

# THE BLEND



## About The Blend

Guests Of The Nation is part 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.

Gerard is Owner Manager of Islandbridge, a business that delivers brand direction, planning and communications across a wide range of sectors including hospitality and tourism. Recent clients include The Smile Conference, MagicTouch Partners, Temple Country Retreat & Spa, Action Recruitment, Quality Hotels (Ireland) and The Hole In The Wall Pub.

For regular updates on branding or to tell your own brand story, please get in touch with Gerard on +353 1 495 3330 or visit [www.islandbridge.com](http://www.islandbridge.com)



## GUESTS OF THE NATION BY GERARD TANNAM

### Hello Stranger

As I write, Irish hospitality and tourism basks in the afterglow of a Ryder Cup encounter that has been rightly hailed as a great triumph for its hosts on every front. After years of priming and making ready, the K Club venue sashayed out for her series of big days with a gleam in her eye, ready to make a match that was, thanks to the efforts of consummate matchmaker Michael Smurfit (who watched as proudly as the father of any blushing bride), made in golfing heaven.

The bride's family too played their part. Whether it was on the fairways, where the home crowd offered a welcome that prompted defeated captain Tom Lehman to graciously salute this Ryder Cup as the best yet, or in the hospitality suites where they were wined and dined with charm and generosity, visitors toasted the hospitality of their hosts, and most left with plans to return as quickly as they can.

I said a triumph on every front but that's not completely true. A closer study of the wedding party shows a few less-than-happy faces in the crowd. In the giddy aftermath, it's easy to forget that amongst the tales of legendary Irish hospitality, there are stories too of opportunism and over-pricing. There are guests who have returned to their homes having enjoyed the rather colder shoulder of our welcome.

These stories are not confined to rogue hoteliers, restaurateurs and transporters. Nor are they told only of the greedy homeowners eager to make a quick buck at the expense of a needy or gullible guest. These are the stories of an industry that is occasionally in two minds as to how it should treat its guests.

### Put Your Loving Hand In Mine

In two minds! Is he out of his mind? Before a chorus of indignant voices drowns me out, let me explain what I mean. But first, let's take a look at the notion of hospitality from the standpoint of our guest.

As a guest, I am tirelessly courted from the moment I offer myself as a potential visitor. This courtship is typically conducted in the most glowing of terms. I am sweet-talked with the promise of warm hospitality, elegant surroundings, plush seats and feather-soft beds. Sales and marketing falls over itself in its eagerness to please. Soon, I am lulled into a sense that I am to be welcomed by a host who has only my comfort, my pleasure and my interests at heart. Dear reader, I yield gladly.

But often, upon waking in the cold light of day, I discover some rather unpalatable truths about my ardent suitor. Whilst I lay sleeping, he offered my room to another guest at a greatly reduced rate. Over breakfast, I hear of a savvy visitor who booked through a third-party site and enjoyed my sweet-talking host's

finest by way of an even sweeter deal. As I stand in line to settle my account, I learn that my constancy over many visits has been rewarded with top-of-the-range room rates, whilst a one-night stand who collected coupons at a supermarket has availed of a promotional special.

All at once, I feel naïve, gullible, taken for a ride. Didn't he tell me I was special? Were all those fine words for nothing? Should I have seen through the charade and demanded my own special deal from a host who clearly had interests other than mine at heart?

This is what I meant by being in two minds. I chose to avoid the more obvious 'two-faced' out of some sense of sympathy for my readers. But this is sometimes how our guests experience our welcome. Far too often, we offer hospitality on a nod and a wink or a 'first-up, best-dressed' basis.

### When Your Troubles Are Like Mine

And, of course, there is fall-out. You sometimes hear hoteliers and restaurateurs bemoan the fact that there is little loyalty to be found amongst visitors. But is it any wonder that a public that believes its host to be expedient around pricing looks around for a better deal elsewhere? Loyalty cuts two ways. There is little point in expecting our guests to offer allegiance to our brand if we are disloyal in return.

Mind you, a quick look at other industries suggests that the whole issue of loyalty is being undermined across the board. The busy mother-of-three, laden down with her weekly shopping, stands patiently in line at the regular checkout whilst the casual shopper nips in for a bottle of wine and a paper and breezes through the express lane. Which of the two customers is more loyal? Which deserves to be whisked through to the cashier and given special treatment? In the same way, credit card companies woo new accounts with cut-price rates whilst longstanding cardholders suffer high interest reward. Is it any wonder that cardholders are promiscuous?

But ours is not just any industry. This is an industry that rightly prides itself on its sense of hospitality. Why then does it wheel and deal and follow practices that undermine that essential core value?

### When You Haven't Got A Dime

In part, I believe it is because too few of us give any serious thought as to what lies at the heart of the invitation to our guests. True, we extend the offer to 'make yourself at home' and work hard to provide for their comfort but we rarely look any further and ask what attitude and behaviour is properly expected of the perfect host. Too often we see hospitality in terms of what's being paid for rather than as a duty of care that must guide both our attitude and behaviour.

Recently, I received a call from the sales and marketing director of a large hotel, which was located some distance from my office. She

explained that the business was having serious difficulty in making any lasting impression on its market and invited me to visit her to discuss the issue in more detail. Some days later, I arrived at the hotel and was told that my host was running late for our appointment. I was asked to wait and took a seat in the lobby, where I sat patiently for over half an hour with no sign of my busy host. Nobody updated me on her whereabouts. Nobody came to offer me refreshment. Finally, I left the hotel frustrated and angry at the waste of my time and the poverty of my welcome.

There was no real expertise required to tell my host the source of the serious difficulty she had described. Had she sat in the lobby of her hotel rather than busying herself in meetings, she might have seen that her own guest was not made welcome, was denied even the basic gestures of hospitality.

Hospitality is a habit as much as anything else and her hotel had abandoned this vital custom because I was not seen as a guest. You could argue that at the time of my visit I was not a guest in the true sense of the word (by which you probably mean paying guest), but a savvy host would recognise that even within this narrow meaning there was a possibility that this accidental guest, if offered the courtesy and encouragement of a welcome, might return another time willing and able to pay for the privilege.

### And You're A Friend Of Mine

For this reason, I suggest that each of us must revisit the habits of our business, both in

terms of what we say and what we do, and consider what type of hospitality we offer to our guest.

Given the chance, do we use the bewildering range of channels by which our guests might find us to pull the wool over their eyes on rates? Or, in the true spirit of hospitality, do we carry through on our duty of care and honestly look out for what's best for our guests?

Do we treat each visitor to our hotel or restaurant as a 'mystery guest' and extend the welcoming hand of the good host? The storybooks of the world are filled with descriptions of how our goodwill and loyalty are tested by the king or nobleman who appears in the unpromising guise of the stranger (or 'the least of my children' in at least one text) and is either made welcome or sent packing.

Judging from the stories emerging from Ireland's Ryder Cup, it is apparent that most of us chose the first way and there is ample evidence to suggest that it was not the weight of his purse alone that determined how we treated the stranger at our door. But before we tee off for a round of slaps on the back for a job well done, we cannot afford to ignore the more difficult-to-swallow truth that more than a few of us are in two minds when it comes to our guests.

We cannot afford to be so compromised. The great host is single-minded in his care for his guest and we must follow his lead and treat each visitor to our door with the same honesty and regard.