SABOTEUR

Foundations for freedom

The Saboteur Brand Toolkit

Verbal Identity

Get in touch

A verbal identity is just one of the 'foundations for freedom' that great brands put in place in order to escape their constraints and achieve their potential.

If you would like to find out more about our verbal identity toolkit, who it's already worked for, and how we can use it to set your brand free, please get in touch.

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What is a verbal identity?

Verbal Identity

A brand's 'verbal identity' is the style in which it consistently speaks and writes in order to build its image. A strong verbal identity has two well-defined components: **voice** and *tone.*
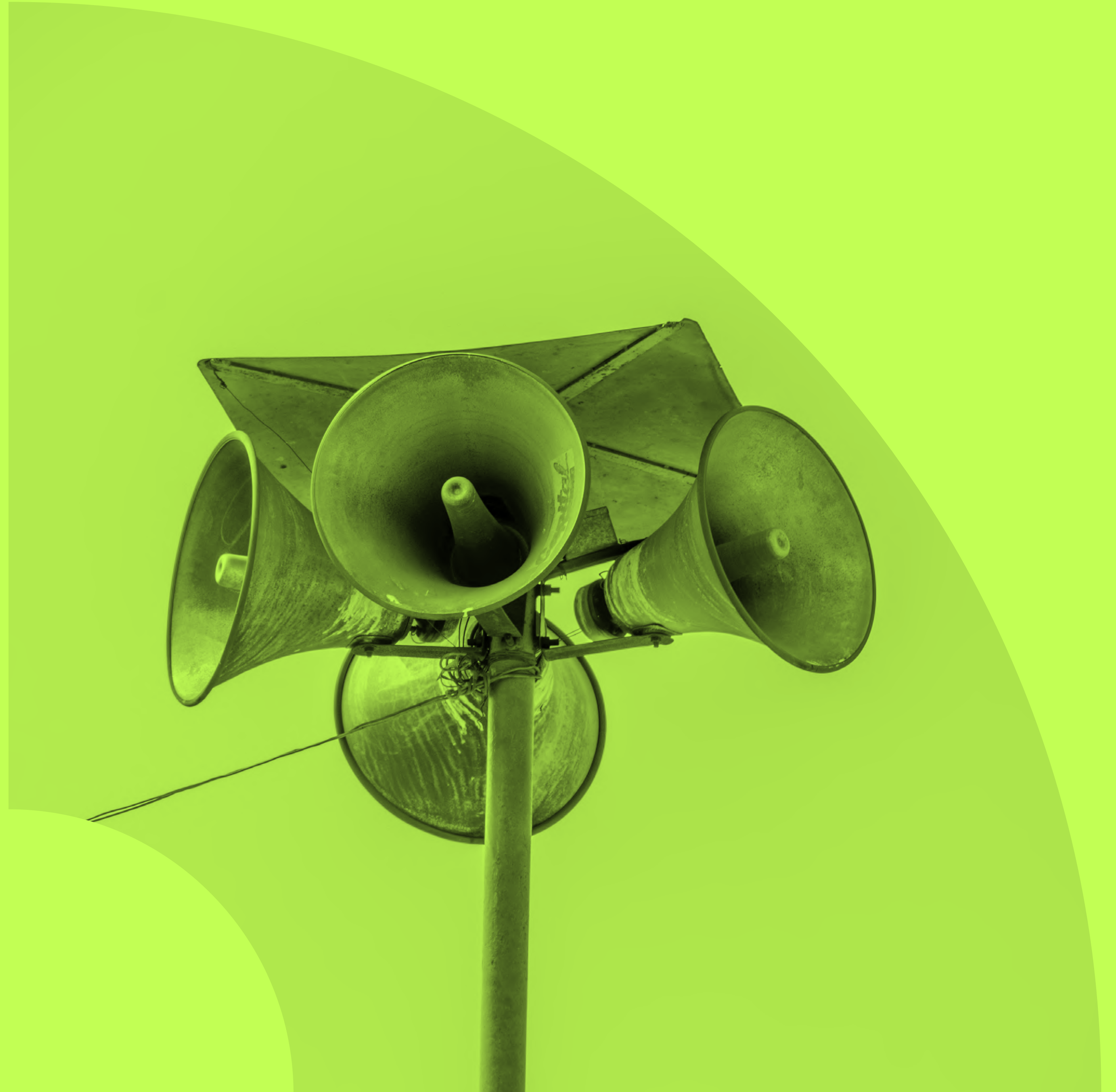
Voice
- Just like a person, a brand has only one voice. It's recognisable, and used wherever it speaks.

- A brand's 'voice' is the core strategic concept (usually its positioning), translated into writing principles.

Tone
- Just like a person, a brand speaks in one voice, but adjusts its tone depending on where and when it's speaking.

- Taking the right tone ensures the brand's voice is appropriate to the audience, message and medium, and has the right emotional impact.

What makes a great verbal identity?

