A recent edition of a British marketing magazine headlined an editorial: ‘Let’s cut out the jargon to get more of us on board’ and highlighted the fact that ‘our community’ could lose out in dealings with other business sectors due to the ‘language difference’. Put another way, it was making the point that if standards are being drawn up by government or international bodies to establish levels of competency, everyone involved needs to be compliant irrespective of language.

There are some terms that we use on an everyday basis, that become part of our makeup. After all, we all know so and so who loves to warble on about the intrinsics and extrinsics of the brands in his portfolio, and those who confuse strategy and tactics, and those who eternally seek the nirvana of ‘the big idea,’ hopefully with enough legs to turn a centipede green with envy.

There is nothing worse than talking about a subject and, after a period of time, hopefully not too long, realising that your interpretation of the topic being discussed is different from others in the meeting. Fact is that most words or terms can, and usually do, have more than one interpretation, and as we work increasingly in different geographies, with varying cultures, religions and sometimes languages, it is crucial to ensure a common understanding is achieved and maintained. Recently, I was involved as an expert witness where a
particular marketing term and its interpretation were the main point of argument. Problem being that the term had one meaning largely in the USA, and another in Europe and aligned countries. This is not a problem confined to marketing. In the world of accountancy, the main hurdle to creating one global system remains insurmountable. The International Accounting Standards Committee (IASC) and the UK’s Accounting Standards Board, the US’s Accounting Standards Board and the International Valuation Standards Committee are not aligned, and whilst there are Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) and GAAP (generally accepted accounting principles) all efforts to create one system, something that has gone on for a considerable time, have broken down. One size does not fit all, although many areas today are aligned. However, with increasing globalisation, companies do need to ensure consistency of marketing and financial terminology, interpretation, systems, analysis and measurement.

Delving into various dictionaries one soon gets an understanding of what essence is about: all that makes a thing what it is; an indispensable quality or element; the permanent as opposed to the accidental element of being; the individual, real, or ultimate nature of a thing; something that exists. Now that we have cleared that up, I decided to take further advice from The Penguin Dictionary of Marketing, but drew a blank. Perhaps it is an American term the Brits are uncomfortable with? Certainly, go to the US academics and authors David Aaker, Eric Joachimsthaler and Kevin Lane Keller and you can feast on their writings about brand essence. But then I pulled out Interbrand’s: The Brand Glossary, and we were in business for a concise definition. Essence is: ‘a collection of intangible attributes and benefits, the core characteristics that define and differentiate a brand. The easiest way to understand essence is to describe what defines a person, and what separates him or her from anyone else’.

It is fascinating to see how various professions, even companies, develop their own jargon and language, which soon creates a barrier to entry to those from the other side. On one occasion working with some very clever people from the De Beers research and development team, we had to continually interrupt asking for a translation of the terminology being used. Watching and listening to current business programmes is increasingly challenging, as one reflects on the differences of EBITA and EBITDA, the FTSE versus the CAC or the Dow. So why should the worlds of marketing, branding, advertising and design be any different?

You could describe brand essence as the DNA of a brand, its heart and soul, and you would be getting close to the bullseye. But listen to some of my colleagues; Chuck Brymer, former head of Interbrand and today global CEO of DDB reminds us that: “it can be called a number of things, but essentially is the tangible and the intangible elements of the brand”; whilst Juergen Hausler who chairs our Swiss, German and eastern European offices, puts it this way: “an attractive, differentiating and (internally) motivating brand essence (the idea behind the brand) is absolutely necessary to create and develop a strong brand – but is not sufficient. Customers ultimately judge brand by the experiences they have with the brand (that hopefully reflects the essence), but also by the idea that is behind the brand.” Chairman of our London office, Rita Clifton suggests a brand essence be two words or a short phrase at most – something that can be used in a sentence by the CEO in a simple answer to the question; “so what does brand xxx stand for?”

This is important, just as we are defining what the brand essence is, it is equally important to explain what it is not. It is not a brand promise, a brand idea, a tagline, a signature, a pay off line or whatever. But experience shows that sometimes a brand essence is so liked that it is adopted as the sign off. Statements like mission statements, visions and values must all support the essence.

Those of us who have worked on brand strategies understand that word smithing is a crucial part of the process. Nike is about Authentic Athletic Performance and this is the constant. Taglines may come and go, new stories need to be told, all marketing needs to stay true to the essence, but ‘Just Do It’, does it for me.

Interbrand’s Jeremy Sampson is happy to swab your brand’s DNA.