



California Business Minute's **CaEO Corner Interview** March 2010

Selling the Sizzle, Not the Steak **An Expert's Perspective**



Eric Swartz
President,
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Eric Swartz is a self-proclaimed branding strategist-cum-sloganeer. With a knack for distilling messages in zippy, nine-syllable packages, Eric takes the craft of slogan writing to a transcendent level, living up to the name of one of his company's divisions: Tagline Guru. "I help organizations extend the value of their brand by crafting concise, compelling, and competitive expressions that differentiate them in the marketplace."

Eric's success in helping businesses and communities is evidenced by a diverse client base that includes Adaptec, Alabama Housing & Finance Authority, American Express, Apple, Cathay Pacific Airlines, Charles Schwab, Emory University, FedEx, French Patent Office, Hewlett Packard, Oracle, Sun Microsystems, Safeway, Tri-Valley Convention & Visitors Bureau, United Business Media, and Wells Fargo. During his career, he has created thousands of brand concepts and expressions for companies, non-profits, municipalities, universities, events, publications, and political campaigns.

Eric began his career as a grantswriter and fundraiser for community performing arts in San Francisco before serving in senior marketing and communications management positions at SPRINT, Ziff-Davis, and The Thomson Corporation.

Tell us about The Byline Group and what made you decide to start it?

After nearly 20 years in the corporate workplace, I was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with, and largely unfulfilled in, my career. Even though I enjoyed the creative aspect of my job as a Director of Corporate Marketing in the field of electronic publishing, all of the organizational upheaval, management demands, and political pressures were bogging me down. So I decided to form my own full-service branding and communications agency back in 1996. I focused on the kind of work that I wanted to do—create and implement branding campaigns and programs; build, renovate, and enhance organizational and community identities; and develop memorable taglines, names, and other branding concepts.

I got my wish. Since I opened my virtual doors, I've had more than 200 clients in 50 or so industries. [The Byline Group](#), which focuses on brand strategy and analysis, has two divisions: [Tagline Guru](#), specializing in verbal branding (naming, tagline development); and [Great Destinotions](#), specializing in community branding and destination marketing.

Define branding and specifically how do you brand a community utilizing a slogan?

To understand branding, first one must understand what a brand is. I define a brand as the sum total of perceptions, impressions, and feelings that someone has about your destination or community. A brand is not a thing, but a relationship...a shared affinity between your place and the person who experiences it. So I see branding, then, as the act of making a promise, and connecting the value and meaning of that promise to the hopes, beliefs, and desires of others.

"Experience the brand. Then brand the experience" sums up my philosophy: Operating on an emotional and experiential level, the goal of community branding is to create and communicate an experience that cannot be duplicated anywhere else.

We begin the branding process by assessing and benchmarking the prevailing perceptions, opinions, and impressions of a destination's brand image and identity. That can involve interviewing key stakeholders; reviewing advertising, collateral, and marketing communications; analyzing demographics and lodging data; comparing and analyzing competitive destinations; and surveying residents of the community.

After collecting and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative information about a community, we produce a Brand Audit, Assessment & Analysis that outlines our research findings. It assesses the current status of the brand, lays out a brand strategy for meeting the community's goals, and articulates a rebuilt and renovated brand vision, position, message, and promise.

The slogan is the most visible component of the brand...a reflection of its promise. A great slogan confers marquee value on the brand and can turn a mundane message into a memorable one. When it comes to city branding in particular, I like to think of tagline development as "urban renewal without having to pass a bond measure."

The 10 Most Influential Taglines Since 1948

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| 1. Got Milk (1993) | California Milk Processors Board |
| 2. Don't Leave Home without it (1975) | American Express |
| 3. Just Do It (1988) | Nike |
| 4. Where's the Beef (1984) | Wendy's |
| 5. You're in Good Hands with Allstate (1956) | Allstate Insurance |
| 6. Think Different (1998) | Apple Computer |
| 7. We try harder (1962) | Avis |
| 8. Tastes great, less filling (1974) | Miller Late |
| 9. Melts in your mouth, not your hands (1954) | M&M candies |
| 10. Takes a licking, but keeps on ticking (1956) | Timex |

You have a background in acting; do you ask community stakeholders to role play as a part of the effort to ascertain a slogan or brand?

Well, I never thought of it quite like that. The process we take our clients through is very collaborative. It's a partnership. The decision to choose one tagline over another is usually made by a committee...although certain individuals on the committee have more pull than others. The difficulty arises when the committee is comprised of individuals from competing factions—CVB

vs. Chamber of Commerce vs. Economic Development vs. City Government. They have different concerns. It's easier to define and differentiate a brand when you know exactly what the objective is—whether it's increasing tourism or stimulating downtown growth.