A great verbal identity starts as great writing.

Find great writing or produce it from scratch.
Then codify it. Never the other way around.

A good verbal identity is

Universal

Applicable anywhere
Your verbal identity should be applicable in any scenario in which you need to express what the brand stands for and create emotional appeal.

Flexible

Open to interpretation
Your verbal identity should be deliberately open to interpretation, to allow writers to tailor it to specific circumstances while remaining consistent to your overall style.

Authentic

True to your goals
Your verbal identity should capture and emphasise your true strengths and ambitions as an organisation. Any external brand expression influences internal expectations and behaviour.

Distinctive

Sets you apart
Your verbal identity should help you and your customers to distinguish your brand from its competitors. At the same time, it can also help you to "fit" – and to build credibility – within a particular category of brands.

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BO

A good verbal identity is

Many organizations use 3 adjectives to describe their brand voice (often human, confident and one other).

This approach invites inconsistency by leaving too much room for interpretation.

"We often come across tone of voice guidelines that are unhelpfully vague. They'll tell writers to be "friendly" and "accessible". But there are many, many ways of being friendly, ranging from formal-but-agreeable through to matey and over-familiar."

Liz Doig, author of Brand Language, Wordtree & Me Ltd. (2014)

"One of our earliest clients was Fred Perry, the maker of iconic tennis shirts and leisurewear. We ended up with three adjectives that defined their brand's tone of voice: 'challenging', 'classic' and 'physical'.

But 'Classic' could mean 'unchanging' to the CEO but 'out of date' to a brand writer. Someone else might interpret it as timeliness and start writing prose inspired by Jane Austen."

Chris West, author of Strong language, Houndstooth Press (2021)

How do you create a verbal identity?

Verbal identity framework

Our verbal identity framework helps organisations to write in a way that aligns to their brand position, and brings it to life for all every audience.

Because a great voice starts with great writing, we build this framework in a specific order.

Brand positioning	The place we want to occupy in the mind of our audiences				

1. Start with the brand positioning

Brand positioning	**The place we want to occupy in the mind of our audiences**				
Examples:	Examples of existing real copy that captures the position, and shows each technique in action.				

2. **Find examples of copy that bring that position to life in different ways. These can be examples from the brand in question, or from 'admired' brands who've taken a similar position in other categories.**

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Brand positioning	**The place we want to occupy in the mind of our audiences**				
Techniques [Look for opportunities to]:	Practical techniques that all writers can use to bring the brand position to life.				
Examples:	Examples of existing real copy that captures the position, and shows each technique in action.				

3. **Codify those examples as techniques that other writers can use.**

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Brand positioning	**The place we want to occupy in the mind of our audiences**
Brand voice [in a line]:	**A short descriptor that makes it easy for everyone to understand and remember how to write on behalf of the brand.**

Techniques [Look for opportunities to]:	Practical techniques that all writers can use to bring the brand position to life.			
Examples:	Examples of existing real copy that captures the position, and shows each technique in action.			

4. Create a 'one liner' that sums up all the techniques in way all writers can remember.

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Setting the right tone

Tone by application

Our practical techniques are used by all writers to bring our purpose to life. All are always relevant to the brand. However some are more powerful, or simply more appropriate in certain situations.
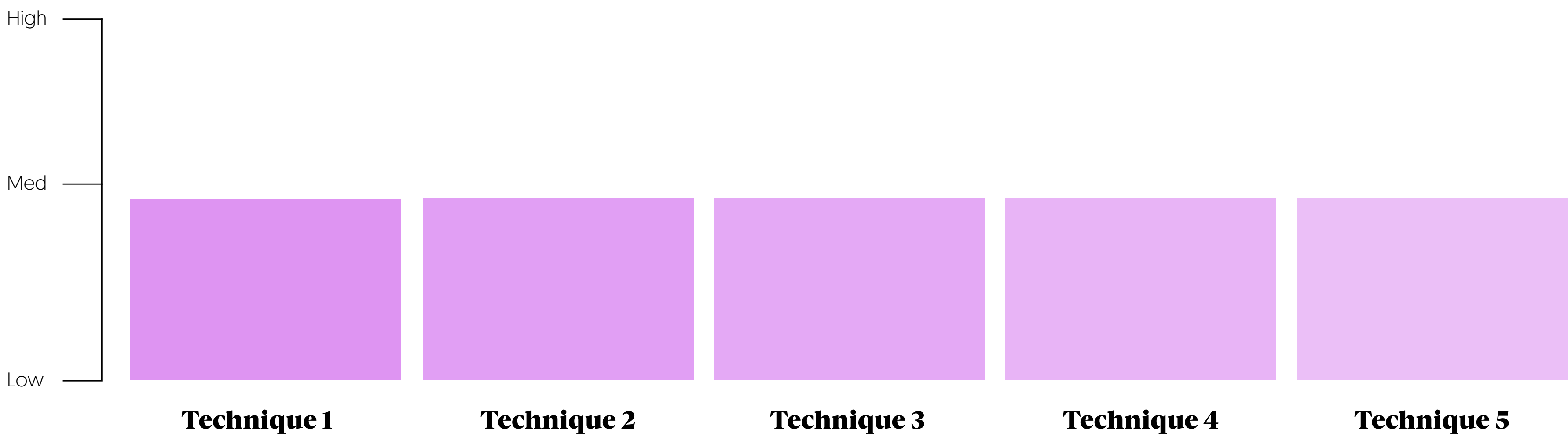
Key applications / audiences

