

Consider This: The Use of Imperatives in Magazine Advertisements

By

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Abstract

A study was conducted to examine the use of imperatives in advertisements, so as to understand the need for their use by the advertising agencies. The results obtained were quite unlike past research, in that magazine ads show a partiality for the use of the experiencer as compared to online ads that prefer the use of the attention focuser. Additionally, majority of the imperatives were affirmative and functioned as suggestions rather than requests. A supplementary survey was conducted to enhance the understanding of this topic. Results show that while most respondents continue to think of imperatives as direct commands, this perception is changing. Finally, it was implied that the snappy, straightforward approach of the imperative verb has an impact on the memorability of the advertisements, which lies behind the prevalence of imperatives in the advertising industry.

Keywords: Magazine advertisements, imperatives, persuasion, language of advertising, pragmatics

Introduction

“Just do it”, the brand ambassador of Nike tells its customers, while Apple encourages its customers to “think different”. The words ‘do’ and ‘think’ in this case are part of a class of verbs in the English language commonly known as imperatives. What are imperatives, and why are they used in advertising?

Imperatives, otherwise known as directives, are a class of verbs that are in the imperative mood and are generally used for commands or requests (Morenberg, 2010, p.106). Thus, an interesting yet unsurprising fact to note is that in many other languages, the linguistic name for imperatives is based on a verb that means ‘command’ (Von Fantel, Iatridou, 2015, p.1). Commands are not necessarily the only functions that imperatives serve; imperatives are used

1

in a myriad of other roles including giving orders, instructions, advising, issuing warnings and making invitations.

An imperative is constructed using the base form of a main verb and does not require a subject for its grammatical function. For example, in the sentence, ‘Come on, I’m waiting’, ‘come on’ would be the two-word imperative verb. Imperatives are a unique class of verbs, in that they do not require a subject, because the subject ‘you’ is implied and latent. They may be softened with the use of words like ‘please’, or they may be combined with negatives to forbid someone to do something, like in the example ‘Don’t use my computer!’

Directives are utilized quite commonly throughout written and spoken English; however, one field where their use has gone relatively unnoticed is in the advertising field. Advertisements have become especially prevalent in the modern world, but what is important to realize is that the use of language is especially crucial in determining whether an advertisement is engaging and effective or not, and this effect carries over to the sales of the corresponding products. Moreover, the use of imperatives in ads is ubiquitous, and often times, surprisingly useful, as they manipulate readers’ thoughts in such a way that gives little room for argument. One of the most fitting examples of this may be the slogan “Just do it” mentioned above. This tagline is bold, short and snappy, but unbelievably catchy to the extent that it may just be one of the most iconic slogans in the world. This preliminary study focuses on the use of imperatives in magazine advertisements, to try and delve deeper into the reasons behind their incessant use in the advertising industry, and to understand their syntactic as well as rhetorical function(s).

2

Objective of Research

This paper focuses on magazines and newspapers, because in spite of the rise of online news sources and such, written publications still constitute a significant part of both the advertisement industry, as well as the daily routine of many traditionalists around the world. Additionally, flipping through magazines is an activity youth still seem to enjoy, in spite of not being habituated to reading the actual newspaper every morning. Moreover, Zembytska (2018) points out, “in oral communication a person can be convinced as a result of the interlocutor’s charm, tone, or the lyricism of the statement” (p.233). This is important to note, because since magazine articles are devoid of such immediate personal contact, they need to resort to other, more engaging behaviour to attract an audience.

Thus, the goal of this investigation is to delve into the world of language in advertisements, with the focal point being the use of imperatives, both in a qualitative and quantitative context in magazine advertisements, so that one can establish a relationship between the type of imperative used (affirmative/negative, discourse analysis etc.) and the overall effect(s) they may have on advertising campaigns. The objective is to seek answers to the following questions:

1. How often are imperatives used in advertisements?
2. What kind of imperatives are used, i.e. negations, requests or commands?
3. How can imperatives in ads be classified into different categories in terms of their contextual use and implications?
4. What effect(s) do imperatives have on the overall success of an advertisement?

Literature review

Imperatives are a distinct class of verbs. As a result, they have been the subject of several studies. Swales et al (1998) concentrated on the use of imperatives in scholarly writing, and called imperatives a ‘fringe phenomenon’ – a phenomenon that is borderline strange and difficult to understand. The authors of this paper determined that imperatives tended to be aggregated in areas where majority of the argumentation was centered, but otherwise they were distributed unevenly throughout the paper. The authors also surmised that while imperatives may seem very harsh in theory, authors often use them to denote personal style, to make for an engaging read and to keep the article concise.

