Great B2B straplines: and how to write them

A well-crafted line can be one of the most powerful marketing tools you could have. Why then are most of them in the B2B space forgettable clichés? Here we aim to redress the balance by asking (and answering) the question: what makes a great B2B strapline?

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So what makes a good strapline?

You might as well ask what makes a good doughnut. You might think custard filling would be good. I wouldn't. There is a huge variety of straplines out there and different styles (fillings?) are good for different situations.



But there is nonetheless a degree of consensus on what makes a good one.

A strapline has to somehow summarise the most important part of your positioning, and this is largely because it is the last thing that people read before moving onto messages from the next company.

The strapline is often there in the bottom right-hand corner of a press ad for a reason. And the flash banner usually ends with logo + line because they want to leave that particular impression with you more than any other.

But more specifically, it might be trying to achieve a number of things, and the only true definition of a 'good' strapline is whether it achieves that end. (And without expensive research, you're unlikely to ever have a reliable answer)

After all, plenty of straplines are catchy, funny and memorable, but did they tell you what the business does for a living? And plenty of straplines are descriptive, but do they communicate the style that sets you apart from your competition? If it does what it was designed to do, then it's done its job and it is therefore a 'good' line.

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Do you really need one?

A better question might be, whether you are a B2B or a B2C business, do you really need a strapline?

Well, put it like this: most of the planet knows what business Nike is in. So Nike doesn't need its 'Just do it' strapline any more. It doesn't even need its name. The swoosh does it all. Imagine that.

But Nike is one of a select few of global corporates that can get away with the luxury of this branding minimalism. For the rest of us, we need to be a bit more informative about what business we're in - and pronto. And we need to make sure that our target audience understands our positioning. Whether we are the cheap ones, the high quality ones, or the funky, flexible ones.

> ***"Nike is one of the few corporates who can get away with the luxury of branding minimalism"***

This is where a 'good' strapline comes in, because it summarises all the important points in a line that is short enough to be easily consumed and remembered.

A good strapline should do one or more of the following:

1. Say what the company does
2. Say how the company does it
3. To do it with enough flair to be remembered

And a good strapline ticks all three boxes.

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A good strapline will give us a good at-a-glance idea as to what the company does. The way that it does so will communicate the brand's positioning. If it does both in a way that leaves us admiring its panache, then it's done its job. And if it passes into the vernacular - then you've hit the big time. Simples.

But while that's pretty much the sole preserve of the big B2C boys, there are a number of big B2B/B2C 'crossover' brands (the likes of Dell, IBM, UPS), whose straplines occasionally pass over the great B2B/B2C divide to make an impact on the public consciousness. And these are frequently the best examples for B2B marketers to consider in their search for a really 'good' strapline.

So in rough chronological order, the following pages contain 10 B2B 'crossover' brand lines that have done just that over the years. They're not necessarily my favourite brands - but their straplines have worked damn hard and ticked the right boxes.
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"If your strapline passes into the vernacular, you've hit the big time. Simples.

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1.

"When it absolutely, positively, has to be there overnight"



FedEx, 1981
Ally & Gargano

To my mind, an object lesson in supporting a brand's promise. Ally & Gargano's memorable US TV spot featured the fast-talking John Moschitta, Jr. There've been many FedEx campaigns since, but this is still remembered as a classic.

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2.

"Nobody ever got fired for buying IBM"



1980s, internal

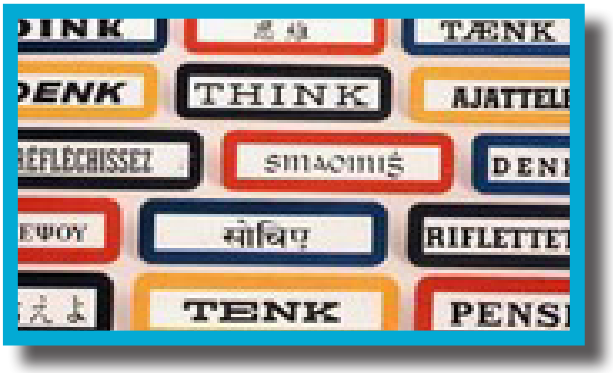
Since the first mainframes rolled off the production line, IBM has always been a massive B2B player, with a core business developing and providing B2B technology solutions, systems and software. This campaign was hugely successful back when IBM really ruled the roost.

