



THE VANILLAFICATION OF BRANDS

Can AI really capture a brand's unique tone of voice?
We did an experiment to find out.

Definition:

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First, we found some tone of voice guidelines. A few brands are kind enough to publish theirs online - namely Monzo, Wise, Experian, Mailchimp, Microsoft, the University of the Arts London, and the UK Government. We also threw in one of our own clients (Zizzi), and used some sorcery to include Lemonade too (more on that below).

We then took each brand in turn, feeding the LLM (Gemini 3 Flash, which at the time was our favourite for writing) with the tone of voice guidelines, and asked it to use that tone to write a 100-word newsletter covering three topics: a price rise, an office move and an employee volunteering activity.

We didn't tell Gemini this was all an experiment, and we started a new chat for each brand.

TWO CAVEATS

For seven of the nine brands, we used the tone of voice guidelines we found online. But there were two exceptions:

1. Lemonade don't publish their tone of voice guide. But we really wanted to include them because they're lauded for their writing, so we handpicked some of their best writing and gave it to Gemini as an example to follow.
2. Zizzi were a deliberate plant. We've been working with them for a couple of years now, helping define their new tone of voice. So instead of giving Gemini their tone of voice guide unaltered, we adapted it into a proper AI prompt – using markdown syntax, plenty of examples, and a few other tricks we thought would help.

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Definition:

WHAT WE FOUND

A surprising amount of sameness.

Parking the Zizzi output for a moment, for the other eight brands Gemini produced essentially three tones, which we'll call generic-formal, generic-plain and generic-friendly.

One of its particularly illuminating quirks came when describing the staff volunteering activity (a trip to revamp a school garden). In the Monzo output (generic-friendly), it used the phrase 'swapped spreadsheets for spades'. Almost the exact same phrase appeared in two of the other outputs: 'swapped keyboards for compost' (Wise) and 'swapped keyboards for shovels' (Experian).

These moments where the LLM tries something interesting are telling, because they're opportunities to show off just how on-tone it can be. But if it's reaching for the same devices each time, that's not distinctiveness at all – it's just vanilla with a flake.

There were more examples too:

The phrase **'on a brighter note'** appeared in four outputs (Monzo, Lemonade, Mailchimp, Microsoft).

The **'from... to...'** copywriting trope appeared in three outputs:

'From big updates to fresh blooms' (Monzo)

'From new roots to new rates' (Wise)

'From new locations to community impact' (UAL)

Definition:

The word **‘transform’** or **‘transforming’** appeared in eight outputs.

In trying to capture the warmth of Monzo, Lemonade and Wise, it **resorted to exclamation marks** – something of a rookie error:

‘...opened a brand new office in Coventry!’ (Monzo)

‘We’ve landed in Coventry!’ (Wise)

‘...a shiny new home in Coventry!’ (Lemonade)





WHAT ABOUT ZIZZI?

It's time to bring our plant back into the conversation. We can't put the Zizzi prompt here, trade secrets and all, but to give you an idea: they have an 'anti-tone of voice' tone of voice.

The aim is to sound totally relaxed. Nothing try-hard, nothing overly excitable, nothing 'copywritten' – essentially the tone of your coolest friend.

Definition:

This is what Gemini produced:

Ciao,

First, the bit you won't like. We've had to put our prices up. Everything's more expensive right now—lighting, heating, even the ovens. It's annoying, but we didn't have much choice.

In other news, we've moved house. We're now based in a new office in Coventry.

Finally, a few of our lot spent a day digging in the dirt at a local school. They've fixed up the garden and it looks brilliant. We're quite proud of them, really.

Baci.

Now, there's an element of subjectivity here, but we'd argue that's pretty much bang-on. It also doesn't have any of the words, phrases or tropes that appeared in the others – for instance, it's the only one that doesn't feature anything about 'transformation'.

It's possible that the more on-tone Zizzi output was a coincidence. Or it might be because we gave it a proper prompt – with clear, concrete instructions, structured with markdown headings, tables and checklists, and including a final self-assessment phase.

Definition:

WHY THIS MATTERS

The rise in AI writing has had a profound effect on brands. Before AI, every brand had its own team of writers (and non-writers) orbiting its tone of voice – in-house staff, agency copywriters, freelancers – all hitting the brief to different degrees, but all aiming at the same target. And no two brands shared the same team.

That's the bit that's changed. The job of brand writing has moved from thousands of separate writers to three shared ones: ChatGPT, Claude and Gemini.

Imagine if all independent restaurants got turned into McDonalds, KFC and Subway and you get the picture: brand writing is being homogenised, processed, mass-produced.

And in terms of writing, those three LLMs aren't even all that different to each other. We don't know exactly what they're trained on, but it's probably not a reach to say they all devoured as much freely available good quality writing – like you might find on company websites, Wikipedia and in professional publications – as possible.

A NEW CHALLENGE FOR COMMS PEOPLE

So if you're an in-house brand or marketing person, you're faced with a novel challenge. Before AI, your focus was largely on improving the quality and consistency of communications. Now, at least three-quarters of your colleagues are using AI to do their writing (based on a 2026 survey we did with 250 people in the UK), in a consistently vanilla tone.

