5 Questions to Define Your Brand Voice

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Do you ever read your marketing copy and think, "This doesn't sound like us at all?" If so, it's time to ask yourself some pointed questions to help you find your authentic brand voice.

"If your logo didn’t appear with your content, could your audience identify the content as coming from your brand? Would someone viewing your content on different channels know it all came from the same brand?"

Erika Heald, Content Marketing Institute

An authentic voice is a critical part of your marketing strategy. But how do you define it? And how do you share it with the people on your team who need to know how to use it?

Around here we say “Give us a week and we’ll give you a voice.”

We use what we call the Five Question Process. It’s pretty simple. Each workday for one week, you answer one key question about your brand. You can answer the questions on your own if you’re a solopreneur, or get your team members involved for a wider view. Plan to spend at least 15-20 minutes on each answer. You want to really dig deep and give this some thought.

At the end of the week, you'll have about 80% of the tough work done to create a workable brand voice guideline you can share with your team. You will be ready to define, in just a few concise and clear paragraphs, what your brand voice stands for, sounds like and intends. And that information will absolutely transform your marketing.

Let's get started...
**Question 1**

Describe your brand as if it were a person. What are the key elements of your brand’s personality and philosophy? Be sure to think about how your brand interacts with advertisers, investors, clients, families of clients, vendors and the public.
Question 2

Understanding where your brand’s products or services will have an impact is critical to developing a strong brand. What change(s) are you working for in your field, your community, your world, and how does your brand help to bring those changes about?
Question 3

Your brand must speak fluently to and resonate with your intended audience and your stakeholders. Your "audience" might include current clients, advertisers and the general public - anyone who will be directly affected by your content. Who is your primary audience? Your secondary audience? Who do you need to talk to? Are there any specific challenges you face in communicating with them?
Question 4

If you could directly speak to each person in your target market, what message would you want to share with them? What do you want people to do when they hear your message?
Question 5

Are there any marketing materials or editorial/branding guidelines already in place for your brand? Does your marketing copy follow these guidelines? What do you love about your existing copy? What do you not like so much? What's missing? Are there any examples of voice and style out there than you really like?
Creating Your Brand Voice Guide

Now that you've defined the essence of your brand voice, document and share it with your team in your Brand Style Guide. This can be a simple document to start; you'll add and grow as you refine your brand standards.

On the next pages you'll find the actual wording from a brand voice guideline for a new print magazine. Any identifying features have been changed to "My Regional Magazine." We hope this helps you create a brand guideline of your own! If you have any questions drop us a note at heygirl@thewordsgirl.com.
(Sample) Brand Voice Guideline

This document is the "road map" for the project regarding style, voice, look, and feel of the print magazine. All team members – editorial, production, sales, and management – are expected to be familiar with these guidelines and implement them in our work.

The Project
My Regional Magazine (MRM) is a community and lifestyle magazine that highlights the people, businesses, organizations and events having a real impact on our community. MRM content focuses on local metro Detroiters having an influence at home or abroad and spotlighting community and global issues that have an impact on southeast Michigan residents.

MRM is a monthly, high quality, high-gloss print publication with select content presented online.

OUR GOAL is to show audience places to go, places to shop and what to buy in Michigan. By doing so, we will support small businesses that are making a difference in this area.

We highlight Michigan “success stories” and discoveries through high quality writing, photography and graphics. Through our online and social media presence we encourage our audience to participate in creating and engaging with our content, and provide a platform for them to sound off on what’s important to them. No matter what occupation or age range, everyone has a story to tell and a voice that deserves to be heard—everyone is significant at MRM.
The Voice

The MRM voice is wise and informed, playful, active, intellectually curious, tolerant of differing opinions yet passionate about our beliefs. We celebrate diverse opinions and healthy debate, as long as they are shared with respect, tolerance and an attitude of growth.

We are racy, but not trashy; hip but not snobby; political but not divisive. Our voice is to-the-point, honest, infused with humor, and peppered with personality. We do not drone on. We seek an authentic "I've been there" voice that our audience will appreciate and relate to. Not preachy, not self-serving; but real, genuine, present and informative.

