



10 Taglines That Changed Marketing History

"The most powerful element in advertising is the truth."— Bill Bernbach

Here are 10 taglines that were so effective they became legendary.

They altered consumer behavior or became cultural shorthand — not just because they were catchy, but because **they captured a powerful Emotional Truth™** which was so effective it changed marketing history.

What makes these taglines especially relevant today is that many were born during highly competitive or economically uncertain times. The brands that won weren't always the cheapest — they were the ones that communicated value with an Emotional Truth™.

The best taglines don't just communicate. They **reflect a feeling people value** about the brand—expressed in “***The Few. The Proud. The Marines.***”—or an emotionally meaningful attitude or observation associated with the brand, as in Nike's “***Just Do It.***”

Legendary taglines redefine how people think and feel about the brand.

What's fascinating — and very consistent with Wallace & Washburn's Emotional Truth™ Branding approach — is that **the greatest taglines rarely describe products**. They identify:

- a human tension,
- a missing emotional payoff,
- or a strategic value opportunity competitors overlooked.

1. **Avis — “We Try Harder.”**

In my opinion this is the greatest positioning line ever written.

Instead of denying they were No. 2, Avis weaponized it into a benefit: *you'll get better service because we have more to prove.*

Most brands spend fortunes trying to hide their weakness. Avis built a billion-dollar advantage by admitting theirs.

I was working at Doyle Dane Bernbach at the time and according to Bill Bernbach, **the client's spouse tried to kill the campaign** because, “Avis should never admit to being #2.”

Fortunately, Bill convinced Avis to test the ad in a small market where it scored extremely well. It transformed a weakness into a strategic value opportunity. They can't use the line anymore... because Avis is now #1! So they say, "We're #1 Because We Try Harder."

2. **Nike — "Just Do It."**

Nike stopped selling shoes and started selling personal empowerment.

This wasn't about athletics — it was about overcoming hesitation, insecurity, procrastination, and fear.

It's one of the few taglines that became a life philosophy — with Michael Jordan emerging as its ultimate embodiment, although it was launched featuring everyday people.

3. **Apple — "Think Different."**

Apple transformed computers from technical tools into identity statements.

The line aligned Apple with rebels, creators, and innovators — emotionally separating them from IBM-style corporate conformity.

4. **De Beers — “A Diamond Is Forever.”**

De Beers may have created more economic value than any slogan in history. Ad Age rates it the #1 tagline ever. It transformed diamonds from luxury items into emotional symbols of eternal love and commitment forever.

It also discouraged resale — strategically brilliant. No pun intended.

5. **McDonald’s — “You Deserve a Break Today.”**

McDonald's shifted fast food from convenience to emotional reward.

Instead of “cheap hamburgers,” the brand became a small personal escape for overworked families and moms.

6. **L’Oréal — “Because You’re Worth It.”**

L'Oréal elevated cosmetics from vanity to self-worth and empowerment.

One of the first major beauty lines to frame spending money on yourself as emotionally justified. Another empowerment line is Coach’s tagline, **“The Courage to Be Real.”** It’s designed to inspire audiences to reconnect with the fearless, adventurous spirit they had as younger people

7. BMW — “The Ultimate Driving Machine.”

BMW owned a single value territory with remarkable discipline: performance driving.
Not luxury. Not prestige. Driving.
It gave the brand laser focus for decades.

8. M&M’s — “Melts in Your Mouth, Not in Your Hands.”

Mars, Incorporated solved a practical consumer problem in a memorable way.
A perfect example of functional value becoming emotionally sticky through simplicity.

9. Las Vegas — “What Happens Here, Stays Here.”

Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority didn’t sell casinos or hotels.
It sold permission. Escape. Temporary freedom from judgment.
That emotional insight revitalized the entire city brand.

10. Volkswagen — “Think Small.”

Volkswagen changed advertising forever.
In an era of giant American cars, admitting smallness became honesty, intelligence, and anti-establishment sophistication. It redefined what confidence in advertising could sound like.

A few others that narrowly missed the Top 10 but belong in the hall of fame:

- FedEx — “When it absolutely, positively has to be there overnight.”
- Walmart — “Save Money. Live Better.”
- Mastercard — “There are some things money can’t buy...”
- Hallmark — “When you care enough to send the very best.”
- The New York Times — “All the News That’s Fit to Print.”
- Disney — “The Happiest Place on Earth.”
- Lionel — “Kids Get Something Wonderful When They Get a Lionel. They Get Dad.” It helped save Lionel from bankruptcy. It’s one of my favorite accounts I ever worked on.

Interestingly, **great taglines rarely emerge from wordsmithing alone. They usually emerge from discovering the right Emotional Truth™ story first** because as David Ogilvy once said, “What you say is more important than how you say it.”

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Marketing's job, usually research-based, is to **give creatives the insights they need to create winning taglines**. Research can uncover revealing words that spark those ideas. In fact, trigger words can almost write the taglines themselves.

For example, Wallace Washburn's branding research for Northeastern University surfaced words such as *co-op*, *jobs*, *experience*, *work*, *important*, *value*, *diploma*, *interesting*, *helps*, *get*, and *find*. Together, they revealed something powerful: Northeastern University **students wanted more than a diploma—they wanted a path to fulfilling work**.

That insight inspired the agency's incredibly effective line: **“Co-op: Education That Works.”** It propelled NU to a top three spot today (from 87th in student applications 30+ years ago.)