



# This Sentence Has 5ive Words

Eigen Values, Creating Truisms and the Future of Marketing



Stephen Denny

# This Sentence Has Five Words:

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### **“This sentence has five words.”**

This is obvious, isn't it? It's not something we need to debate. Saying, “This sentence has five words,” is self-defining. **It's a truism – something correct and unarguable.**

Now, if I were to say, “This sentence has lots and lots of words and syllables,” I might be right and I might be wrong. It depends on what you happen to think is “a lot.” **It's subjective, subject to debate and very arguable.**

Our first sentence – “This sentence has five words” – is an **Eigen Value**: a self-referencing, self-defining concept. The thing itself – and each of its outputs – is its own definition.

Our second, subjective sentence is not an Eigen Value. It isn't self-defining and frankly lacks meaning to anyone but its author. This is an important distinction, because the casual reader of this sentence frankly doesn't care one way or another about the message or the messenger.

The idea of Eigen Values comes from the vast body of work attributed to cybernetician Heinz von Foerster. His work, and the work of others in this field, has influenced the disciplines of philosophy, psychology, architecture, mathematics, cryptography and art.

Why is this concept important to your idea, your brand or your movement? Because creating Eigen Values is what marketers do when they're doing their very best work.

The concept of Eigen Values should change how you look at the marketing discipline completely.

# Viewing the Marketing Discipline Through the Lens of Eigen Values

**The best branding and marketing work we do is so evocative and specific to our essential brand attributes that it is self-defining.**

The output – the actual work itself – is synonymous with the brand itself. It is as much an Eigen Value as “This sentence has five words.”

And when we do so-so work, it ends up looking like our “lots and lots” sentence above. In one ear and out the other.

We don’t have time for “in one ear and out the other.” Our time, resources and budgets are stretched too thin to begin with. **We need every bullet to count.**

We can’t rely on chance to work in our favor. Our customers are bored, distracted and ambivalent about what we have to say.

We might hit the exact target at the perfect moment and still not get the sale because of factors outside our control. **People are busy and we are not their biggest problems.** We need to be sure that whenever we interact with a prospective customer that each and every touch point builds upon the others that we’ve put out in the marketplace.

# Web experience and TaxLifeboat.com

TaxLifeboat.com does for tax delinquency what Turbo Tax did for tax preparation. They streamlined a very complex and frightening period of anyone's life into an easy, plain English way of knowing your options and getting your problem solved.

Think of all the companies you've ever seen that offer this sort of service. What comes to mind? Rows of law books, dark interiors, and people you wouldn't lend your watch to for a minute.

TaxLifeboat.com's website is white. It's light. Each photograph on the website shows

natural light and was shot in the morning – a new day, dawn, new beginnings, the end of darkness and the long night of stress and fear. People are content – they're happy but not "stock photo jack-assing" for the camera. It's how you want to be when you're in trouble. It's the after picture and a metaphor that delivers the message.

Even the company name is evocative. It's a lifeboat. Not a hand out, a law firm or tax mill.

TaxLifeboat.com's website and user experience is an Eigen Value.



Relationships are built over time, brick by brick, interaction by interaction. If we come across to our customer base like five different brands, we need to work five times as hard to earn their trust. Why would we make it so hard on ourselves?

**The idea of Eigen Values needs to be the lens through which you judge everything your customers see, touch and experience.**

Your brand should be defined in every consumer touch point, from how your customer service representatives answer the phone to your out-of-box experience to your website to your business cards.

This goes far beyond mere consistency.

An Eigen Value suggests that everything you do has an identical genetic make-up to your brand. **Each touch point, each "moment of power," should be as unique as your fingerprint** and unutterable by anyone other than you.

# Shifting Perspective: It's About Them, Not Us.

**Marketing is the sum total of everything that your company is and does – according to your customer.**

That's the best definition of marketing I've come across and it's the one I try to impress upon others.

It means that it isn't about all the things we assume are our jobs. It's about what our customers experience. Big difference here.

When you define "marketing" as a group of separate and cleanly defined tasks – press releases, web design, channel marketing programs, packaging – there are going to be gaps between what you think you're responsible for and what our customers organically experience.

These in-between spaces are where customers experience our brand at our worst.

If we think marketing is about advertising and PR, we'll focus our attention on these two things. If customers spend the vast majority of their lifetime interaction with our brand on hold calling customer service or dealing with our impossible to open clamshell packages, they'll only remember those things. We'll think we're doing a great job. They'll know we're lousy.