For a good example of a magazine that hits the mark with this kind of voice, read Modern Farmer (yes, really, Modern Farmer) – they offer fresh takes on traditional subjects, with witty and highly readable writing that offers a ton of information.

The Audience

Our readers are primarily women (70%), with an average household income of $150,000. We also target the 50,000 college graduates in southeast Michigan and the approximately 555,000 small business owners in the state of Michigan. Age range is from late teens to seniors, with a wide range of interests.

Our Message to Our Readers:
We cover the people, places and events that make a difference in your lives. We also offer them a platform where they can sound off, make some noise, state their point of view, bark at us, and continue the conversation. We value every voice and respect every opinion.
We aim to:

**Make our readers feel hip.** For example, Shinola Detroit has established itself as a local status symbol. Forget the Apple Watch; Shinola is what’s happening in our town. We’ll share the backstory with our readers.

**Make them feel smart.** Understanding the ins and outs of various political proposals is daunting. Our readers need clear explanations – minus the partisan sound bites – to help them see deeper into the political issues we face.

**Make them feel sexy.** Have a strong majority of women readers, our content recognizes the celebrity in each of us and celebrate the sexiness of being authentic and passionate about whatever engages us in our lives. This is not just talk. When women get behind something, they put their hearts and souls into it. We want to share that passion.

**Make them feel hungry.** Our readers will pay for quality. After hearing consumers say they wanted P.F. Chang’s food at home, Unilever in April teamed with the Asian-food casual-dining chain on P.F. Chang’s Home Menu meals for two. While they may seem a tad pricey for frozen meals at $7.99, sales were nearly $14 million in October, so it’s well on its way to becoming a $100 million-plus brand. These kinds of stories are happening in our area as well, and we will bring them out.

**Make them feel techie.** Baby boomers spend more on technology than anyone. They spent an average of $850 for their latest home computer — $50 more than any other group, reports Forrester Research. Help them engage in the latest tech, not because they "should," but because this is how they want to communicate. We’ll cover what’s new from our local tech companies and retailers.
Our Content

MRM’s dedication to our advertisers and readers is to keep our audience engaged by being a source of up to the date content created by our writers and designers. Article subjects include:

o Local Business -- Small, large and non-profit business and organizations, leaders and employees, products, trends, contributions and news.

o Politics -- Policies, elections, national and local politics having an impact on the community and residents, local advocates and politicians.

o Health and Wellness -- Fitness, nutrition and wellbeing focusing on health, medical, self-care and awareness, expert interviews.

o Entertainment -- Theater, film, music and art events in the local community reviews and suggestions.

o Fashion and Beauty -- Fashion trends in clothing and accessories including local designers and retail, plus How-tos and product information in hair and skin care, highlighting national and local retail and products.

o Hot Spots -- Restaurants, bars and nightclubs. A guide of where to go. Interviews with local chefs, bartenders, DJ’s or business owners.

o Creative arts -- Highlighting local visual artists, musicians and authors through interviews and reviews

o Sports and Recreation -- National and local sports news, plus recreation spots and activities

o Hobbies and Crafts -- Craft and hobby how-to’s, events and interviews with experts and enthusiasts

o Travel -- Local and international travel spots, deals, ideas and reviews

o Gadgets and electronics -- Product trends, information and reviews
Editorial Guidelines – The How-tos for Writers

Refer to the Associated Press Style Book for punctuation, numerals, etc. If in doubt, check with your editor.

Use the Active Voice – With an active voice, your writing is more forceful and interesting; the passive voice bogs down and loses momentum and vibrancy. Know the difference and use it.
http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/passivevoice.html

Write in the Present Tense – Future tense waters down the impact. "I will go to the beach" becomes more powerful when you write "Today I book my beach house." Our audience is vibrant, active and alive. Our writing reflects this.

Know that we are a team. Your team is here to help, in any way we can, including fleshing out story ideas and doing a thorough edit of final copy. Please work with us to create the best possible product.
We hope you found this sample brand guide helpful and useful. Good luck, and let us know how you do with your own brand guide!

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