Category: e.g. Thought leadership

Key applications / audiences: e.g. CEOs

Brand voice: In a line

The levels will adjust to show the writer which techniques to prioritise for this application.

High

Med

Low

Technique 1   **Technique 2**   **Technique 3**   **Technique 4**   **Technique 5**

The reasons why these are the priority techniques for this type of application.

Brilliant basics

Writing advice for all brands

Definitions

While a verbal identity is unique to a brand, there are some common rules which (almost) all brands should follow in order to make their writing more effective. We call these **the brilliant basics.**

Brilliant Basics

1. Go for the shorter word
2. Use the 'active voice'
3. Avoid exclamation marks and emoticons
4. More verbs, fewer nouns
5. Use terminology, but avoid jargon
6. Modern, not Victorian grammar
7. Use positive framing instead of negative framing
8. Begin with your conclusion
9. Favour shorter sentences
10. Evoke provenance
11. Break these rules if it strengthens your brand position

1. Go for the shorter word

Where there's a choice to make, favour the shorter word over the longer one.

'Use', rather than 'leverage'. 'Help', not 'assist'. 'Great', over 'extraordinary'.

This helps your brand speak with more speed, emotion and confidence.

The New York Times

We believe that great journalism has the power to make each reader's life richer and more fulfilling, and all of society stronger and more just.

The New York Times avoids complex language, which increases the impact of its writing.

3. Avoid exclamation marks and emoticons

These techniques are often associated with very young or naïve writers. While some brands want to appear this way, most don't. So, avoid: **!;)** and so on.

This helps your brand avoid seeming juvenile.
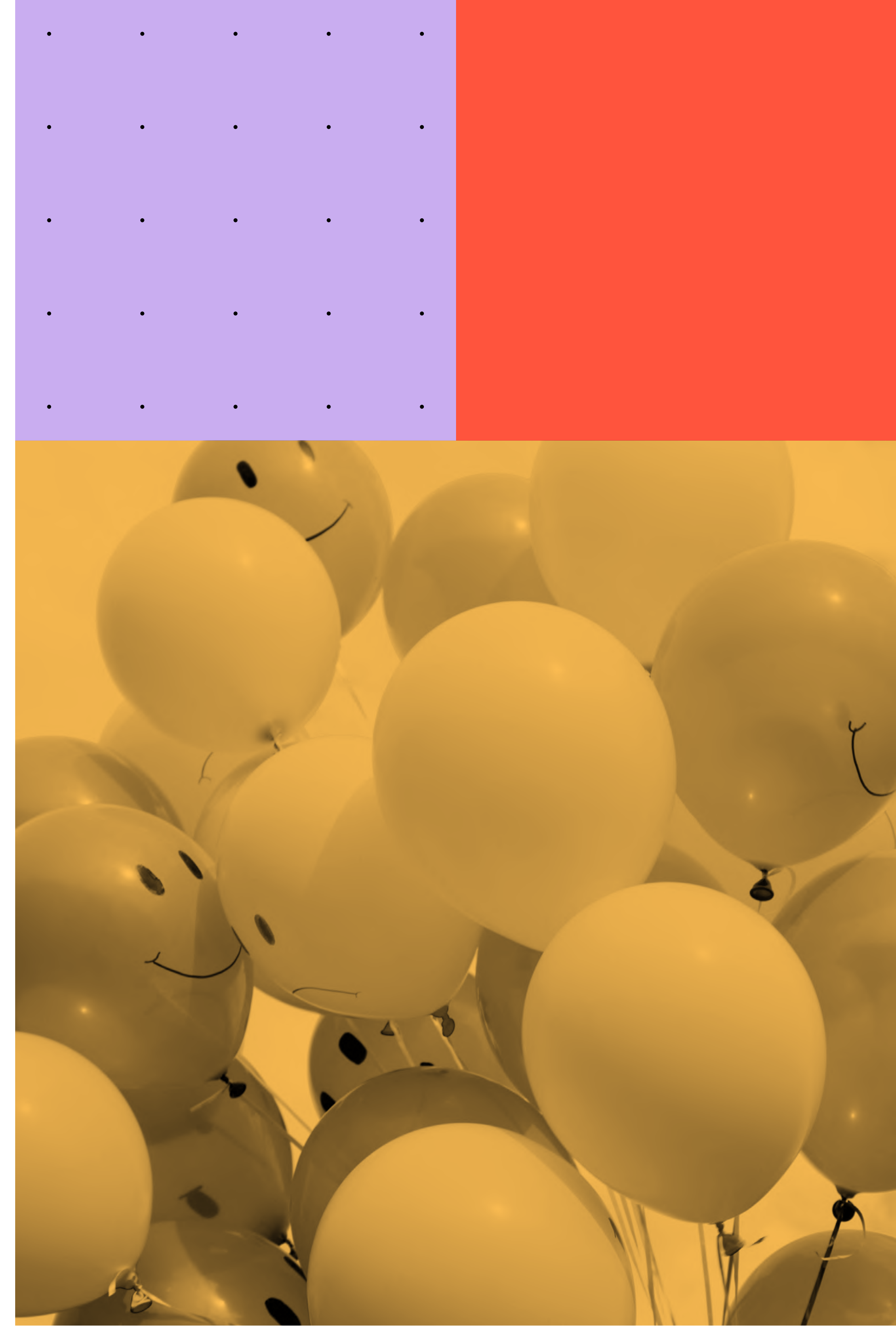
4. More verbs, fewer nouns

