Verbal Identity:
Why Your Healthcare Organization Needs One Now
Introduction

**WE HAVE A LOGO. WHY DO WE NEED A VERBAL IDENTITY?**

We don’t have to tell you that in the 21st century, consumers have more choices and higher expectations than ever. That’s why how you promote your healthcare services matters as much as what you promote.

Your brand identity is more than your logo, or the imagery and color palette you use in your communications. Words matter too.

The words that represent your health system or hospital should also set you apart from all the others in your territory.

An inconsistent or generic brand identity can make it easy for customers to ignore your messages—or worse, confuse you with another brand.

That’s why making sure your copy and visuals powerfully define your brand is a critical strategic issue.

And that’s what this white paper will help you do.
HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU NEED TO SHARPEN YOUR VERBAL IDENTITY?

It’s time to make verbal identity part of your overall identity if you can check the box on more than one of the following red flags:

- **No one would notice** if you replaced the content on your website with the content from a similar institution in another market.
- **Your content sounds bland** or trite compared to that of other organizations you and your team admire.
- The copy for clinical specialties and service lines is **department-centered** rather than patient-centered.
- **The quality of your written content varies** from author to author and channel to channel.
- Content approval for major campaigns and projects like website updates comes back with comments like “This doesn’t sound like something we would say” or “Content is off strategy.”
- **Digital engagement metrics**, including “Likes,” “Shares,” information requests, or traffic to key landing pages within your site, are **not showing positive growth trends**.

One advantage of putting your verbal identify under a microscope is the opportunity for you and your team to review all your brand touchpoints—from business cards to TV spots to PowerPoint decks—and **ask yourselves if your communications reflect who you really are as an organization.**
In Part 1 of this white paper we'll look at two healthcare system brands, one national and the other regional, then break down how their missions shape their verbal identities and the programs they create.

In Part 2 we’ll walk you step-by-step through the process of creating a strong and unique verbal identity for your brand.

Whether yours is a national, regional, or single-market institution, a strong verbal identity tells customers who you are and why they should choose you—from Google’s search results page to patient literature and internal communications.

We’ve created this guide because we have seen first hand how disciplined, strategic branding that includes the right visual and verbal style can give healthcare organizations a real edge in the fight to connect with patients and providers.

We hope you find our perspective helpful.
Part One

WHAT IS VERBAL IDENTITY?

It's your job as a healthcare marketer to make your brand as competitive and compelling as possible.

As such, a strong verbal identity, one that enhances your visual identity, is a strategic asset. But, what, exactly, is a “verbal identity?”

In its simplest terms, a verbal identity consists of two components: What your organization’s content talks about and how that content speaks to your audiences.

A verbal identity is the language that reflects a brand’s personality and values. It also reflects the values and needs of your customers.*

From a content perspective, verbal identity is your brand positioning brought to life in the words you choose to describe your institution and your patient services.

Granted, it can be tricky to create a verbal identity for a hospital system given multiple audiences and subject matter of healthcare marketing. But as you're about to see, it can be done successfully for organizations of all sizes.

*NOTE: Throughout this white paper we use the terms “customers” and “patients” interchangeably.
Just as visual identity guidelines help you create images that look great across all customer touch points, from social to traditional media, a well-defined verbal identity helps you create written content that sounds “like you” for a wide range of needs, including (but not limited to):

→ Landing pages  
→ Ad campaigns  
→ Social posts including hashtags  
→ Press releases  
→ Internal communications  
→ External communications including “after care” instructions

Organizations that struggle to differentiate themselves usually haven’t planted a flag in the ground other than a variation on the usual; “Dedicated to providing the highest level of care to the communities we serve.”

Put another way, your visual and verbal identity reflects your mission statement.

Is yours bold and inspiring, or vanilla and expected?

**LET’S PUT THIS IN HUMAN TERMS.**

Many healthcare brands seem to forget that their audience is made up of human beings. Yet in today’s healthcare landscape patients place a high value on the quality of their often intimate interactions with providers.