The strapline crystallizes probably the most well known example of the infamous old 'FUD' sales technique: that of instilling a sense of Fear, Uncertainty & Doubt in a potential customer if they even considered choosing the competition over an established 'tried and trusted' brand - aka not buying a mainframe. That was then, however, and it's worth noting how far they have progressed with their strapline of 'Let's build a smarter planet'.

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3.

"I think, therefore IBM"



IBM, 1988
Ogilvy & Mather

Another IBM entry, but it's a cracker.

This line was an evolution of a motivating one-word appeal made to all employees by Thomas J. Watson, IBM's chairman, back in 1911.

His plea to them? That they should, above all, THINK about their role. So ingrained was this idea that 'THINK' signs were translated and dispolayed in IBM offices across the world for decades.

Ogilvy's more recent take on it is probably my favourite B2B slogan. It's a simple message. It's closely related to what IBM do (and what people do with IBM products) and it's a very clever twist made with panache on an already globally recognised phrase.

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4.

“Intel Inside®”



Intel, 1991, Dahlin Smith and White

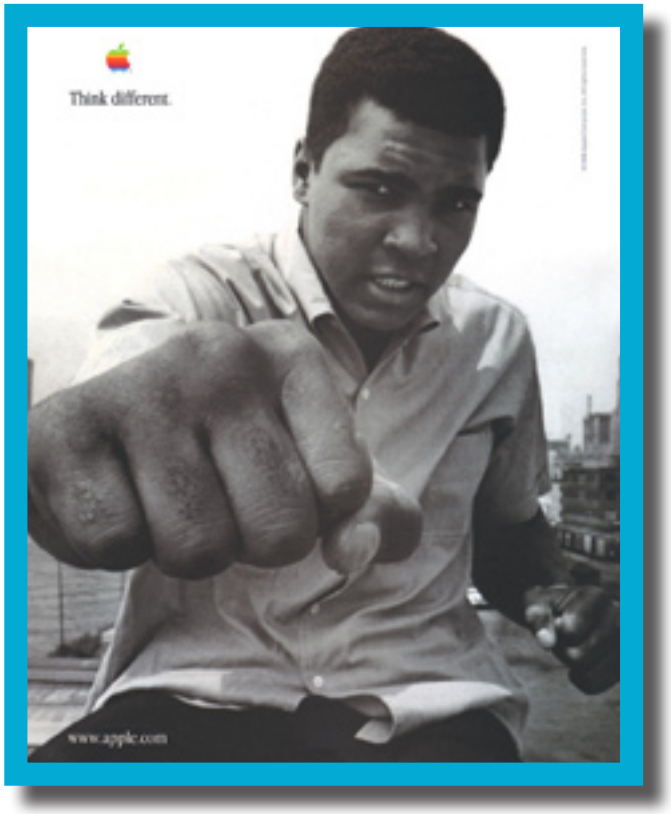
Yet another example of a PC heavyweight (and one of the top ten world brands) with a hard-working nugget of branding that’s entered the vernacular by spawning numerous parodies; substitute the word ‘Intel’ for whatever you want and you’ve got a ready-made T-shirt sloganeer’s dream.

This campaign represented the first time a PC component manufacturer successfully talked directly to computer buyers. 20 years on, and the line is still plastered across millions of PCs.

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5.

"Think different"



Apple, 1997, TBWA\Chiat\Day

A strapline to make the grammar police all twitchy.

Nevertheless, it was a clever play on and dig at IBM's 'Think' motto. It encapsulated what Apple was all about, and challenged IBM's dominant market position so successfully, that the playing field now has now most definitely levelled out.