The challenge is to wrangle the AI so that it writes in your brand's tone of voice. Keep the quality, lose the vanilla.

Just to qualify that a little bit: vanilla ice-cream is nice. It's the world's favourite flavour. So using LLMs to write your copy might not actively turn off many of your customers (although they might totally ignore it or tune it out).

But nor is it going to make them fall in love with your brand in the way Innocent's voice did, or Surreal's, or Oatly's, or The Economist's. Unless, that is, you give your LLM the same level of attention as your human writers: train it properly, measure its output, iterate and improve.

Definition:

HOW TO GO FROM VANILLA TO **PISTACHIO**





If you use an AI-friendly tone of voice prompt (as we did with Zizzi), there's a better chance that AI will give you your exact tone of voice. It did in this case, though of course one example doesn't make it a watertight finding.

Definition:

To give your brand an even better chance, you need what we're calling a **brand language system**.

Here's how it works:

1 Make sure your tone of voice actually is distinctive to begin with

The starting point is a really good tone of voice guide.

If you've got one already, great – you've done the hard bit.

If you don't, make sure you do this bit properly. That means:

- knowing what your brand's personality is – because that's essentially the foundation from which your tone of voice will grow
- doing a comprehensive audit of your current writing to diagnose what you do well and what you don't
- doing the same thing for your competitors' writing so you can see how to stand out
- involving all the people who need including: brand, marketing, sales, product, internal comms, HR and legal are usually the key ones
- creating guidelines that go into detail about exactly what the tone of voice is, and how to do it, in a way that LLMs really understand
- creating plenty of brilliant before-and-after examples to show the tone of voice in action across your whole organisation
- getting tone of voice specialists to run the whole thing (hi!)

One of the best things about a brand language system is that you don't need to hold back on the nuance. If you want your brand to start every sentence with a verb – fine, AI can do that. If you want every piece of copy to be in the style of a limerick – also fine, AI can do that too. You can build a truly distinctive voice, with dozens of ownable characteristics, and implement it at scale.

Back in the olden days, when all the writers were human, that wasn't possible. Your tone of voice had to be simple enough for everyone to use – professional writer or not.

Definition:

2 Wire it into your AI tools

We'll build a set of prompts – you'll need a general tone of voice prompt, but beyond that you might also want prompts for specific tasks like social posts, press releases or product copy.

And to make sure the prompts work brilliantly, we'll build a library of writing examples scored from 'way off' to 'perfect.'

By showing the AI exactly where the boundaries are – what to do, what to avoid, and what's just okay – we can test and refine its instructions until it consistently hits the mark. We'll set this up within your existing tools, or give you your very own AI suite with all the best models built in.

3 Keep it fresh

Models drift, so we regularly tweak your prompts and add more writing examples to the library to keep everything up to date.

Definition:

ONE WE MADE EARLIER

We've been working with a big Australian pensions organisation since 2019, helping them sound clear and human in their communications. We built their tone of voice, trained hundreds of their people to use it, then built them a bespoke AI suite complete with a brand language system.

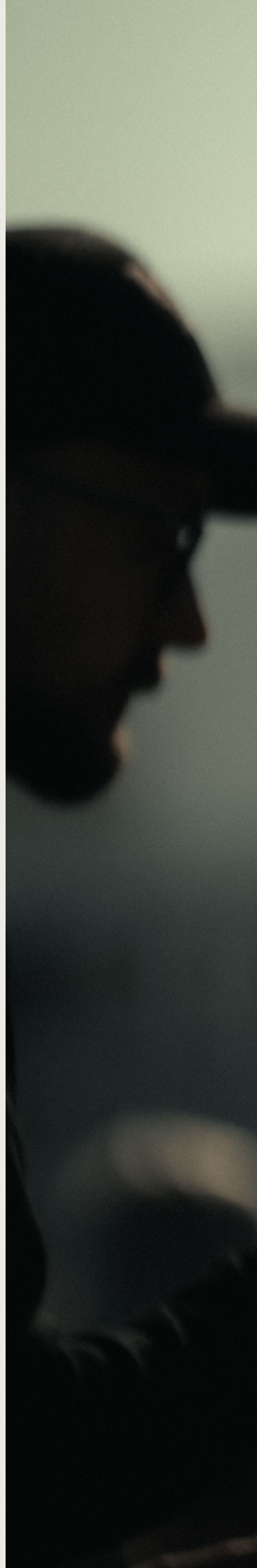
We then ran a pilot – using the AI tools to rewrite comms there would never have been any budget for a human to tackle alone – and measured how well their system performed.

- It was **twice as fast** – the comms took half the time a human would've taken.
- It was (nearly) **twice as clear** – the rewritten versions scored 76 for readability, against 48 for the originals.

DON'T SETTLE FOR THE DEFAULT

With everyone relying on the same three writing tools, the only way to stand out is to treat your LLM like your people. Don't just sling it a half-baked brief and expect brilliance – give it the tools and skills it needs to fully capture your brand's spirit in its writing.