Lists of nouns are hard to digest and remember, which makes noun-heavy text off-putting to readers.

So, 'we are strategists, engineers and implementation experts' is probably better as 'we plan, design, and implement.'

This helps your brand engage and intrigue.

Use action words: more verbs, fewer nouns

After analyzing 200,00 link containing tweets, it was found that tweets that contained more adverbs and verbs had higher Click Through Rates [CTRs] than noun and adjective heavy tweets.
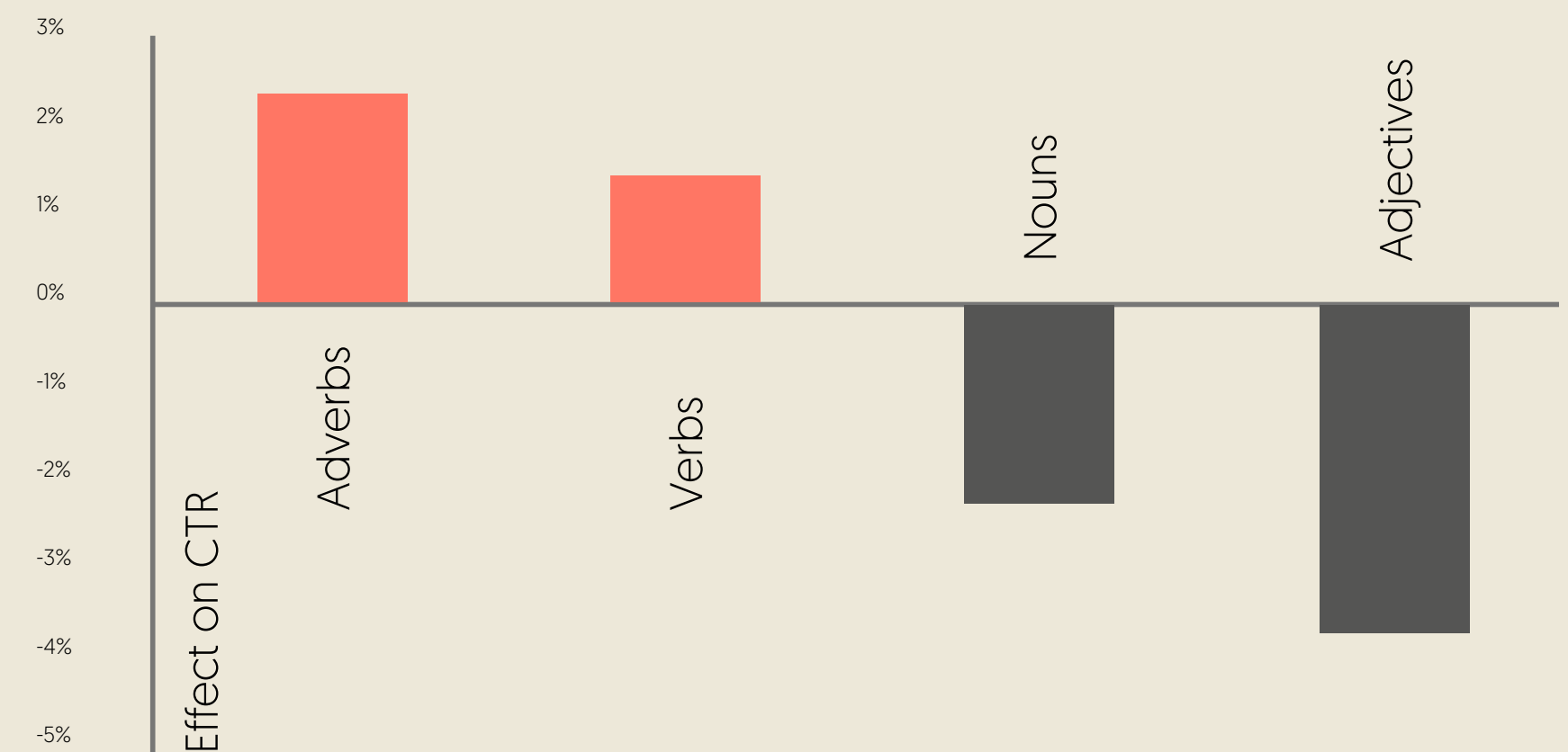
Source: https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/twitter-increase-clickthrough-rate

5. Use terminology, but avoid jargon

Jargon is "insider language" that excludes non-experts unnecessarily, or simply helps a writer to avoid explaining something clearly.