Other studies examined the use of imperatives in other languages, such as Chinese. Song (2009) concludes that when Chinese and English are compared, they are found to be extremely different when it comes to the use of this phenomenon, with Chinese being a language that minimizes circumlocution as much as possible, thus relying more on imperatives on a daily basis. This study could be extrapolated to understand cross cultural differences- native Chinese speakers prefer being more direct and upfront as compared to English speakers.

Very few studies (i.e. the Pennock-Speck and Fuster-Marquez study (2014), and the Zjakic, Han and Liu (2017) have focused on the prevalence of imperatives in the advertising field. One plausible reason for the limited research on this topic could be that they often go unnoticed in written English, unless pointed out. In recipes and directions, for example, one

does not even realize that he or she is being directed to do something, and the reader or interlocuter follows instructions without argument. For instance, Labrador et al (2013) note that that advertisements can be classified in terms of their linguistic features into their own unique subgenre with specific micro and macro-linguistic characteristics, and argue that advertisements use persuasive techniques, one of them being imperatives, with informal language, to attract potential customers (p.45).

Another related study by Pennock-Speck and Fuster-Marquez (2014) studied the use of imperatives in voice overs in British TV commercials, and the authors are of the opinion that they are more akin to suggestions and recommendations in this regard. They found that imperatives were used very frequently in advertising, and that negative imperatives were scarcely used with softening devices such as ‘please’. The authors then were able to devise a stellar system of classification of imperatives into five categories as detailed below:

1. Attention focusers – this class consists of imperatives that aim to catch the reader’s eye at first glance (ex. Check).
2. Contact group – this group is comprised of imperatives that call on the reader to contact the business (ex. Visit).
3. Acquisition of product – this category denotes the actions the addressee must take to attain the product (ex. Join).
4. Experiencer – this class is comprised of imperatives that assume the product has already been bought but the benefits have yet to be procured (ex. Enjoy).
5. Others – this category contains verbs that fit into none of the aforementioned categories (ex. Keep).

4

Pennock-Speck and Fuster-Marquez (2014) were also able to prove their hypothesis that imperatives used in advertisements serve as suggestions and advice rather than direct commands. Another study by Zjakic, Han and Liu (2017) focused on the use of imperatives in gym advertisements on the popular social networking site Facebook. The authors utilized Brown and Levinson’s (1978) politeness theory to account for the use of imperatives. They argue that although imperatives may seem face threatening and discourteous in web advertising, they are used to facilitate a connection between the advertiser and the potential

consumers (p.14). Additionally, one must keep in mind, that politeness is subjective and depends both on the speaker and the addressee (p.16). The aforementioned point can be further supported by Austin's (1962) Speech Act Theory (1962), which says that "the action performed when an utterance is produced can be analyzed on three different levels" namely the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. The locutionary act refers to the actual words uttered by the speaker, the illocutionary to the function, or intention, behind the spoken words, and the perlocutionary rests with the hearer's perception and the effect of the words on him/her (Cutting, 2002, p.13).

Another O'Neill's (2018), who evaluated the differences in the use of imperatives in English and Catalan advertisements, inferred that not only did English advertisements use imperatives more frequently, but that they seemed to have a range of functions, including promises, offers, openers, etc. The Catalan imperatives, on the other hand, were used without any mitigating articles, and had a more apparent illocutionary force akin to commands. In the case of the five English ads that did appear with a clear illocutionary force of directing, this was only possible because of the difference in authority and/or power between the advertiser and the potential customer, thus allowing the exchange to take place without any possibility of face threats. Advertisements for insurance companies, banks and building companies are a clear example of this phenomenon, in which bare imperatives are permitted because of the obvious differences in status between the speaker and the addressee. Another interesting statement the author makes is that face threatening acts become considerably less problematic when anonymity between the speaker and addressee is maintained. In this regard, Zembytska (2018, p.233) points out that not only do imperatives establish a bond with the reader, but they also encourage them to act and purchase the product without hesitating

5

Methodology

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected from weekly magazines – the two magazines used in this case were the Weekend magazine from Khaleej times and the Friday magazine from Gulf News, both local newspapers founded and based in the United Arab Emirates, with both also being the most widely known newspapers in the country. Twenty-three advertisements containing imperatives were selected covering a wide range of products, from clothing and jewelry all the way to meditation and yoga sessions with, fourteen being from the Friday

magazine, while the rest were from the Weekend magazine. Each of the advertisements collected (with the exception of one) were only one page long – as a result, unlike TV advertisements which are comprised of long visuals and skits, these ads must make a lot more of an impact at first glance, thus the number of words are limited in most of them, with a maximum of two to three sentences. In general, the Weekend magazine tended to have less advertisements per magazine than the Friday magazine, which accounts for the difference in sample sizes.

