

THE BLEND



PURPOSE-BUILT FOR SUCCESS BY GERARD TANNAM

My Mind Is Running Back

I don't have a lot of time for taglines. Of course, the best of them capture something of what's on offer to the customer in a catchy and memorable way and can help bring a brand to life. I even have a few favourites of my own: 'Time Dedicated To You', 'Let Your Fingers Do The Walking' and 'And All Because The Lady Loves...' amongst others. And I do sometimes find myself wondering how those crafty biscuit-makers get the figs into the fig-rolls.

But too often, it seems to me that a tagline sounds hollow or contrived, a slick formula designed to nail the customer and deliver the readymade sale. You'll have gathered from this that I'm not a great fan of the elevator pitch either, much-loved though it is by sales gurus and others who design the playbooks for those eager to learn by rote the steps to the customer's heart. Now, I've heard the arguments for the efficiency of the slick formula, but, to be honest, they leave me a little cold. I'm not convinced that the search for a tagline doesn't distract from the business of looking out for the customer. To my ears, most of them seem to be more concerned with making self-serving claims or boastful promises than they are with taking care of customer needs and wants. The search for a tagline usually makes for a poor starting-point in the relationship with the customer (although I'll concede that it occasionally makes for a powerful summing-up). If it's to be more than just empty words, it must be based on

something a lot more substantial than a well-crafted slogan or catchphrase.

When In Far Off Lands I Roam

Recently, I found myself struggling for words to describe a visit to the newly-developed Doonbeg Golf Club on the west coast of Clare. After a long and sometimes difficult journey in the rain and darkness of an Irish winter's evening (which reaches long into that part of the day that people elsewhere are pleased to call afternoon) and on the assault course that we're not quite so pleased to call our secondary roads, we limped towards the lights of the great country house that stands at the heart of the development. It's fair to say that the people of Doonbeg didn't find us in the best of temper but equally fair to acknowledge that we couldn't say the same of them.

Maybe I'm more a product of my upbringing that I like to admit, but I'm inclined to feel like an intruder when I approach any of the great houses that now offer public lodging in the new economy. But as we stepped out of the cold and the wet into the reception hall of Doonbeg, we were greeted like old friends and invited to take a seat by the fire whilst someone was called to show us to our rooms.

In my experience, taglines in the hospitality industry usually propose something along the lines of a 'home from home'. Now that's much easier to say than to achieve. In fact, I wonder

whether the copywriters have any idea just how difficult it is. The same strange surroundings and unfamiliar faces that make the notion of a break so attractive in the first place, work equally hard to make the visitor feel anything but at home. Throw in the well meant but poorly-directed service on offer in so many places and the home-from-home claim seems even more clumsily made.

Not so at Doonbeg. Here, we were received with a rare warmth and immediacy into an environment that was clearly designed with us in mind. I'm not suggesting for a moment that everyone arrives with the same misgivings about entitlement as I did, but there is something in all of us that hesitates briefly at the threshold of someone else's place and wonders whether we're welcome there. Those misgivings were swept away in the certainty of our greeting. We were made most welcome and freed up immediately to settle in and enjoy our time there.

I'll Think Of You Again

Later, as I sought the words to 'tagline' my own experience for friends, I determined to find out more about how the makers of Doonbeg had managed to design the place with me in mind. First, I spoke with John Haley, Master Architect for Doonbeg. Much has been made of Doonbeg's distinctive style, which borrows from the architecture of many of the great houses that distinguish the Irish countryside. I'm no judge of architectural



About The Blend

Purpose-Built For Success is one of a series of articles in which Gerard takes a look at how to cook up a great brand, samples some of the ingredients you'll need to make one of your own and weighs up the impact of branding on different parts of the business mix.

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features so was much more interested to hear what John was looking for when he made his pilgrimage around the island to study the various country house examples. John talked of how he had observed that the usual practice at those country houses that were still family homes was for the people of the house to enter it from the back rather than through the grand entrance at the front. In my experience, this practice isn't confined to the great country houses. It's not uncommon in farmhouses too, where the front door is used only when the newly-weds enter for the first time and for other formal events such as weddings, funerals and pattern masses. Everyday comings and goings are made through the farmyard door at the back of the house.

John took his lead from this and designed the Lodge (the main building at Doonbeg) to front onto the ocean and the golf-course, freeing up the back of the house to serve as reception area for guests. A similar approach was taken to designing the layout of the rooms and connecting areas within the house itself. John described how he needed, "something powerful but not overpowering, iconic but not overwhelming, an elegant country house that was exposed and isolated in its setting but was homely at the same time."

Even more telling was John's recognition that "the service would be more important than the space" and his determination to design a place that would put people first. There was, he confesses, "a huge struggle to fit everything in." He reckons that he designed Doonbeg three times, each time getting closer to his ideal of a place where "you can

enjoy the camaraderie of family and friends in a building that has a sense of proportion, where the view out the window is not as important as the feeling of being at home." When you see the extraordinary views from the Lodge, you realise that this is no ordinary ambition, and that it's no accident that the sense of homecoming is so strong for visitors to Doonbeg.

It's There That I Sat Down

Next, I talked with Joe Russell, General Manager at Doonbeg from the time when the golf club (which opened some time before the lodgings) operated from a small, converted cottage on the site. Like John, Joe recalls building with a great sense of purpose. Inspired by an invitation from the owners of the development to craft a place where a truly local hospitality might be matched by US-style service, Joe set out to translate something of the immediacy of those early days onto the grander stage.

He stresses how important it was for him to take the lead in demonstrating the levels of service and attention that were required. In contrast with the stuffiness that often marks out the organization and management of a golf club, Joe and his team greeted one another and guests by first name and determined to create an environment where the whole family (and not just the golf-playing member) was welcome.

Again, the emphasis was to be on putting people at their ease. This was reflected in the simplest of ways. Rather than establishing a standard greeting or response to everyday

exchanges, as you often find in the 'good-mornings' and 'have-a-nice-days' of other places, Doonbeg invited each of its team-members to say 'hello' or 'thanks' in their own style. The effect of this is immediate and echoes John's sense of keeping things in proportion. For guests, there's no sense that the pleasantries are forced or contrived; whilst for staff, there's the freedom to get involved with guests and colleagues in a more natural and down-to-earth way.

I See You Everywhere

John and Joe's account of how they tackled the challenge of building an intimate and friendly place in the grand and dramatic surroundings of Doonbeg confirms my own belief that the savvy brand-owner sets out from the beginning with a very clear sense of what's to be achieved. As they've shown, it's just as important that the aims of the organisation are described in the very personal terms of the relationship between the business and its customer.

I saw no evidence of a tagline during my time at Doonbeg, but as I leafed through a magazine recently, I came across an advertisement for the development that talked of a place where 'luxury feels at home'. That's not bad as taglines go, but it's good to know that its makers spent time getting the welcome right before attempting to put words on the experience. Far too often, it's the other way around.

To check out if you'd feel as at home as I did, visit: www.DoonbegGolfClub.com