Terminology helps any loosely informed reader find what they're looking for more easily.

This helps make your brand sound clear and accessible.

Whether you're looking for more fun on your daily drive, off-road adventure - or simply the space for both - there's a MINI to suit you. With styling options to suit your taste, from sporty to luxury. Browse, create and purchase your perfect MINI online today.

"Off-road", "styling" and "sporty" are examples of terminology that most car buyers will understand.

6. Modern, not Victorian grammar

Victorian grammar says: Don't start a sentence with a conjunction, never leave a hanging preposition, and don't ever use contractions.

Modern grammar allows all of these. It helps writers create impact, shoten their copy, and mimic speech so their writing is easier to digest.

This helps your brand to appear contemporary, relevant.

Your idea should be the next big thing. Let's create it together. Join IBM's community of thinkers, makers, doers, leaders and creators as we connect to solve the most complex challenges facing businesses today.

IBM is a widely regarded as a sophisticated brand, and it uses modern grammar.

6.

7. Use positive framing instead of negative framing

Readers have limited attention to spare. So, it is dangerous to say something positive by starting with a negative.

Don't say 'our technology isn't just reliable, it's transformational'. Do say 'our technology is transformational.'

This helps make sure readers have positive feelings about your brand.

Don't just calculate.
Create.

Merchandisers – all levels
London, £competitive + excellent benefits

We're looking for merchandisers who can see beyond the figures. Merchandisers who want to work hand in hand with our buyers, predicting the latest trends, then getting them into our stores in record time.

The pace is fast and the pressure's high. But if you're more than a number-cruncher, it's your chance to see your decisions make a real difference on our rails.

To enter the fold, go to newlookcareers.com

new look

Negative framing

8. Begin with your conclusion

Schools teach us to first set out the argument, then come to a conclusion.

Customers want to give you as little time as they can. So give the conclusion first, then your argument.

This helps make sure your most important message is read and understood.

MAKING HUMANITY MULTIPLANETARY

Building on the achievements of Falcon 9 and Falcon Heavy, SpaceX is working on a next generation of fully reusable launch vehicles that will be the most powerful ever built, capable of carrying humans to Mars and other destinations in the solar system.

SpaceX don't wait until the end of a passage to make its most important point.

9. Favour shorter sentences

Longer sentences sound waffly and are less likely to be read.

As a rule of thumb, aim for sentences that can be read comfortably in one breath.

This helps make sure your brand sounds confident and your writing is easier to digest.

OUR COMMITMENTS

Dedicated to improving people's lives. As trues today as it was at the start.

Google's writing is always concise and accessible.

10. Evoke provenance

Your customer is likely interested in your brand's provenance. So, evoke it in your writing, for example by inserting the occasional word in the brand's native language.

But be careful to avoid 'overdoing it', especially by using national or regional clichés.