Remember, people are busy. They don't care about your stuff. More often than not, your entire brand is only visible to the average consumer on those rare occasions that they need you and is only remarkable to them if and when it fails.

This is why the idea of an Eigen Value is so powerful and why this perspective is missing in so many brands today. **This is why you need to approach the idea of brand strategy and implementation with a different lens.**



## Promotional pricing at Jet Blue

"We love doing things that customers would say, 'I can't imagine anyone doing this except for Jet Blue,'" JetBlue CMO Marty St. George told me.

Understand that once a plane takes off, that empty seat is worthless. The cheapest marketing tool JetBlue has is an empty seat. And sampling an airline that vows to "bring humanity back to air travel" is something the company is proud to do.

JetBlue's answer to empty seats and sampling their greater humanity is to capture the imaginations of air travelers with fares that are as unique as the brand itself.

Like \$31 one-way fares on Halloween. Or the company's "All You Can Jet" pass for \$599. "We really want to be innovative. We want people to see us coming out of left field."

JetBlue's innovative pricing strategy is an Eigen Value.



# A Theory of Constraints.

**Oddly, the first task at hand in deciding who you are is deciding what you're not.**

So in deciding what we are and what we aren't, let's begin by giving ourselves a problem to solve. **Start with your constraints.**

Work with me on a quick mental exercise to try this idea out. We're going to design a product together: we'll pick a child's car seat. We'll work through three thinking exercises to get you going.

First, take out a pen and write down how you are going to re-imagine the car seat. Whenever you've got something, just raise your hand. If you're like most people, you're going to look at me with a mix of confusion and bewilderment for a few moments and then end up doodling for a few more. It's hard to just "re-imagine" something out of thin air. If you find this exercise difficult, you won't be alone.

Let's try this again. Take out a pen and write down how you are going to re-imagine the car seat. One more thing: you've got exactly ten seconds. Starting now. Again, if you're like most people, you jumped a few inches out of your seat when I said "now." But at the end of ten seconds, you probably wrote three things down. And the three things were better than the doodles you did above. **We introduced a constraint: the constraint of time.** You had to make decisions, and you did.

## Product development at Vibram

How do you present yourself as a brand of preference – to both your OEM customers who use your products as components in theirs, as well as your end users to whom you sell finished goods – when you sell shoe soles? You produce a shoe sole so revolutionary, so dramatic, that you create your own category.

Only Vibram could have launched the Five Fingers athletic shoe. It wouldn't have made sense for anyone else to claim this ground and it would have been counterproductive for a major shoe brand to claim it.

You can't launch a barefoot shoe for running when you've spent decades preaching the benefits of built-up padded running shoes to your public. But you can when you're known the world over for soles.

The Vibram Five Fingers shoe is a shoe sole held on to your foot by the most minimalist of outer enclosures. A sole you wear on your foot.

Vibram's Five Fingers athletic shoe is an Eigen Value of product development.

Last chance. Take out your pen and write down how you are going to re-imagine the car seat. One more thing, again: design this new car seat for older parents with bad backs. I probably didn't even have to say, "go!" You were off and running. You had ideas, one after the other. The seat can swivel 90 degrees, it can run on a rail across the back seat so that it's easy to put the child in at the door, it's got a proprietary clip to make installing and uninstalling easy, and so on and so forth. The constraint introduced here is easy: you're designing for a very specific person – it might even be you – **and the problems you're looking to solve are very vivid.**

The bigger difference between the constraint of time and that of your archetypal person is **that you had to see things from their perspective, not yours.**

## Creating Separation

**Deciding who you're not is often an exercise in defining who others are first so you can compare yourself to them.**

This doesn't have to be a mud-slinging session. It frankly benefits from giving your competitors and alternatives the benefit of the doubt. But deciding who you are and who they are is often the first and easiest task to ultimately understand the meaningful gaps between you and them.

Deep metaphors help shine a light on these in-between spaces. Knowing you're a lifeboat but not a ladder, a security camera but not a helmet cam, an offensive line but not a quarterback, or that your brand is the embodiment of the Greek goddess Cassandra is powerful. It gives you the context around which you can mold your choices when it comes to creating customer facing language. It helps fill in the "in-between" spaces.

And rigorously creating space between you and your competitors and alternatives helps ensure that the

positioning statement you end up with is **utterly and completely unique to you and an unthinkable statement coming from anyone else.**

Don't think this happens in a day's casual workshop. It happens alone, together, and in small groups at various times. It requires careful nurturing to bring out the best people have as well as the harsh criticism of the group when it's decision time.

