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The Four Words That Defined a Good Mother

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In 1966 somebody proposed making a grocery item part of a woman's identity. The room should have laughed.

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STORIES FROM THE FIELD
J.R. WORDEN

The Four Words That Defined a Good Mother

Identity, trust, and the day somebody decided an ordinary household product should say something about the woman who bought it

In 1966 somebody walked into a meeting and proposed making an ordinary grocery item part of a mother's identity. Four words did it, and they worked for twenty years. Then the company retired them, and what went wrong is a sequencing problem rather than a creative one.

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The Woman

She would never have called it her brand.

It was 1966. People did not talk about personal brands. There were no Instagram profiles to curate, no LinkedIn bios to polish, no feeds broadcasting carefully selected versions of daily life. There wasn't even MySpace.

But she had a brand. And her brand had attributes.

The husband she chose said something about her. So did the neighborhood they lived in, the condition of the yard, the car parked in the driveway, the clothes she wore, the way her children were dressed, the wine she served when friends came over, and the food she put on the table.

None of those decisions defined her by itself. But when put together they created a picture.

Responsible. Thoughtful. Particular.

She cared.

She cared what other people thought, sure. Most people do. But that was only part of it. She also cared what her choices implied to her.

Was she taking care of her family?

Was she making smart decisions?

Was she paying attention?

Was she the kind of mother she believed a good mother should be?

Some choices carried more weight than others, but they all went into the same account.

Her account of herself.

Then, somewhere in New York, sixty years ago, somebody looked at that woman and had what must have sounded like an absolutely stupid idea.

Let's create marketing that makes a consumable product part of her brand.

Not a car. Not clothing. Not perfume. Not wine.

An ordinary, inexpensive product that spent most of its life hidden inside a kitchen cabinet. Something few outside the family would ever see. Something she could buy in a few seconds while pushing a grocery cart.

You can almost hear the plead, ”Let’s make that say something about what kind of mother she is.”

The room had to be silent. It just had to be.

The Pitch

There’s no transcript of the meeting. There doesn’t need to be. Strip away sixty years of familiarity and imagine what the idea sounded like before anybody knew it would work.

> **Marketer**: “We’re going to make this product part of how a woman sees herself.”
>
> **Client**: “How stupid do I look?”
>
> **Marketer**: “No, seriously.”
>
> **Client**: “You think she’s going to build her identity around a grocery item?”
>
> **Marketer**: “No.”
>
> **Client**: “Good.”
>
> **Marketer**: “We think she’s already built the identity. We just want her choice of our product to become additional evidence.”

That’s different.

The woman knows who she wants to be. She wants to be responsible. Attentive. Selective. She wants to believe that when a decision concerns her children, she isn’t someone who just grabs whatever happens to be closest. She chooses. She chooses carefully. Nobody has to sell her on any of it. She got there on her own, years ago, and she’s been paying into it ever since.

That doesn’t begin with the product.

It begins with her. Describe her in a way she will embrace proudly, connect the description to the role she takes most seriously, then turn it into behavior. Only then do you introduce the brand.

Four words.

That’s the entire campaign. Four words that would have to describe the customer, establish her standard, convert the standard into an action, and turn a single purchase into proof she’d lived up to it. No demonstration. No comparison chart. No ingredient story. No price promotion. No celebrity.

It sounds a little less ridiculous now.

The Bet

The campaign launched in 1966, and its architecture is easier to see if you take the words one at a time before you know what they are.

The first word was an attribute, and it was a strange choice.

Not wealthy. Not fashionable. Not sophisticated. Something much more useful than any of those: it described a person who paid attention before making a choice. Anybody can be flattered. Very few flatteries arrive with a standard attached.

The second word named the role where that attribute mattered most, and it wasn't shopper or consumer or housewife. The role carried responsibility. Somebody else depended on her decisions, which meant getting it wrong had a cost that landed on a person she loved.

The third word was the action, because an attribute that never produces behavior is just a compliment. You couldn't merely believe you were thoughtful. Sooner or later thoughtful people had to make thoughtful choices, and the word demanded one.

The fourth word was the brand.

Attribute. Identity. Behavior. Brand.

The product itself is almost absent from the idea, and that's the point. The company was asking her to acknowledge something she already believed about herself, and then quietly attaching the product to the belief. Nothing new about the product had to be learned, argued, or accepted, which is a strange thing to say about an advertising campaign and the reason this one is still being taught.

The campaign ran for nearly twenty years.

Then somebody decided it needed fixing.

The Improvement

This happens inside companies constantly and rarely has anything to do with the customer.