This helps your brand to sound authentic, and not like an impersonation.
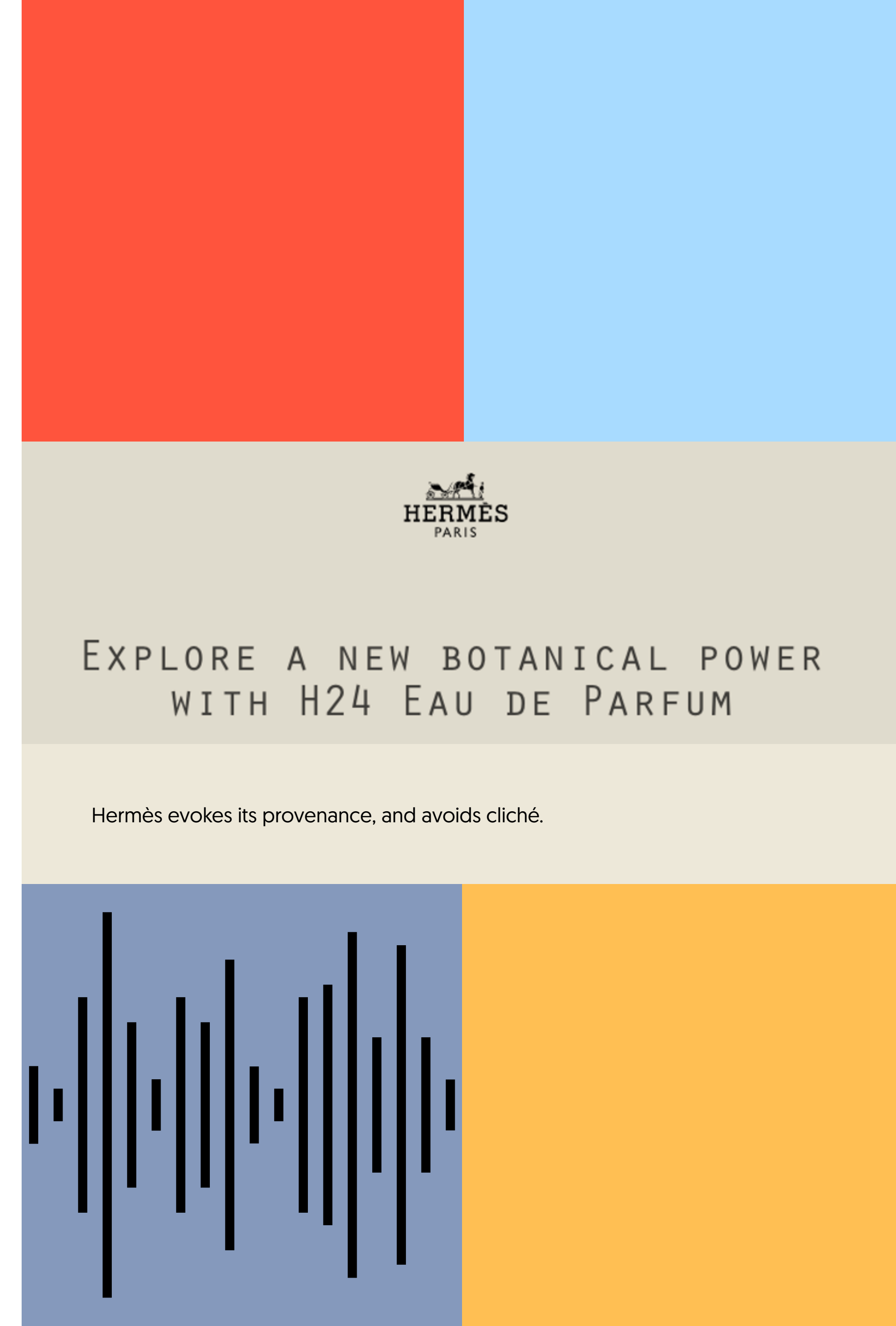
HERMÈS
PARIS

EXPLORE A NEW BOTANICAL POWER
WITH H24 EAU DE PARFUM

Hermès evokes its provenance, and avoids cliché.

11. Break these rules if it strengthens your brand position

There are some brands that break from best practice and do well as a result.

For example, Ferrari fills its copy with engineering jargon, which helps to prove its engineering credentials over other car brands. For Ferrari this is a deliberate and strategic choice. It is not, as jargon is in most cases, simply a company's bad communication habits making it all the way to the consumer.

Exhaust-wise, prevalence was given to combustion order harmonics by modifying the geometry of the centre extension pipes. All the pipes in the 6-in-1 exhaust manifold to the monolithic catalytic converter are of equal-length and this optimises the sound by giving predominance to the first-order combustion harmonics.

