

Brand Bytes

By John Mathes, Director of Brand Services, Bancography

A little bit of Home Depot in my life

A little bit of Toyota by my side

A little bit of Starbucks is all I need

A little bit of Comcast is what I see

A little bit of Oakley in the sun

A little bit of Sealy all night long

A little bit of Wells Fargo here I am

A little bit of brand makes me your man



With apologies to Lou Bega, my *Brand Bytes No. 5* won't exactly set the music industry on fire with its latest cover, but I think the idea of "a little bit" sets the stage for a timely discussion of what's hot in the marketing world today — what I'm dubbing **brand byte** communication.

CNN Headline News started it back in 1982. The Internet propelled it, and Facebook has humanized it. We live in a world of sound bites (bytes if you prefer, as I do) where we get a little bit of everything and not a lot of anything.

As consumers, we're on marketing overload. Thousands of messages a day compete for our attention as we navigate life. We can't begin to absorb it all, especially when those messages are laden with brand attributes, benefits and promotion. It's too much and we're all suffering from the short-attention-span-theater effect.

As financial services marketers, we have to be cognizant of competing for our customers' limited attention. No longer do they set aside specific time for watching television, reading a newspaper, a magazine or even surfing the Internet. The advent of Tivo-like DVR technology has allowed a concept referred to as **time-shifting** — watching television (and zipping through commercials) when convenient. And now, Sling-Box is revolutionizing **place-shifting** — watching television where you want via your laptop.

Most creative types will tell you that outdoor (billboard advertising) is the hardest to develop and write. That's because to be effective and readable, the message needs to be five to six words or less. That can be a difficult byte to write. But many other marketing vehicles follow the same guidelines. Point-of-sale, merchandising and digital signage all have the same brevity objectives. Internet marketing thrives on bytes (all types). Promotional freebies have little room for anything but a byte. Consumers rarely read past a headline in a newspaper or magazine ad. I guess CNN had it right starting back in 1982 — just the headlines. Television is selling more and more ten second units, and there's even a movement by a few renegade advertisers championing a cause to carve up both television and radio advertising segments into a second or two. Wow, try to communicate something meaningful in a couple of seconds. That's daunting.

What makes a good **brand byte**? It starts with your brand positioning. If you don't have one articulated, collaborate with a brand positioning firm that can help you map it out. If the resulting brand position is truly differentiating, then you are well on your way to a great byte. If the positioning speaks to your heritage and existing brand equity, then you are about to hit a home run. Make it clever, succinct, relevant and mix in a double entendre and you're golden. Oh, and keep it five words or less. Preferably three or less. Ok, two words. Whew. Easy, huh? Not! After you have one successfully crafted, try expanding your bytes into a full complement of succinct messages that work in all media.

Time spent with all traditional advertising vehicles, a common media measurement, is tanking. Even time spent on specific Web sites is down due to the prolific run-up in choices, portals, and of course, social networks. In fact, Web 2.0, the trend toward real-time interactivity and collaboration via the Internet, and its plethora of conversations have led to a social phenomenon now known as **ambient awareness**, the omnipresent knowledge of up-to-the minute status. Clive Thompson, in a September *New York Times* article, wrote extensively about how status updates, which are the bedrock of Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, et al, are reducing our conversations (and attention) to snippets. Twitter is training its user base to communicate in 140 characters or less every time they have something to say. People must love the idea, as Twitter was the fastest growing social network in 2008, up a whopping 664 percent year-over-year growth. Facebook and LinkedIn were both up in the neighborhood of 150 percent. These social networks, and many like them, are pushing byte-sized messaging into overdrive and into the mainstream.

If you've mastered the art of texting, or if you have teenagers, you know very well how much is communicated in just a few short characters and abbreviations. Sentences are so passé.

A quick byte is all consumers have time for. And frankly, it's all they want because there's no time for anything else. They get it. The challenge for financial services marketers is to communicate to consumers succinctly, relevantly and differentiated. Serve it up in easy-to-digest bytes. Just be sure to offer many serving stations. Let's look at some.

SunTrust Bank has. SunTrust, a southeast regional network, has the idea of **solid** firmly in its **brand byte**. Recent communication conveys the following: stand on solid ground; solid is timeless; solid is habit-forming; solid builds from the ground up; live solid; bank solid.

All of your **brand bytes** should aggregate into your full brand message. As customers grab a byte here and there they are becoming increasingly ambient-aware of your brand's attributes, personality and ultimately the promise that your brand is making. If done successfully, each byte connects to each other and tells the story of how your brand is different from the financial services brand across the street or down on the corner.

Are you biting on the idea of **brand bytes**? I hope so and I hope you try it. But I'll warn you, it's extremely hard to reduce your brand to a few words. My word count tool for this article tells me I've written 1,010 words. Now I'm going to try and get it down to five or six.

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