Being perceived as authentic and approachable can be a huge differentiator for your healthcare brand.
A clear and strong verbal identity will ensure that your written content supports your patients, providers and strategy.

Let’s look at two healthcare brands that set the gold standard for strong verbal identities.

In 1880s Rochester, Minnesota, Mayo Clinic founder Dr. William Worall Mayo pioneered a new approach to patient care—practicing medicine with a team of specialists.

His idea would transform the family practice into an international “medical mecca.”

It did not happen by chance. Early in its history, clinic leaders realized they would need to create a new business model to support Dr. Mayo’s ground-breaking approach to patient care.

Knowing that many patients and families find their website during a stressful time, the homepage uses friendly, straightforward language to put them at ease.
By aligning physicians and administrators with the needs of patients, this non-profit, multi-specialty academic institution can deliver a seamless experience for patients.

As a result, the clinic’s verbal identity can drive communication that puts the needs of patients above everything else.

And most important, give them confidence that their experience will live up to the marketing.

Even the technology Mayo adopts is driven by their mission to deliver the highest quality patient care in a seamless, personal way.

With their reputation for patient-centered care, the Mayo Clinic understands that sometimes the voice of their brand is the voice of their patients.
So right now you’re probably thinking, “It’s easy to be bold and engaging when you are the Mayo Clinic. But we’re just little ol’ Twin Pines Memorial Hospital.”

As the following example from a relatively small hospital in Indiana demonstrates, you don’t need the profile or resources of a national healthcare powerhouse in order to create a verbal identity that truly sets you apart.

**In fact, challenging circumstances can be amazing opportunities.**

Hancock Health serves a market that includes Greenfield, McCordsville and New Palestine; three traditionally agricultural communities in Hancock County that in the past 20 years have become part of the Indianapolis metro area.

With Indianapolis located in adjacent Marion County only a 30-minute drive west and in the midst of a growth boom, both places have seen an influx of younger, white-collar residents with growing families. While the demographic shift means new potential patients for Hancock Health services, the proximity to Indianapolis and its three prominent hospital networks also represents a significant threat, offering healthier, mobile residents easy access to top tier medical talent.
That could have left Hancock Health to care for older patient populations suffering from complications of obesity, diabetes and heart disease. But Hancock Health’s leadership saw a significant opportunity to reinvent their mission around an audacious goal:

**To make Hancock County the healthiest county in Indiana.**

Not only was declaring such an ambitious target strategically savvy, their messaging and programming demonstrate how Hancock Health is stepping up to meet Indiana’s ongoing need for healthcare leadership.

According to the 2016 Annual Report of America’s Health Rankings from the United Health Foundation, Indiana ranks 39th of 50 states. When a state ranks in the lower tier for overall population health, it’s difficult to position itself to outside companies as a place that offers a high quality of life and a healthy workforce.

“The message must not make the patient feel judged because of their health choices.”

Rob Matt
Chief Operating Officer
Hancock Health

On their homepage, images of Hancock’s patients and services change on refresh, a smart technique that reinforces the system’s clear flag-in-the-ground of community health advocacy.
We mentioned that Hancock Health must compete with three major health networks in Indianapolis. Each of the systems— I.U. Health, St. Vincent’s, and Community Health— are well regarded and recognized for clinical leadership across various service lines.

But in our view, Hancock Health is the first to tactfully but forcefully address the problem of Indiana’s below average population health and shape their identity around programs aimed at creating change.

Unlike regional systems that use tired superlatives to describe themselves, Hancock focuses on what matters most to patients.

Which is why, despite not being the largest health network in central Indiana, Hancock Health is leading the way when it comes to being a brand that’s making a large impact in its community and the areas that surround it.

Hancock comes off as authentic because they back up the aspirational words with programs designed to reduce the need for medical intervention.
Incentives like no-prescription, low-cost lab screenings encourage at-risk patients to proactively manage their health and avoid potential complications.

“Approximately 80 percent of outcomes are determined by a patient’s environment, genetics and behavior. So our messaging can’t focus solely on clinical care.”