**Feelings get hurt, but only temporarily.**

**You end up with great work this way.**

**You have to make hard choices.** But by decisively choosing what is "in" and what is "out," our constraints help us define ourselves clearly.

## Hiring and Culture at Method

How does a San Francisco start-up competing against some of the world's largest conglomerates in the detergent world keep its culture intact?

Method likes to hire people who come recommended by current employees. This goes further than just trying to save money on recruiters. It's a cultural tether.

Interviews at Method are done in groups. The interviewee – sponsored by a current team member – presents three ideas to a cross functional group: one strategic, one functional and one on “how to keep Method weird.”

What does this mean? It means that the company gets new blood running through its system that is more likely to be culturally compatible. Not only does the current employee think twice about referring a loose connection, but the group dynamic helps everyone understand what the company values.

- The ability to get along with others.
- Functional and generalist chops.
- An off-beat personality.
- The desire to stay weird.

Method's hiring process is an Eigen Value.



# Creating Eigen Cultures

**Creating a diamond hard branding strategy is the necessary first step. But creating an Eigen Value brand means every output of your brand must be more than just “aligned” – it must be self-defining.**

This goes beyond logos and tag lines, as you can imagine. Every customer touch point, every “moment of power” where customers experience significant turning points in their relationship with your brand is now cast as synonymous to – and as identical to – our branding strategy.

**Ask yourself these three questions as you review the next customer-facing output:**

- Does this way of doing things define our brand – specifically and uniquely?
- Could this only come from us?
- Would our customer know this was our work if we purposefully hid our name from them?

Now, bring the rest of the organization into the discussion. When we solicit their thinking on applying our now diamond-hard core of branding, we see how an Eigen Value becomes an Eigen Culture.





## Our references become self-defining. We start looking and acting like who we are.

- Hands-free means you should be able to interact with your brand without looking. You are tactile and voice activated.
- Being visual means color and field of vision, 130 degrees from side to side. If you deliver a visual experience or enhance a customer's life through a visual medium, you can't be narrowly focused.
- When you preach an immersive experience, you present yourself as an immersive experience – edge to edge, not with a thumbnail.
- When your focus is on letting your client's superstars perform, you don't hog the spotlight. You showcase your professionalism with efficient and crisp delivery.
- When you're about helping people who are scared, you don't compound the fear. You show them the right end results with the subtleties of the right metaphors to help them emotionally grasp your value: sunlight, morning, calmness and relief.

Why does this level of detail matter? Isn't it enough to be great at what you do?

**No.**

**Great brands create great experiences and the experience is cumulative.** It builds over time. Not everything can be devolved into a bag of chips on a clip strip. Relationships with brands take time to build.

**Each touch point, each "moment of power" builds upon the last.** People are busy and they'll ignore you if they can and forget you as quickly as possible because other stuff is coming in, fast and furious. Consistency is important because we're psychologically wired to expect consistency and we're dissatisfied when we don't get it.

So our job is to create an experience that goes beyond consistency. We create experiences that are self-defining.

# First Steps

Define your brand, decide who you are and who you're not, create meaningful separation and then ask yourself at each moment of power, **"Is this as unique to us as our fingerprint? Could this only come from us?"**

A simple sentence that belies the complexity and time necessary to grind your strategic problems down into gem-like insights, but one that hopefully leads you to take that first step.

It can seem daunting, so let's pause for a moment. Let's not take that first step thinking we're embarking on the first of an endless series of task force meetings and re-work, because if we did, we'd never start. Instead, let's **consider the idea of creating Eigen Values in our respective companies as a lens through which you can refine and re-launch the important customer-facing elements that make up everything they think about you.**

Regardless of the first step you choose to take – and there are an infinite number available to you – keep the mantra close at hand.

This sentence has five words.

This sentence has eight syllables.

An orange is orange.

**Creating Eigen Values is what we do when we're doing our best work.**



# About the Author

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Stephen Denny is a twenty year veteran of connecting brands to the wants & needs of technology users, having managed the people, strategy and budgets at brand name technology companies like Sony, Onstar, Iomega and Plantronics. He has deep experience in both B2B and B2C marketing and has been recognized as a highly creative, “out of the box” strategist.

He has lived and worked in the US and Japan, holds several patents, has lectured at top graduate schools and industry forums, and has an MBA from the Wharton School. Denny is a frequent contributing editor to The Daily Fix and Marketing Profs, and authors the marketing blog, StephenDenny.com.

His book, Killing Giants: 10 Strategies to Topple the Goliath in Your Industry, will be published in March, 2011, by the Portfolio imprint of Penguin Books.

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