However, this allows for a diverse corpus that includes a multitude of types of products to be analyzed. All the data are recent and compiled from the January, February, and March 2019 editions of both magazines (see appendix 1).

Procedures

For the sake of the analysis, the number of sentences in each advertisement, along with the location of the imperative in the sentence and the accompanying visuals were noted. The imperative verbs, once singled out, were categorized into affirmative or negative classes, and mitigating or softening words like ‘please’ were also noted, if found. Furthermore, the imperatives used were then classified into two broad categories – requests or advice, based on Uso-Juan’s (2014) definition of a request being a speech act which involves committing the hearer in some future course of action that matches the speaker's goals and Jary and Kissine’s (2014) definition of a request as informing the hearer of the optimal course of action. Finally, the imperative verbs are further divided into the five classes devised by Pennock-Speck and Fuster-Marquez (2014).

6

Survey

As a follow up study, a survey (see appendix 2) was drafted and sent out to students from the American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, to understand whether students, from all walks of life, are mindful of the fact that imperatives are so prevalent in advertisements, and if they are, what their perception is of the form of the imperative used. The participants were asked a number of questions about the slogans of the famous activewear competing brands, Nike and Adidas, so that one could follow their perception of the language used in advertisements and decipher whether the use of imperatives has a

noticeable effect. The questions were short and objective, to allow for simple statistical analysis. The survey was circulated via popular messaging platform WhatsApp, and after a number of weeks, thirty-eight responses were collected.

Results and Discussion

This section provides an in-depth analysis and discussion of the use of imperatives in magazine advertisements.

As mentioned in the previous section, the ads were only one page long and comprised of at most three sentences. Each advertisement, regardless of what it was endorsing, also contained visuals to allow potential consumers to conjure clear images of the product or service in their minds. Interestingly enough, as was found in many of the studies mentioned, an overwhelmingly large number of advertisements used only the affirmative form of the imperative (100%), with only one ad out of the twenty-three using the word 'please' as a mitigating device:

(1) *For more details, please visit www.ishanshivanand.com*

Worthy of note here that this was only done in the case of directing potential customers to companies' websites for further information on the product and other products. Furthermore, majority of the imperatives were at the onset of the sentence, with very few exceptions. Some sentences contained more than one imperative, such as the following,

(2) *Buy gold jewelry worth AED 500 and get 1 raffle coupon to win gold prizes*
while the rare exception had imperatives functioning as complete clauses, such as the following:

(3) *Educate. Empower. Evolve.*

The example above is very clearly using imperatives for dramatic effect, and it may certainly work as shorter, bolder sentences tend to capture readers' attention more than lengthier alternatives. There was also one instance where the imperative followed the hashtag symbol, a highly widespread social media trend of today:

(4) *#ComeDiscover Nordic Designs*

Moreover, both magazines contained a staggeringly large number of suggestions as compared to requests, with 87.18% of the Friday magazine and 81.48% of the Weekend magazine imperative tokens functioning as advice. This finding constitutes for an important observation, and strongly supports Viskari's (2008) remarks that advertisers aim to get the addressees to think of the statement as benefitting themselves rather than the sellers (p.23).

The omission of softening devices amplifies this effect to a great extent: it, in a way, tricks the reader into believing that his/her interest is being cared for by the advertiser.

The use of the token 'please' changes the suggestion into a request, and in one of the only two instances it is found in this study, is used to solicit the reader's response, further strengthening the idea that advertisers manipulate its use as and when needed.

