, untrue, ambiguous, confusing or mundane won’t capture consumers. These failures are best forgotten:

- **“The Coke Side of Life”** – Coca-Cola faltered here. Avoid using the word “life” in a tagline. It’s hackneyed, trite and played out.
- **“Your World. Delivered”** – AT&T liked it, but can you figure out what it means?
- **“Life/Changing”** – If you’ve been to Iowa, you might disagree with the state slogan.
- **“The Last Real Beer”** – Coors claimed it, but beer connoisseurs didn’t buy it.
- **“Higher Standards”** – Bank of America boasted of this attribute, but it’s too generic.

Powerlines and Spokespeople

People relate to a tagline more easily when a spokesperson or a recognizable character, real or imaginary, says it. Famous advertising characters include Smokey the Bear, Morris the Cat, the AFLAC Duck, Tony the Tiger and, to get away from animals, Mr. Clean. To be effective, such characters and spokespeople must appeal to almost every demographic, be exclusive to one brand and appear to be a natural fit with the product. Include the spokesperson’s contribution in all touch points and seldom, if ever, change it. Spokespeople must be committed to the product they promote. Memorable, successful spokespeople include:

- Brooke Shields swore, “Nothing comes between me and my Calvins.”
- Clara Peller promoted Wendy’s with the famous question, “Where’s the Beef?”
- “Fred the Baker” got up early at Dunkin’ Donuts because, as he said, “It’s time to make the donuts.”
- “Joe Isuzu” said Isuzu’s cars were good, promising, “You have my word on it.”

“The alchemy of the television commercial remains part truth, part fiction, part staging, part substance, all to create a heavy dose of image with tremendous impact on the behavior and attitudes of viewers.”

Actor John Houseman intoned that at “Smith Barney, they make money the old-fashioned way. They EARN it.”

About the Author

Steve Cone has worked in marketing for more than three decades. His first book was *Steal These Ideas!* He is currently the chief marketing officer for Epsilon. His past clients include Apple, Citigroup, American Express and United Airlines.
