

Bad Grammar, Good Brands?

I am not the grammar police. Honest. I have dangled participles and split infinitives with hardly a backward glance. But as both a creator and consumer of advertising writing, I desire clear communication. Grammar, punctuation and emphasis all work together in advertising to convey meaning.

For instance, the importance of punctuation has been elegantly demonstrated with Eats, Shoots and Leaves. But sometimes, in the desire for clear communication, advertising copy writers use “unconventional grammar.”

Advertising writers have been known to eschew “proper” punctuation in favour of streamlining. For example, I am not putting semi-colons at the end of each item on a bulleted list in a Direct Mail letter. It’s cluttered. This kind of *streamlining* decision is also used to make print ads, including billboards, more powerful. As stated on the excellent blog [Six Stories Up](#), if it reads awkwardly, even if it is technically correct, it is not good copy.

On the other hand, *additional* punctuation can also be powerful for communicating.

Big. Bad. Barbara. We know those aren’t real sentences. But using a full stop after each single word, the message has a stronger impact – especially in tower high Helios bold. In the world of ad copy, we allow it for impact. (Of course, if you used it all the time, you’d sound like William Shatner.)

But should we use the proper even when it *sounds* wrong? [A marketing web site](#) used this example to prove the point: The data is in / The data are in. Using the singular verb “is” might be selected because it *sounds* correct. “The data are in,” may appear wrong to a majority of readers, even though it is correct!

And, sometimes “proper” grammar police go too far! I once had a client whose secretary (ruled the roost and raised in a one room school house) was a stickler for “proper.” Unfortunately, to her that meant using the passive voice and banning contractions! In radio and print advertising! A good time was not had by all.

Honda took a bunch of hits last year on several blogs with the campaign slogan, *To Each Their Own*. This agreement error is so common as to often go unnoticed. And many blogs, including the clever [Candlepower](#), pointed that out, adding if the meaning is clear, that’s the important thing. Indeed, using the proper, *To each his or her own* or *To each one’s own* sounds so cumbersome that the writers probably said yes, it’s wrong and we are using it.

Wrong, but useful. Sometimes unconventional grammar is so effective because it is eye-catching (or perhaps more properly, *ear-catching*). I tend to agree that usually when we see it in advertising; it is intentional. For instance, Apple’s icon tagline: *Think Different*. You can bet a billion folks at the agency said “h” when they heard the tagline for the first time.

But unconventional was exactly the brand message. And for that reason alone it works so well!

(This does not mean we can forgive the dreaded *Shop Local* which properly should be, *Shop Locally*)

Similarly, McDonald's ads make our grammarian ears sit up and take notice when they talk about their charitable initiatives with the lovely tag, "More Happy."

And, although I remain unconvinced about drinking clam juice, Mott's also gives us cause to pause with the unconventional phrasing "Taste the Different."

Grammar, punctuation and emphasis – all work together to deliver the message. When you haven't got them right – even unconventionally – then the message isn't properly conveyed either. Take for instance, this new slogan for a town; "**Where you *want to live***" (emphasis theirs). If the statement required any emphasis (the stress of italics) it should rightly be on the word *live* – where you want to *live* – as it is the only **double entendre** in the tagline: "live" meaning *reside*, but also *enjoy to the fullest*.

However if, as I suspect, the writer's intention was to express that people, if they had a choice, would select this town – then they are going to have to rewrite. Italic emphasis on *want* doesn't convey this. The words *want* and *choose* are not interchangeable. Want is an unsatisfied desire; is that really what you *want* to say?