Types of Imperatives

The Pennock-Speck and Fuster-Marquez model (2014) that was utilized for discourse analysis showed interesting results, with most of the imperative tokens functioning as experiencers - 38.46% and 51.45% for the Friday and Weekend magazine respectively. This observation, while unexpected compared to results of past research, may provide some insight into the internal monologue of the marketing team - they try to make the most of the limited space allowed to them in traditional written publications. Thus, the purchasing of the product is presupposed, and the advertiser skips to the next stage of consumption – explaining how beneficial the product is for the buyer. The following sentence is an apt example of this concept:

(5) Rejuvenate your body and mind together!

The aforementioned slogan is from a yoga and wellness center and supported by the clear visual of a woman at peace doing yoga, as well as the bold font used, this text would potentially be able to, without any magniloquence, entice the reader into paying for a membership.

At this point, the results of the two magazines begin to diverge, with the second most prominent kind of imperative in the Friday magazine being the acquisition of product (33.33% of the total imperatives), whereas the weekend magazine showed the use of acquisition of product on par with the contact group imperatives (18.52% each). The use of the imperatives like 'subscribe' hint towards an approach that is less aggressive and more inclusive of the reader's opinion and free will. On the other hand, the use of verbs like 'call' or 'visit' which come under contact group imperatives seek to encourage the reader to learn more about the business to increase chances of their interest (Zjakic et al., 2017).

These results are quite dissimilar from previous studies conducted by Zjakic and colleagues (2017), in that the most prevalent form of imperative was the attention focuser (around 31%), which appeared in little to none ads in the current study (p. 19). This is an extremely important observation to differentiate in the rhetoric between traditional and modern sources of advertising – the former do not attempt to catch the reader's attention, rather their efforts are fixated towards appealing to the addressee's emotions, to get them to experience what it

would be like to possess the product. The latter kind, however, such as the Zjakic (2017) study, which concentrated on gym advertisements of Facebook, seem to have a different agenda. Their principal goal is to seize the reader's attention, and considering Facebook is such a dynamic profile, with multiple things happening at the same time that catch the user's attention, this explanation is quite plausible. Moreover, contact group imperatives, which constituted a significant portion of imperative tokens in this current study (15.38 and 18.52%) was the least frequent kind in the gym study, and this could be explained by the fact that Facebook is an interactive platform with various ways of contacting the advertiser directly, thus contact group imperatives are trivial and unnecessary here.

Survey Analysis

As mentioned before, a survey (see appendix) was conducted to supplement the theoretical analysis and provide a more solid footing for the data obtained through it. Thirty-eight responses were collected, all of them being students from the American University of Sharjah. When asked, 92.1% of the respondents certified that they were aware of activewear company Nike's slogan, 'Just Do it', and majority of them admitted they thought it was quite catchy. Compared to this, leading competitor Adidas' slogan 'Impossible is Nothing' was recognized by only 7.9% of the respondents, along with 13.2% who said they might know of it but were uncertain. Furthermore, when asked (see Fig. 1) which of the two previously mentioned slogans they were more likely to remember, 94.7% of the participants chose Nike's slogan. These statistics have important implications for the effect that imperatives have on memorability, especially considering this fact in conjunction with the fact that majority of the people (18.9% of them) believe that the two slogans are poles apart when it comes to the message they are trying to convey. This factor is interesting, in that when one really thinks about it, both slogans are trying to convince the reader to go ahead and take charge of their goals, because nothing is unachievable. However, because the use of language is so distinctive in both, readers tend to think their messages are distinctive too. This could also be because imperatives tend to be very direct and assertive in a way and don't beat around the bush, making their effect much more apparent than when they are not used.

What about this slogan makes it catchy in your opinion ?

38 responses

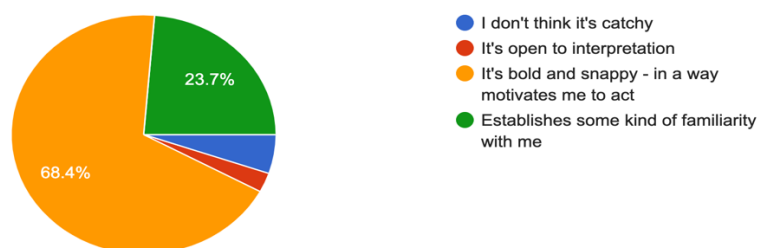


Figure 1 – Responses to Question 4 of the Survey.

When asked why this slogan was so catchy, 68.4% of participants responded saying that the boldness of the slogan incited a certain drive into them and motivated them to act. The second most frequent response was that the wordings were able to generate closeness and familiarity with the reader. Both of these responses suggest that imperatives are useful because they act as stimulants and are also a way to bond with the reader.