We conduct tagline development over multiple rounds so we can get feedback and direction. We also produce storylines for the top 3-5 final taglines to help our clients arrive at a satisfying decision. And, of course, all of this relates back to the findings of the audit and the objectives of the destination. We try to keep everyone on the same page.

A note on consensus-think among committee members: they tend toward the bland, not the brand. To overcome that, my role as a professional business communicator is to get my clients to think like brand managers and guide them through this process.

How does a community utilize the services of The Byline group?

We can be of help whether a destination simply needs to rebrand, revamp, or refashion...or completely refurbish. That's part of the whole needs assessment process. Like the corporate world, the world of destinations (cities, regions, wineries, restaurants, amusement parks, arts councils, recreation centers, etc.) should also be competitive in their outlook and positioning. Brands don't exist in a vacuum. They're always being compared, weighed, and tested.

It's important that a destination hire an agency that knows how to construct as well as deconstruct a brand identity, build a solid message platform, and contextually understand the marketplace. It's more than just being a clever wordsmith. However, guess what...most of the agencies out there are fairly good at messaging and positioning. You know what trips them up every time? The slogan! That's where communities get into the most trouble...and it can undermine everything else they've done. Since verbal branding is my specialty, I feel I've got that part covered. I've seen many slogans selected by cities around the country...and I often shake my head in disbelief. What were they thinking? And what were their agencies thinking?

Top 10 U.S. City Mottos

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| 1. What Happens Here, Stays Here. | Las Vegas, NV |
| 2. So Very Virginia | Charlottesville, VA |
| 3. Always Turned On | Atlantic City, NJ |
| 4. Cleveland Rocks! | Cleveland, OH |
| 5. The Sweetest Place on Earth | Hershey, PA |
| 6. Rare. Well Done. | Omaha, NE |
| 7. The City Different | Santa Fe, NM |
| 8. Where Yee-Ha Meets Ole' | Eagle Pass, TX |
| 9. City with Sol | San Diego, CA |
| 10. Where the Odds Are With You | Peculiar, MO |

What do you think are the key economic issues that California faces going forward after the recession?

The same ones it had before the recession -- economic growth, job creation, loans and tax breaks for small businesses, infrastructure development, and investment in new technologies, etc. In spite of the hard times, communities have to keep their brand identities vital, fresh, and meaningful. You have to give people good reasons to spend their money. That means being innovative and flexible...and promoting your destination wherever and whenever possible. It's all about defining the word...and then getting the word out. This is especially important when people are distracted and disillusioned. Give them a rallying cry...something to cheer about. Describe

and promise an authentic experience that speaks to their dreams and desires. It may not be totally recession-proof, but it will certainly be beckoning and brand-savvy.

Were you born and raised in California? If so, where? If not, what brought you here and when?

Actually, I was born in NYC and spent nearly the first four years of my life New Jersey. My father, who was an engineer, accepted a job in Spain. My parents sold their house...and the job fell through. Then, my father was offered a job in Hawaii so we flew out to San Francisco en route to Honolulu. Then, that job fell through. So there we were in San Francisco. And that's where we stayed. Five years later in 1960 (when I was eight), we moved to Burlingame on the Peninsula. In the intervening years, I've lived in Berkeley (where I did my undergraduate work) and Philadelphia (where I did my grad work at Penn). Since 1977 I've lived on the Peninsula...and am located in San Mateo, just five miles south of where I grew up.

What or where is your favorite location(s) in California to visit?

I enjoy Lake Tahoe (the Sierras), Monterey/Carmel, Wine Country (Napa/Sonoma), San Francisco, and the California Coast (Mendocino/Big Sur). I'd like to visit Hearst Castle and Yosemite again. And I've never been to Mt. Shasta. It's a pretty incredible and diverse state. I really like California's slogan—"Find Yourself in California." It really captures the sense that you can be who you want, reinvent yourself if necessary, and live your dream. It's very aspirational...and also emblematic of our state's style and personality.

Identify a quote that best describes your work ethic?

I've always had a strong work ethic...going back to my schooldays. I love to learn and write and create. I like to express kernels of truth that are edgy and humorous. Being a student of rhetoric, linguistics, and aesthetics, I take great pleasure in communicating ideas simply, succinctly, and elegantly. If others are inspired by what I write, then it's all worth it. I spend my day thinking conceptually so my brain gets a lot of exercise.

If I had to pick one quote, it would be from Vance Packard, the American journalist, social critic, and author who wrote the *Hidden Persuaders* back in 1957. He said that top-flight creative people have the ability to express powerful meanings indirectly. For me, it means being a nuanced thinker who can express important messages artfully and persuasively. That's what gets me up in the morning.

The one thing you like best about your job?

Using language to express wholly original and compelling ideas...that about sums it up.

What keeps you up at night?

Not much. I sleep pretty well although I've been known to wake up at three o'clock in the morning with a slogan on my mind. That's why I keep a pad and pencil on my nightstand.

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