The relationship between verbal identity and other brand elements
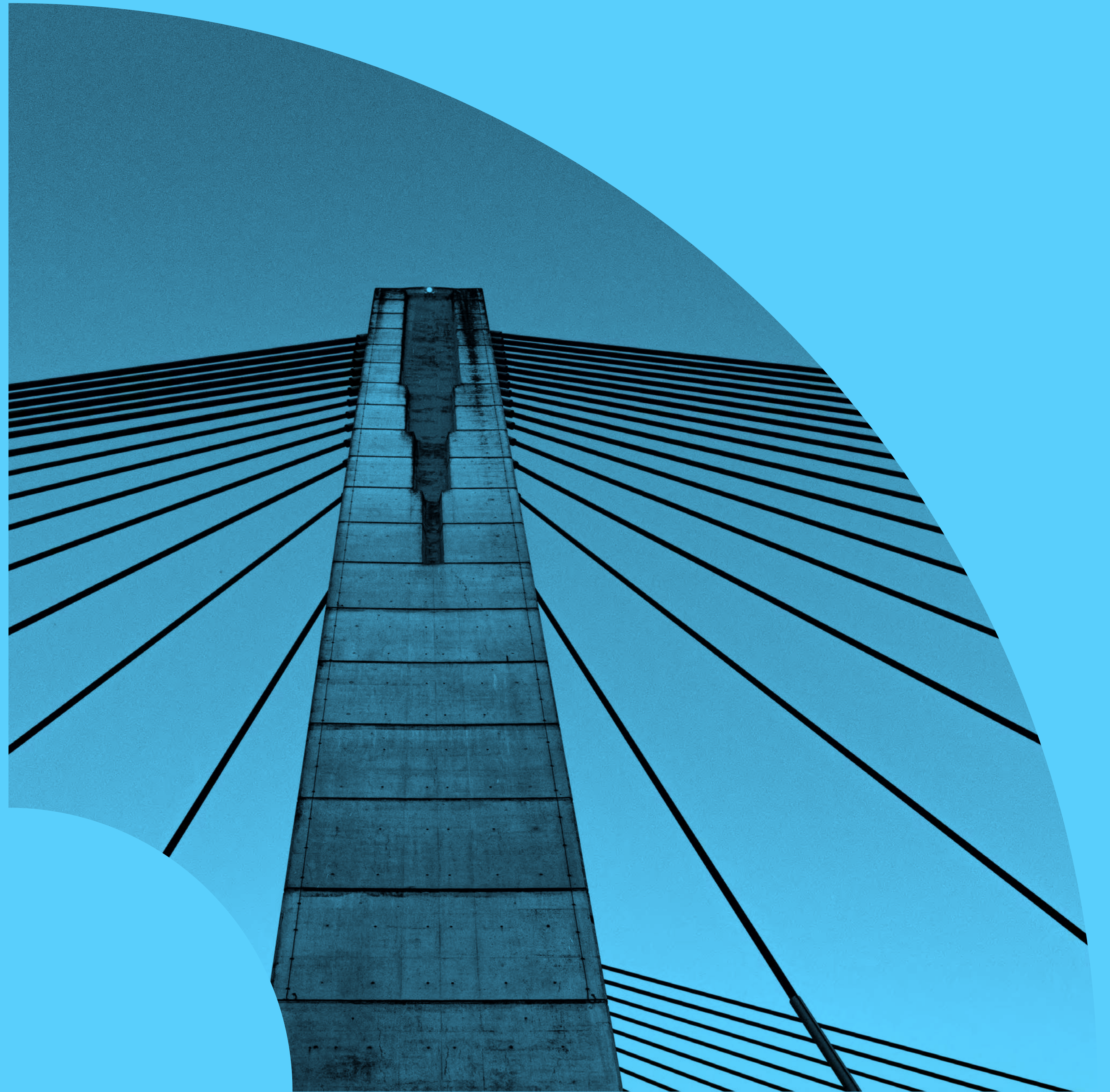
BUSINESS STRATEGY ARTICULATION
Making the business's strategic objectives clear and compelling to all relevant stakeholders, especially those inside the organisation

Organisational purpose statement, vision statement, mission statement, corporate values

BRAND PORTFOLIO AND ARCHITECTURE STRATEGY
Deciding the number and types of brand needed to reach an organisation's objectives

BRAND POSITIONING
Defining how the brand must be perceived for the business to reach its objectives
(key behaviour changes: purchase, invest, advocate, create)

Positioning statement, brand essence (a.k.a. 'strategic platform' or 'positioning idea'), brand narrative, brand personality, brand messaging

EMPLOYER VALUE PROPOSITION (EVP)
Defining what you stand for, offer, and require as an employer
(key behaviour changes: apply, don't apply, align, stay)

EVP statement, essence, narrative, messaging

BRAND NAMING	VISUAL IDENTITY	VERBAL IDENTITY	BRAND CAMPAIGN	CUSTOMER XPERIENCE	TALENT CAMPAIGN	EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE
Claiming or reinforcing the brand's position through its choice of name	Claiming or reinforcing the brand's position through its look and feel	Claiming or reinforcing the brand's position through its use of language	Claiming or reinforcing the brand's position through a series of ads or activations	Claiming or reinforcing the brand's position through customer interaction	Claiming or reinforcing the EVP through a series of ads or activations	Helping to realise the business strategy & EVP through employee interaction
	Visual identity platform or 'creative idea' Inspires and unifies all design applications *Expressed as a sentence or one liner*	**Verbal identity platform** Inspires and unifies all written and spoken applications *Expressed as techniques and a one liner*	**Campaign platform or 'campaign idea'** Inspires and unifies a campaign's elements and executions *Expressed as a short phrase*	**Customer experience platform** Inspires and unifies all signature experiences *Expressed as customer experience pillars and/or a short phrase*	**Campaign platform or 'campaign idea'** Inspires and unifies a campaign's elements and executions *Expressed as a short phrase*	**Employee experience pillars** Inspires and unifies a set of internal strategic initiatives *Expressed as a shared belief, behaviour, or 'mantra'*
	Design applications, graphic device, logo, colour palette, motion principles, photography, illustration, brand tagline	Headline examples, internal comms examples, speeches, press release examples, etc.	Campaign applications including design, copywriting, campaign tagline, etc. (Can be customer, talent, or employee facing)	Signature brand experiences, customer service flourishes, hero products and services, key features in physical environments, etc.	Campaign applications including design, copywriting, campaign tagline, etc. (Can be customer, talent, or employee facing)	Employee engagement initiatives, events, rituals, internal initiatives, policy, codes of conduct, etc.