On the other hand, when inquired as to the meaning of the slogan, 50% of respondents believed (Fig. 2) the Nike slogan to be giving them a direct command to do something – which is a common misconception that imperatives are exclusively used to give orders, as mentioned in the beginning of this paper.

10

Which of the following do you think the slogan is doing ?

38 responses

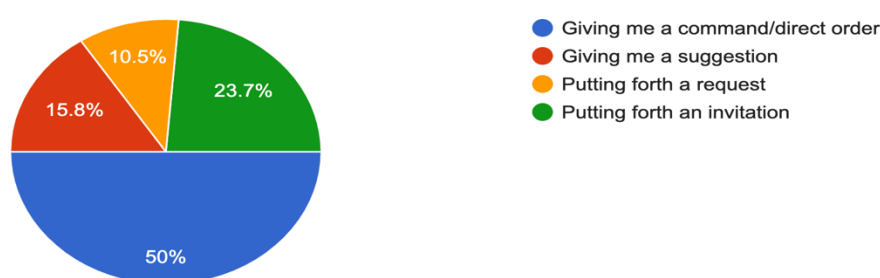


Figure 2 - Responses to Question 5 of the Survey.

As discussed, however, this is not always the case. The second most recorded response is that of the imperative acting as a suggestion, which can be used to support the theory that an increased number of people are starting to perceive imperatives differently, as well as the fact that the perlocutionary effect really does differ amongst people.

The results for both the primary and supplementary research constituted important findings about the contextual use of imperatives and the effect they have on potential customers' ability to remember the slogans. Austin's Speech Act Theory (1962) does play an important role here, because as can be found in the survey, the perlocutionary effect of imperatives on people is not always the same, and thus imperatives in ads cannot be labelled as rude or impolite. Additionally, some ads, such as the ad for Emirates NBD, may use their higher status as a way to use the imperative form without any hesitation. Others, like Nike, however, try to cultivate a personal relationship with the consumer and convince them of the product or service as being more advantageous to themselves rather than the seller, thus the sellers are then given free reign over the use of the imperative, because the risk of them sounding discourteous is diminished. Finally, because of the assured anonymity that advertisers are handed in all the aforementioned examples, the risk of partaking in face threatening acts is greatly subsided, and thus advertisers need not worry about offending the readers.

Conclusion

This study combined data from past research as well as more recent data to generate research that both supported and contradicted literature entries, and for good reason. It was able to find that the quintessential form of the imperative in magazine ads was the affirmative form of the experiencer, without the addition of any mitigating articles, in contrast to other forms of advertising which seemed to prefer the attention-focuser. Additionally, this study was able to use actual responses from the general public to ascertain the effect imperatives truly have in the advertising industry, and it was found that individuals are partial to bold and snappy slogans, and that the use of the imperative form might proliferate chances of the slogan being remembered. Finally, this study was able to ascertain the perception of imperatives amongst people, and found that it might be changing, albeit slowly, into a broader and more inclusive class that can be defined as more than just commands.

However, due to time constraints and other limitations, the sample sizes used here were not ideal, in that they could be larger and enlist more responses around the globe, especially since the advertising industry has evolved into a colossal multi-faceted empire that has quite an impact on the sales industry. Research may benefit from delving deeper into imperatives, their use and their connection to the Speech Act theory, along with Brown and Levinson's Politeness theory (1976), because looking at this phenomenon from a wider lens may prove to have deep-rooted inferences for the linguistic characteristics of the advertisement and internal monologue of the advertiser. Hence a more detailed and inclusive study should be conducted to solidify the results found in this current study.

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Appendix 1

Friday Magazine:

Text 1: Omega Dubai Desert Classic

Text 2: Daiso Japan

Text 3: Emirates NBD

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Text 4: Home centre

Text 5: Jaguar

Text 6: Malabar

Text 7: Global Village

Text 8: Jashanmal

Text 9: Birkenstock

Text 10: LC Well

Text 11: Danube Home

Text 12: Etihad Guest

Text 13: Emirates NBD

Text 14: Nine West

Weekend Magazine

Text 1: Britannia

Text 2: Emirates

Text 3: British Orchard Nursery

Text 4: Deep Healing Through Mindfulness with Ishan Shivanand

Text 5: Pure Gold

Text 6: Dodge

Text 7: Baskin Robbins

Text 8: Jeep

Text 9: SNAP Fitness

Appendix 2

Complete survey questions along with collective responses

Have you heard of the slogan ' Just Do It' by Nike ?