A customer encounters a campaign occasionally, in the gaps between the things she's paying attention to. The people running the brand encounter it every single day, in presentations, research decks, packaging reviews, media plans, agency meetings, sales meetings, and budget conversations, until the words stop meaning anything at all. The company gets bored years before the market does, and then it mistakes its own boredom for a market signal.

None of which is stupidity, and it's worth being careful here, because the people who made this call were not fools and the decision is easier to make than it looks from outside. The people inside a brand are the only people alive who see a campaign the way it gets described in a planning meeting: as a thing with a lifespan, a budget line, a fatigue curve, and a next version. Everybody else sees four words on a label. The two groups aren't seeing the same object, and only one of them is in the room.

By the mid-1980s, the four-word platform was retired. What replaced it moved the attention somewhere else entirely, onto the product, and more specifically onto taste. The new idea invited the consumer to try the thing and notice that it was better.

Which sounds perfectly reasonable, and is close to a complete reversal of what the old campaign had accomplished.

For nearly twenty years the message had opened with a question about her. Now it opened with a statement about them. The old line handed her a reason to choose that existed before the product entered the decision at all. The new one asked her to evaluate the product again: taste it, consider the competition, judge it, compare it, and decide whether it deserved a preference it already had.

Which raises a question worth sitting with. Why would a trusted brand invite its customer to reopen a decision it had spent two decades helping her close?

The Experiment Nobody Needed

Take the instruction literally for a second. Taste the difference. Compared with what?

Should she buy three competing products? Set them out on the kitchen table? Blindfold the children? Hand out scorecards and run a controlled panel somewhere between making dinner and checking homework?

Obviously not, and obviously that isn't what anybody at the company had in mind. The language still gives away the change in thinking. The old campaign put the customer at the center of the decision. The new one put the product there and even invited in the competition, and those aren't the same thing at all.

The original idea understood that the customer already owned something valuable and difficult to manufacture.

Certainty.

Hers was about herself rather than about anything sitting on a shelf, and she'd been accumulating it for years without any help from a marketer. She knew she cared about her children. She knew she considered herself careful about what she bought for them. She knew careful parents make careful choices.

Every one of those beliefs was already sitting there, fully paid for. The brand borrowed them, which is why the campaign was so efficient, and which is exactly what the company walked away from.

They Went Back

A few years later the company restored the old idea. One word was modernized. The architecture underneath it was left almost untouched.

Attribute. Identity. Behavior. Brand.

So a brand walked away from a customer-centered decision rule, spent a few years talking about its product, and then returned to the structure it had abandoned. That sequence doesn't prove why the intervening campaign went away, and the honest position is that the public record doesn't say. Perhaps the company wanted a broader audience. Perhaps the old positioning felt tired in a conference room. Perhaps research promised that taste would bring in new buyers. Without the internal brief, pretending to know would be lazy.

What we do know is that the old words came back, and that gives us a better question than why the new ones left.

What did those four words understand that their replacement forgot?

Now we can finally talk about the product.

The Details of the Story

The agency was Grey Advertising. The client was Procter & Gamble. The year was 1966.

And the ordinary household product that somebody decided should become part of a mother's identity?

Peanut butter.

Fucking peanut butter.

The brand was Jif, and it wasn't the market leader. It had launched nationally in 1958 into a category owned by Skippy and Peter Pan, and by the mid-1960s it was still a distant third. This was the number three peanut butter reaching for something its shelf position couldn't buy.

The four words were: *Choosy Mothers Choose Jif.*

You've heard them a thousand times. Read them once as an argument about how a person decides.

Choosy. The attribute. You're careful, you're selective, you pay attention before you commit.

Mothers. The identity. This isn't shopping. Somebody you love depends on what you decide.

Choose. The behavior. Being careful eventually has to show up as an act.

Jif. The product, arriving last, as evidence rather than as an argument.

The line says nothing about peanuts. Nothing about texture, nutrition, price, or taste. It spends three of its four words on the customer and what she does, and gives the brand the last one. There's a functional story underneath it, and it's a good one, because Jif's formulation had to hold onto spreadability while still clearing the FDA's ninety percent peanut threshold that separates peanut butter from peanut spread. The campaign mentions none of it.

Krampner's history of peanut butter credits the platform with helping carry Jif past Skippy into U.S. market leadership around the 1980 peanut-butter crisis. It didn't do that alone. Product development, distribution, P&G's media weight, pricing, and a category-wide crisis all had a hand in it. The line is the part that kept working when everything else changed.

Around 1985 or 1986, P&G set it aside for "Taste the Jifference."

