
Business War Cries

Sloganeering has developed into a serious business in Germany, with a surprising market share of English-language slogans - from an average 3% in the Eighties to over 30% today. Recent evidence of a return to native wording among one or two players notwithstanding, this trend appears exponential. The word slogan itself might seem like another English borrowing but in fact originates from Gaelic *slua* (army or host) + *garm* (cry or shout). Slogans, literally, are war cries.

Like any good war cry, a slogan should be loud, clear and distinctive. In the overcrowded battlefields of today's corporate world, all too often they come across as shrill, garbled and indistinguishable. "Always Low Prices" is loud and clear, but the Wal-Mart corporate punchline is hardly thrilling. Similarly, "You can do it. We can help." - the Home Depot war cry - is designed for lowest common denomination rather than best possible scenario. Boeing's "Forever New Frontiers" is certainly more Star Trekky, but lacks that muscular quality which makes the best slogans crunchy and memorable. "Imagination at work" from General Electric functions much better here as a professional balance between dream and hard fact. This reminds me of the MAN slogan "Engineering the Future", another pleasing blend of Germanic rigour and Anglo-Saxon optimism. The ThyssenKrupp war cry "Developing the future" works along the same path, but less effectively with that more abstract action-word "develop". Taking a look around the rest of the DAX ballpark, we find everything from the sublime to the unfortunate.

Deutsche Bank's "A Passion to Perform" is perfectly equivalent to the German "Leistung aus Leidenschaft", complete with complementary alliteration. "Never stop thinking" from Infineon, on the other hand, sounds as if it wants to be positive but comes across as subliminally negative. In psycho-linguistic terms, two negative signals in a three-signal message ain't necessarily clever. Altana conduct the same message with their straight worded "Think on" tagline. But then the same company creates unease with their pluralism in "We create values in Pharmaceuticals and Chemicals." Drugs and pills may create economic 'value' but inanimate objects cannot be said to carry ethical 'values' in themselves. Yes, the guy wanted to think two thoughts in the same words but, no, the result doesn't sound like English pure and true.

It will be interesting to see if BMW attempt an anglicization of "Freude am Fahren". In my opinion this slogan will not stand on its own two legs for the non-German speaker like the way Audi's "Vorsprung durch Technik" did and continues to do. The stateside advertising slogan from adidas - "Impossible is Nothing" - is a nice reversal of syntax which makes you stop and think for that all-crucial millisecond. But the Commerzbank war cry "ideas ahead" is an ambiguous rendering of "ideen nach vorn", a slogan more akin in meaning to "ideas to the fore". "Ideas ahead", on the other hand, might suggest there ain't many ideas around at the moment. The corporate message "We have.../ ideas ahead/ for you" is not only bad English therefore but bad business.

The Schering slogan "making medicine work" at least makes sense, without igniting any imaginative fireworks. "Science for a Better Life" from Bayer does a better communicative job here, because it paints a bigger picture and remembers the customer. By the way, how few - how terribly few - slogans in this business culture come from the customer's point of view? Metro's "The Spirit of Commerce" is an emotive piece of market positioning, but also misses the mark. Friendlier is Henkel's "A Brand Like a Friend", but here is another verbless sound bite of pseudo-English. "World of TUI" and the Siemens slogan "Global network of innovation" both lack the normative English article "The", while my prize for the worst English-language slogan on the DAX must go to Volkswagen. Here is a company that has experienced a spot of bother lately, but has anyone taken time out to check up on its core corporate message? "Drivers wanted" might try to sound like everyone's queueing up to purchase their dream automobile, but could just as easily mean that no one wants the damn things. Time for a Sloganwechsel?

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