38 responses

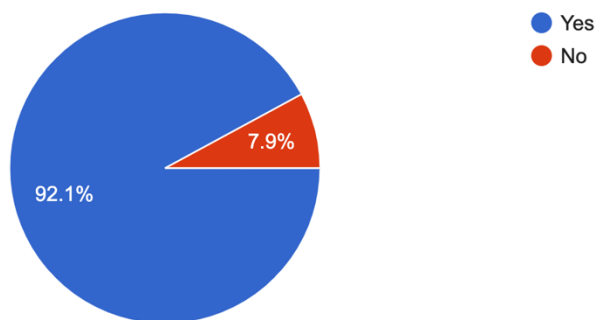


Figure 3 - Response to Question 1 of Survey

On a scale of 1-10, how catchy would you say this slogan is ?

38 responses

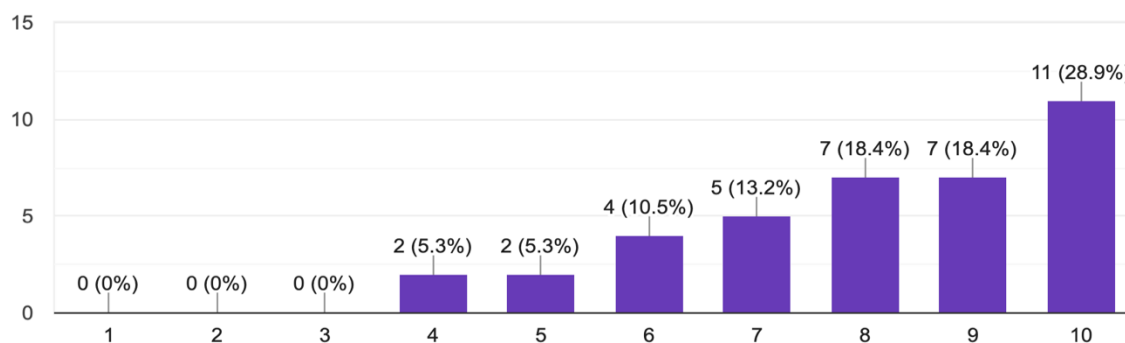


Figure 4 - Response to Question 2 of Survey

What about this slogan makes it catchy in your opinion ?

38 responses

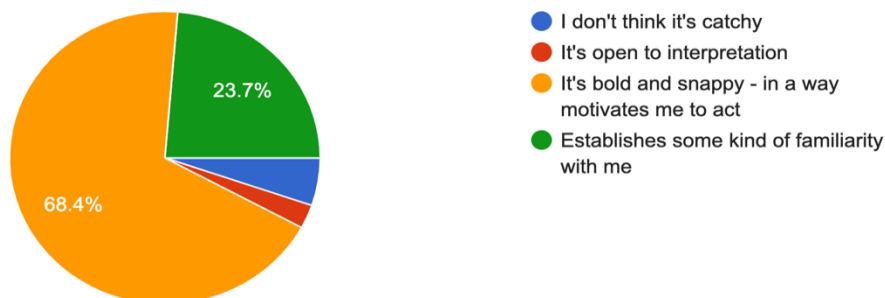


Figure 5 - Response to Question 3 of Survey

Which of the following do you think the slogan is doing ?

38 responses

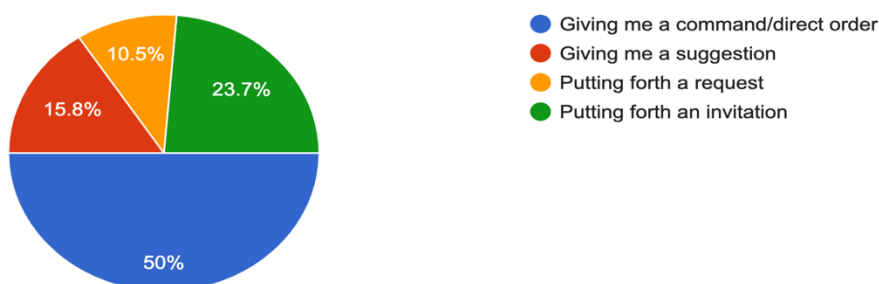


Figure 6 - Response to Question 4 of Survey

How different do you think the previous slogan is from the slogan 'Impossible is Nothing', in terms of the message it's trying to send ?