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6.

"The document company"



Xerox, 1991-2008, Young & Rubicam

A bit of a double-edged sword, this one. A line that aimed to position Xerox as the big cheese in the world of document copying - which it did hugely successfully for a number of years - so much so that it helped the company name pass into the vernacular and a new verb was born, as everyone started to Xerox their documents.

But with the advent of the digital age, the company felt it was being hamstrung by it. Not even a logo morph from a solid red 'X' to a more 'digitised' look could save it from the perception that it was getting left behind - and so the line and logo were dropped in 2008.

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7.

"Easy as Dell"



Dell, Inc. 2001, Full Moon Interactive

Ten years ago, people were still wary of buying a computer online. (Many still are.) How would they know what to choose? Would it arrive on time? If at all? Would they be able to get it to work without an engineer? The horror!

This catchy strapline nailed the brief to reassure uneasy online shopping pioneers.

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8.

"Fluent in finance"



Barclays Bank 2002, BBH

The 'Fluent in Finance' TV spots featured Samuel L Jackson delivering complex monologues with his customary cool panache directly to camera.

With a left-field approach deliberately designed to be thought provoking, the Fluent in Finance straplines reinforced this positioning, and aimed to generate a certain confidence in the brand's promise, capability and authority.

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9.

"The world's local bank"



HSBC, 2002, Lowe

Another bank with another clever proposition. Aiming to play up the fact that the HSBC Group operates as a number of local banks around the world, the strapline - supported by a huge media campaign - summarised the whole story in 4 well chosen words.

A very smart way of lending the brand a sense of local insight and touchy-feely sensitivity to its global corporate image and reach.

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10.

"We love logistics"



UPS, 2010,
Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide

A lesson in complication made simple. And as complicated things go, logistics is up there. Someone at O&M had the simple-genius idea of explaining it all to the tune of 'That's Amore'.

Appealing to a wider audience but at the same time unravelling the complexities of logistics, this line and its well-executed, gently humorous TV spot explained exactly what the brand does, and at the same time lending it immense recognition and priceless recall in the minds of Joe Public.

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11. (wooden spoon prize)

"What's your problem?"



FileMaker, 1999
TBWA\Chiat\Day

Beware the dangers of an overly clever strapline.

In 1999, this was FileMaker's. Aiming to position itself as a versatile business database software product, the brand was temporarily hoisted on its own sharply witty petard - because funnily enough for a lot of people, FileMaker was indeed the problem.

I'm sure it's a terrific product. But the strapline is a shocker.

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Feel the inspiration

So those are my selection of 10 straplines that do the job well. Some are more flamboyant than others, some are descriptive, some downright philosophical. But what's the secret to finding them?

One of the difficulties of creating a strapline is viewing it objectively.

Asking a marketers to separate themselves from the target audience in order to gauge the effect of a line is asking a lot, frankly. While this is of course true of all marketing communications (how many campaigns get refreshed just when they are starting to achieve traction because the marketing director is bored with it?) it is especially true of the three-word strapline. After a while, when the freshness is gone, it is hard, nay impossible, to understand the effect it has on someone who sees it only occasionally.

There are two ways around this. One is to trust your early judgement. Make the decision quickly and not via endless committee-driven revisions.

Another is to put faith in research and to ask the right questions, ie do they remember it rather than do they like it. Canvas opinion on residual brand associations, rather than on the meaning of the line itself. If you can achieve an equal balance of creative flair and rational understanding of your messaging, you won't be far off.

If nothing else, try to do it better than your immediate competitors and you'll be doing well. If you were, for example, competing against the local painter decorator in my area who billed himself as "slow, but expensive", you may find it's not that hard.

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Hope that helps. If you'd like us to help you write a better strapline - or to help you solve any B2B issue you may be grappling with - please feel free to get in touch.Email us or call and ask for Ann-Maria. Thanks.

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