

How Nike's Famous Tagline "Just Do It" Was Influenced by a Convicted Killer

Most people know Dan Wieden created Nike's famous tagline, "**Just Do It.**"

Far fewer know what inspired it.

While searching for a line that could unify all of Nike's advertising, Wieden remembered the reported last words of convicted killer Gary Gilmore before his execution:

"Let's do it."

The phrase stayed with him—not because of the crime, but

because of its raw
decisiveness.

Wieden later adapted it into
three words that would
become one of advertising's
greatest taglines:

Just Do It.

With his typical dry humor,
Wieden later joked that he
changed the phrase because

otherwise he'd "have to give him credit."

But here's what fascinates me even more.

The words weren't the genius.

The Emotional Truth™ behind them was.

Consider Nike's very first **Just Do It** commercial.

It didn't feature Michael Jordan.

It featured **80-year-old Walt Stack**, who ran 17 miles every morning across San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge. When asked how he kept his teeth from chattering in the cold, he quipped:
"I leave them in my locker."

That choice tells us something important.

Nike wasn't celebrating superstar athletes.

It was celebrating people who simply had the courage to begin.

My analysis of why the campaign became legendary

After studying and reverse-engineering more than 100 winning brands, I believe Nike

followed the same three-step pattern I've found behind many legendary campaigns.

1. Discover the Emotional Truth™

Nike's Emotional Truth™, in my opinion, wasn't about winning.

It was:

Action Builds Confidence.

The more you act, the more
you believe in yourself.

2. Express it through an Accepted Premise

Before people embrace an
Emotional Truth™, they
usually accept a belief they
already hold.

For Nike, that belief was simple:

You can't succeed unless you try.

That premise made the Emotional Truth™ feel instantly believable.

**3. Give it
unforgettable
expression**

Only then comes the tagline.

Just Do It.

Dan Wieden didn't invent the Emotional Truth™.

He gave unforgettable expression to something millions of people already believed.

That's why Nike stopped selling shoes...

...and started selling personal empowerment.

The Nike story is just one of more than 100 legendary campaigns we've reverse-engineered in search of the Emotional Truth™ behind great branding.

The pattern keeps repeating.

**Legendary
campaigns don't**

**invent Emotional
Truths™. They
discover them.**

If you'd like to see how this same process can help your agency uncover stronger campaign platforms and win more new business, send me a message. I'd be happy to share our presentation.