37 responses

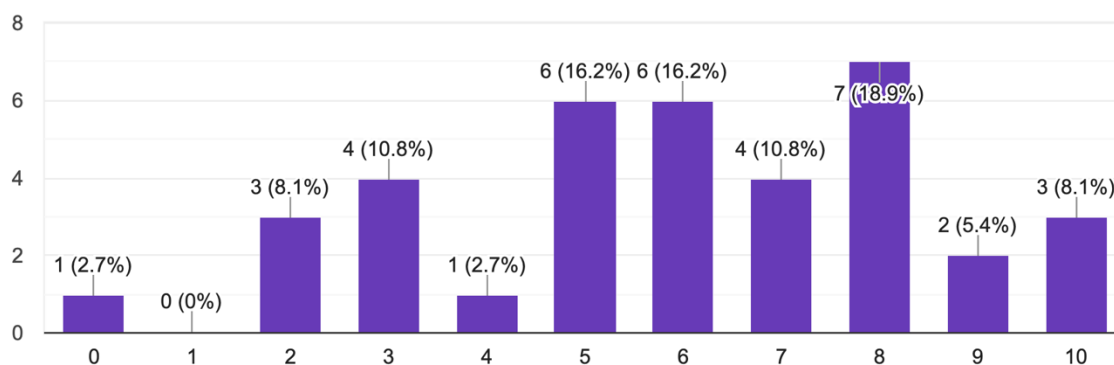


Figure 7 - Response to Question 5 of Survey

Do you recognise the slogan 'Impossible is nothing' ?

38 responses

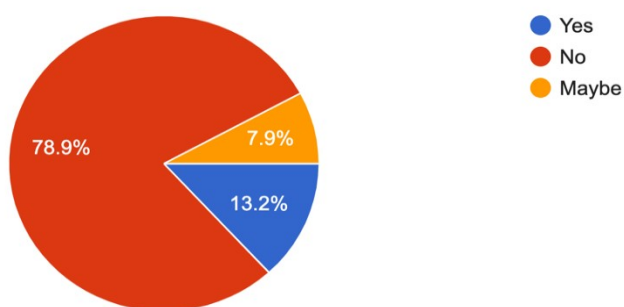


Figure 8 - Response to Question 6 of Survey

Out of the 2 slogans, which one do you think you are more likely to remember (when considering only the s...mpany or products involved with it) ?

38 responses

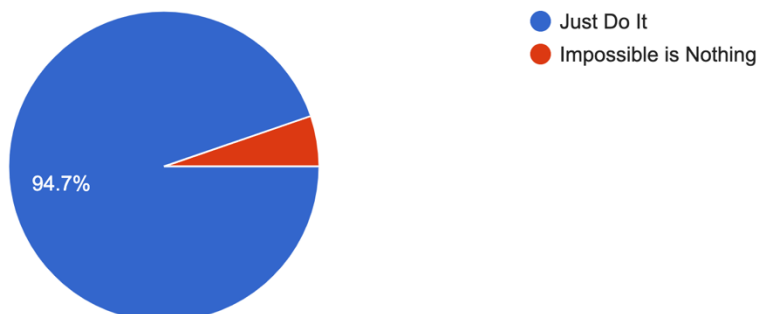


Figure 9 - Response to Question 7 of Survey

Which of the following slogans are you more likely to remember ?

38 responses

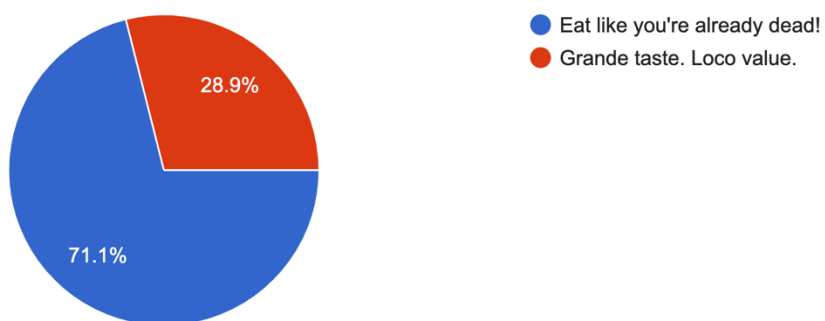


Figure 10 - Response to Question 8 of Survey