Yep. Let that settle. Taste the Jifference.

They traded four words capable of making peanut butter part of a mother's identity for a pun asking her to reconfirm her loyalty. In 1988 the platform came back as "Choosy Moms Choose Jif." Mothers became Moms. The architecture survived intact.

The Science: Certainty Can Be Borrowed

This is where the story stops being about advertising.

Every consequential decision starts in uncertainty. That's what makes it a decision rather than an execution: if the right answer were obvious, nobody would have to choose. The standard marketing response is to attack the uncertainty with information about the product. Better, faster, cheaper, healthier, safer, more reliable, more delicious. Pile up enough evidence and eventually the buyer has to concede.

The original Jif campaign went the other direction. It started with something the buyer didn't need Jif to prove.

I care about my children. Because I care, I make careful choices for them. Careful mothers are selective. Selective mothers choose carefully.

Choosy mothers choose Jif.

The brand enters last, and by the time it does, the reasoning is already finished. The uncertain decision, which peanut butter do I buy, has been connected to a settled one, what kind of mother am I. An uncertain choice borrowed its certainty from an established belief that had nothing to do with the category.

That's a mechanism, and it's bigger than identity marketing. People arrive at decisions carrying identities, prior commitments, social expectations, experiences, fears, and beliefs about who they're trying to become, and all of it influencing before the first message lands. The blank slate waiting for a marketer to supply enough facts has never once walked into a store. Decision Architecture is the study of that structure, which is a formal way of saying that the buyer brings most of the building with her and the seller is deciding where to attach.

Great marketers figure this out sometimes. Usually without a name for it.

The Product Was the Last Word for a Reason

Buyers move through decision gates, and each one carries a question in the buyer's own voice. Relevance, is this about me. Credibility, do these people understand this. Proof, can they show me rather than tell me. Safety, what could go wrong and have they named it honestly. Access, what's the next proportional step. Skip a gate and the engagement stalls.

Now put the four words against them.

Choosy clears Relevance in a single word. Is this about me. A woman who thinks of herself as careful has answered yes before she finishes reading, and she never had to be persuaded of anything, because the campaign described her rather than the product.

Mothers does the work that ordinarily takes a case study. It supplies aspirational Safety, which is the gate almost nobody builds for. What could go wrong here is not that the peanut butter is bad. It's that she turns out to be the mother who wasn't paying attention, and somebody notices. Naming the community answers that before it's asked. If choosy mothers choose Jif, then choosing Jif is defensible to her husband, to the other mothers, and to herself at two in the morning.

Choose is Access, and the reason it works is that the next step is almost insultingly small. Reach out your hand. No form, no appointment, no commitment beyond a dollar and a shelf.

Jif is the product, and the four supplied inputs put it exactly where the campaign put it. Purpose earns relevance. People earn credibility. Process earns proof. Product opens access. Product is the input that comes last, because it opens the door rather than earning the belief that makes anybody want to walk through it.

Which leaves one gate conspicuously unspent. The campaign offers no Proof at all. It never demonstrates anything, never compares, never explains the ninety percent threshold that would have given it a legitimate technical claim. It skips the gate that every marketer reaches for first.

And it gets away with it, because Proof is expensive and it was buying something cheaper. The buyer had already crossed her own threshold on the only question the campaign cared about.

Proof Arrives Too Late

Everybody in this business has heard that proof offered too early reads as chest-beating. Nobody talks about the opposite failure, and "***Taste the Jifference***" is the cleanest example of it I know.

Trust is not the objective. Trust is the condition that makes commitment possible. It's the threshold where uncertainty has been reduced enough that acting becomes acceptable despite the risk that's still sitting there. And commitment, once it happens, is the end of evaluation. The buyer stops comparing. That's not a side effect of commitment, that's the definition of it.

A customer who has been choosing Jif for fifteen years crossed that threshold a long time ago. She isn't evaluating peanut butter. She's reaching.

Then a campaign arrives and asks her to taste the difference.

Look at what that instruction does structurally. It takes a buyer who has finished and walks her backward, out of commitment and into exploration, and hands her a task she had no reason to want. It reopens a decision the company spent twenty years and a great deal of money helping her close.

And the bet is asymmetric in the worst possible direction. If she runs the comparison and Jif wins, she ends up precisely where she started, minus the afternoon. If she runs it and Jif loses, the company has paid to lose a customer it already had. There is no outcome on that branch that leaves the brand better off than saying nothing.

Somebody else ran the same play in the same stretch of the mid-eighties, and that one is fully documented.