VERBAL IDENTITY

SERVICE

STRATEGIC DELIVERABLE

COMMUNICATIONS PLATFORM

COMMUNICATIONS APPLICATIONS

EXPERIENCE PLATFORM

EXPERIENCE APPLICATIONS

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Further
reading

If you want to find out more about verbal identity, we recommend the following titles.

Further reading

1. **Brand language, tone of voice the Wordtree way: A textbook with examples and exercises to help you to develop a consistent voice for your brand or organisation**
   By Liz Doig
   Wordtree & Me Ltd. (2014)

2. **Strong language: The fastest, smartest, cheapest marketing tool you're not using**
   By Chris West
   Houndstooth Press (2021)

3. **Brilliant business Writing: How to inspire, engage and persuade through words**
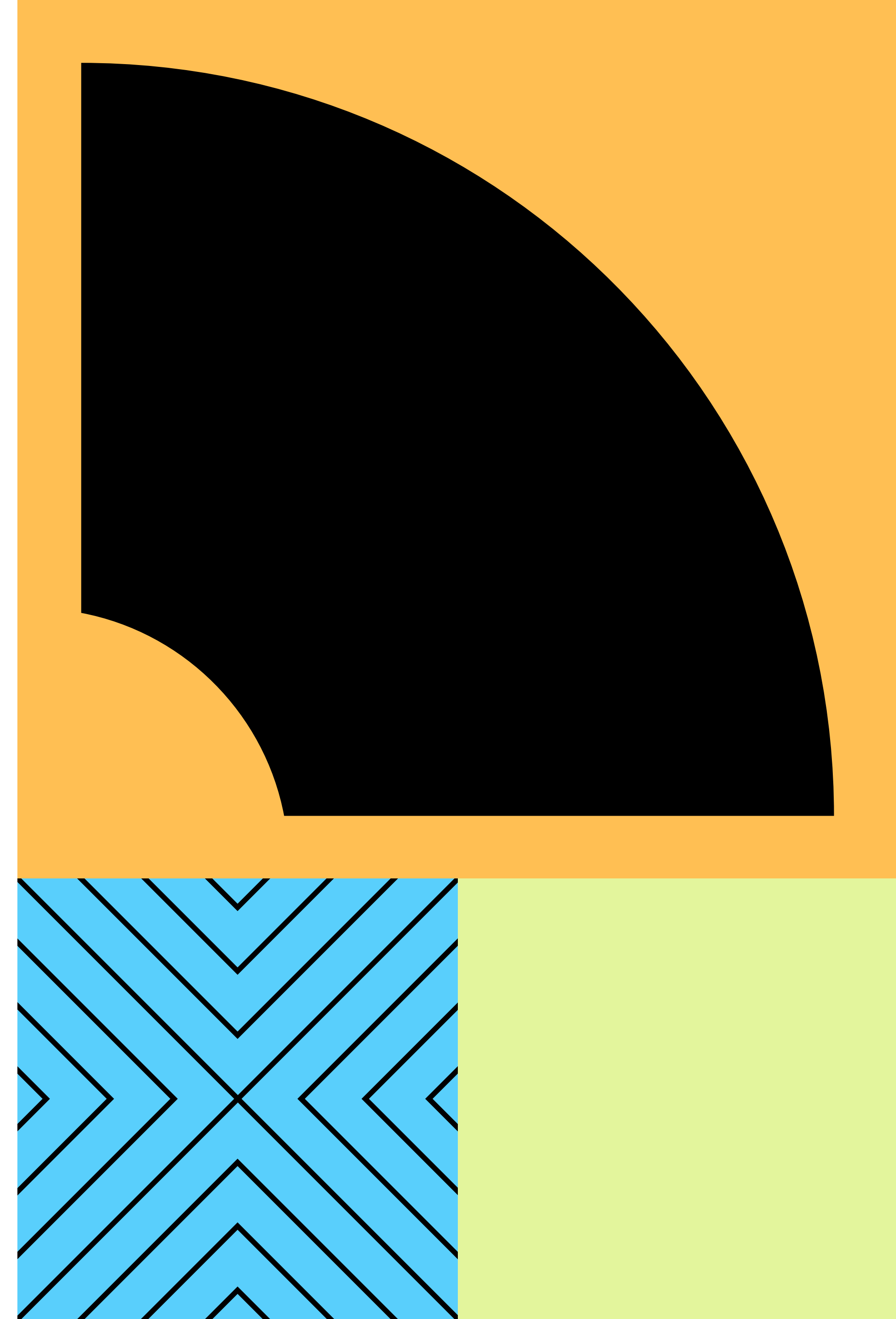   By Neil Taylor
   Pearson (2012)

4. **Financial Times Essential Guides. Business writing: How to write to engage, persuage and sell**
   By Ian Atkinson
   Financial Times / Prentice Hall (2011)

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