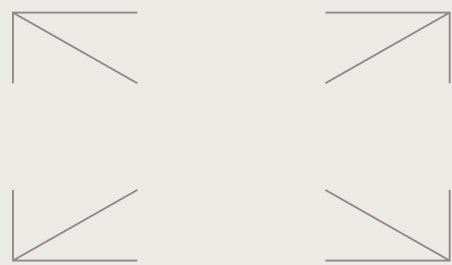
Because sure, vanilla is fine for the masses. But if you want to be the brand your customers love, you're going to need some pistachio.





Definition:

APPENDIX



Gemini’s outputs, unedited:

MONZO

Hi there. Let’s start with the important stuff. We’re increasing our fees soon because our own energy bills have gone up. We know price hikes are never welcome news, so we’ve explained exactly how this affects you below.

On a brighter note, we’ve packed our boxes and opened a brand new office in Coventry! We’re also celebrating a team of Monzonauts who swapped spreadsheets for spades this week. They’ve been busy transforming a local school garden into a proper green sanctuary.

From big updates to fresh blooms, here’s what’s happening at Monzo this month.

WISE

Here’s the latest from Wise. From new roots to new rates, we’re keeping it transparent.

First, an honest update. Rising energy costs mean we’re slightly increasing our fees. We don’t like doing it, but it’s necessary to keep our mission sustainable while we work to bring prices back down.

In brighter news, we’ve landed in Coventry! Our new office is officially open, helping us build a borderless future.

Finally, some garden magic. A few Wisers recently swapped keyboards for compost at a local school, transforming their outdoor space.

New home, new seeds, same mission.

Onwards.

Definition:

EXPERIAN

Your monthly update: New steps and fresh starts

Whether we're improving our services or supporting our local communities, we're always looking for ways to move forward together. Here is what's happening this month:

Managing rising costs To keep our services running reliably despite global energy hikes, we're adjusting our prices. We've focused on making this change as small as possible so we can continue to provide the expert guidance you rely on.

We've moved! Our team has a new home in Coventry. It's a fresh, modern space where we can work better together for you.

Helping our community grow Finally, some of our volunteers recently swapped keyboards for shovels to transform a local school garden, creating a vibrant space for children to flourish.

LEMONADE

Hi there. Transparency is our thing, so let's get into it.

First, the 'ugh' news: rising energy costs mean we've had to slightly nudge our prices up. We're not fans of price hikes either, but it's what keeps our Giveback model—and the business—healthy and sustainable.

On a brighter note, we've traded our old desks for a shiny new home in Coventry! If you're in the neighborhood, give us a wave.

Finally, some of our team spent the weekend getting muddy at a local school, transforming a neglected garden into a green oasis for the kids.

Growth, gardens, and keeping it real. Here's the full scoop.

MAILCHIMP

Hello. A lot is happening at Mailchimp this month, and we want to keep you in the loop.

First, the tough news: we're raising our prices due to rising energy costs. We value being plainspoken, so we're telling you directly. On a brighter note, we've officially moved into our new office in Coventry. We're still unpacking, but we already love the neighborhood. Finally, some of our team recently volunteered at a local school to transform their garden into a vibrant space for students. It was hard work, but seeing the results was worth it.

Here's the full update.

Definition:

UK GOVERNMENT

Hello. Here is your monthly update on our work and services.

We are increasing our prices soon. This is because our energy costs have gone up. These changes help us continue to provide our services to you.

In other news, we are moving to a new office in Coventry. This move will help our teams work together more effectively.

Finally, some of our colleagues recently volunteered at a local school. They worked hard to transform the school garden into a better space for the children to enjoy.

Thank you for reading.

MICROSOFT

What's new this month

Welcome to your monthly update. We're sharing a few big changes and some local highlights.

To keep up with rising energy costs, we're increasing our prices. We're committed to being open about these changes while continuing to deliver the services you rely on.

On a brighter note, we're heading to the Midlands. Our new Coventry office is officially open. We're also proud of our employee volunteers who spent the week transforming a local school garden. They've built a beautiful space for students to learn, explore, and play.

Let's dive in.

UAL

Welcome to your monthly update. We're sharing some important changes as we continue to grow and support our community.

To keep our creative spaces running despite rising energy costs, we are increasing our prices. We're also excited to announce we're moving to a new office in Coventry. This move helps us connect with even more creators across the UK. Finally, a team of UAL volunteers recently spent the day transforming a local school garden, bringing the power of design to our local neighborhood.

From new locations to community impact, here is what's happening this month.

Definition:

ZIZZI

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Definition:

We're a team of brand, marketing, comms and AI specialists who make an unforgettable impact – inside and outside organisations.

We built our business by bringing together different specialists – strategists, creatives, makers, technologists and more. Because generalists make stuff. Specialists make stuff happen.

Our AI and tone of voice work helps organisations build the skills, standards and culture to communicate with confidence.

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**LET'S HAVE A
CHAT ABOUT
FINDING YOUR
BRAND'S FLAVOUR**

hello@thisisdefinition