On April 23, 1985, Coca-Cola announced a reformulated Coke. Nearly two hundred thousand consumers had tasted it blind and preferred it. The company had proof, in volume, from its own buyers, and it did the responsible thing and acted on the evidence. Seventy-nine days later, on July 11, the original formula came back as Coca-Cola classic.

Coca-Cola's own account of the episode names the mechanism better than most marketing textbooks. What the tests didn't show, the company says, was the bond consumers felt with *their* Coke, something they didn't want anyone, including The Coca-Cola Company, tampering with.

Read as a sequencing failure, that stops being a famous blunder and starts being predictable. The taste test measured the sip. The decision had stopped being about the sip years earlier. Two hundred thousand people can tell you which one tastes better, and not one of them is answering the question that decides the purchase.

That's what happens when a firm sells its product to a buyer who has already crossed the gate. The message is Proof, and Proof was the right move four gates and fifteen years ago.

The Sentence Your Buyer Wants to Say

Sixty years later, a mother in the same aisle can learn nearly anything she wants about what's in front of her. She can ask an AI system to compare sugar, protein, price per ounce, additives, allergens, and reviews, and in about nine seconds she can know more about the category than the woman standing there in 1966 could have learned in a month.

There's still one question none of it answers. What does this choice mean about me?

That comes from somewhere else.

The husband. The house. The yard. The clothes. The wine. The way the kids leave the house in the morning. The food that goes into their lunchboxes.

The hundreds of choices that slowly become a picture of who we believe we are.

Which is the part that transfers, and the part most professional-services positioning gets exactly backward. Look at what firms put on their websites. We drive change. We build confidence. We create impact. We deliver outcomes. Every one of those is a sentence about the firm, offered to a buyer who is trying to work out something about themselves.

Jif gave its buyer a sentence she wanted to say about herself, and made the purchase the evidence.

So here's the test, and it's harder than it sounds. Name the sentence your buyer wants to share with their team. Not what you want said about your firm. What they want to be able to think about their own judgment when the engagement is over and somebody asks how it went.

The general counsel who doesn't get surprised. The CFO who saw it coming a quarter early. The board member who did the work when it would have been easier not to.

If you can't write that sentence in one line, you don't have a positioning problem. You have a research problem, and no amount of message testing will fix it, because you're testing language against an audience you haven't defined at the only level that decides anything.

And if you can write it, understand what you're holding. Accumulated meaning is the one marketing asset that can't be bought at any price and can't be rebuilt on a schedule, and it's the only kind that keeps working while nobody is spending against it. Twenty years went into those four words. Jif got them back in 1988, which was fortunate. Coca-Cola got theirs back in seventy-nine days, which was luckier still.

Sixty years ago somebody walked into a meeting and proposed making peanut butter part of a mother's identity. It must have sounded ridiculous.

Four words made it work, and the most important one was never peanut butter.

It was choosy.

The Details

The campaign. "Choosy Mothers Choose Jif" was created for Procter & Gamble's Jif by Grey Advertising and debuted in 1966. Jon Krampner's *Creamy and Crunchy: An Informal History of Peanut Butter* credits the agency rather than an individual. Two secondary accounts name individual creators, David A. Kaufelt and Grey copywriter Bernie Kahn, and they contradict each other. Neither is presented here as settled, because neither is.

The position. Jif launched nationally in 1958 behind Skippy and Peter Pan and was still a distant third by the mid-1960s. Krampner credits the campaign with helping carry Jif past Skippy to U.S. market leadership around the 1980 peanut-butter crisis. Helping. Product formulation, distribution, P&G's media scale, pricing, and the category crisis were all in the mix.

The departure. P&G set the platform aside around 1985 or 1986 in favor of "Taste the Jifference." The public record confirms the switch. It does not contain a verdict on how the replacement performed, and this piece doesn't claim one. The argument here is structural rather than commercial.

The return. Jif's corporate history records a 1988 update to "Choosy Moms Choose Jif." Public sources do not identify who made the decision or what evidence was behind it. The reading that accumulated equity proved hard to replace is analysis, not history.

One thing not claimed. It's fair to say a mother-only purchase frame reads as dated now. It isn't supportable to say that's why P&G retired the line in the mid-1980s, and no source found says so.

The Coca-Cola parallel. The Coca-Cola Company's own published history of the episode supplies the dates, the sample, and the quotation: the reformulated Coke was announced April 23, 1985, nearly 200,000 consumers preferred it in taste tests, and the original returned as Coca-Cola classic on July 11, 1985.

Afterward. P&G introduced Smooth Sensations in 1999 in a push for international recognition, and sold Jif and Crisco to J.M. Smucker in 2001.