Rob Matt
Hancock Health

In the digital era, even Google’s search results page becomes an ideal opportunity for Hancock to deliver information and emotion.
Part Two

HOW DO YOU CREATE A VERBAL IDENTITY?

1. **Begin with a realistic picture of where you stand in the minds of consumers, providers, and payers** before you begin to define or redefine your brand personality. Keep in mind that external audiences may see you much differently than internal audiences. And recognize, but don’t get hung up on, past perceptions—brands can and must evolve.

2. **Enlist the help of brand identity professionals who specialize in healthcare marketing** (that’s us!) and who have the experience and expertise to help you design a discovery process, and offer guidance on conducting brand relationship perception research, if needed.

3. **Make stakeholders and clinical leadership part of the process** to build support and trust. (We’ve found this works best as a dedicated, facilitated process. Read more about Anne Arundel Medical Center’s facilitated discovery here.)

4. Make sure everyone understands and agrees that the goal is to land on a brand personality that patients, providers, and prospects (both patients and hires) will be drawn toward.
WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE BIG BRAINSTORMING SESSIONS?

1. Deliver a draft document containing concrete rules that define how to express the personality of the brand when creating marketing content.

2. Gain input and sign off from stakeholders and senior leadership before publishing.

3. Be sure the guidelines are flexible and give specific examples by channel—especially digital and social.

4. Include a detailed discussion of style—use of active voice, conversational aids like personal pronouns, and punchier, imaginative headlines to make content memorable.

5. In digital communications, be sure to include strong CTAs (calls to action) wherever appropriate to increase traffic to landing pages and potential for engagement.

6. Understand that tone of voice will shift somewhat depending on the service line and audience—what does that sound like?

7. Avoid getting too granular in guidelines to prevent robotic or formulaic copy.

8. Allow content creators latitude to be creative within the parameters of the brand and the type of communication.
CREATE CONNECTIONS, NOT CONTENT.

Remember, marketing content is the means to an end. And the “end” is actually the beginning—an opportunity to start a conversation or engagement that connects consumers to the health information or service they need at the time.

The ideal brand voice, like the ideal healthcare professional, will comfortably express a range of emotions, from a sense of humor to sense of compassion.

Like a well-designed landing page, the right tone of voice and the right content can transform utilitarian content into an engaging and memorable moment.

An effective brand voice creates the following emotions in the audience:

→ **Confidence** in the experience of the service line or expertise of the specialist being featured.

→ **Reassurance** that we understand the condition or disease and will navigate patients and families through treatment with care.

→ **Resolve** to make an appointment or seek more information about a service, specialist or a symptom.
Final Thoughts

WHO BENEFITS BY CREATING A VERBAL IDENTITY?

→ **The organization and everyone who works there**, by being part of an organization with a well differentiated and clearly positioned brand.

→ **Content creators**, who will spend less time figuring out how to say something and more time crafting effective content.

→ **Service line marketing managers**, who can develop more effective and cohesive communications with fewer revisions and disconnects throughout the approval process.

→ **Patients**, who can make better choices about their healthcare options—and feel more comfortable and confident about the choices they make.

→ **HCPs (health care practitioners)**, who can take pride in marketing communications that project clinical authority without sounding cold or canned.
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This white paper is collaboration between freelance writer Dave Reyburn and designer Stephanie Helline. Stephanie is the owner and creative director of Strategic Design Services and Dave is the owner and creative director of DS Reyburn Strategic Creative.

We’ve covered a lot of ground, but we’ve only scratched the surface of how to communicate your brand story more powerfully. And time constraints kept us from talking about the daily challenges of maintaining consistency while still getting projects out the door.

With that in mind, feel free to email Dave or Stephanie with any questions about verbal or visual identity we weren’t able to address here.

Or, if you think your team is ready for a guided workshop to learn how to attract the attention and traffic your brand needs, contact us to schedule a free 30-minute consult.

We’ll walk you through the process, potential timelines, and cost range.

In the meantime remember this. The best healthcare stories, like the best healthcare providers, connect on a personal level.