

THE BLEND



About The Blend

Don't Stop Me Now 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 Temple Country Retreat & Spa, Action Recruitment, The Westport Woods Hotel, MagicTouch Partners, The Tourism Research Centre at DIT and The Smile Conference.

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BY CHOICE HOTELS

DON'T STOP ME NOW! BY GERARD TANNAM (I'M HAVING SUCH A GOOD TIME)

Whew! It's been quite a ride!

You're Ireland's fastest-growing chain of hotels, with properties in prime locations across the country and an ambitious, hardworking and dynamic team of developers and operators on board. You've got energy to burn, and a huge enthusiasm for the job at hand. You're tearing up the rulebook as you go; designing new properties and delivering service that defy easy classification.

The past seven years have passed in something of a blur. You're tempted to keep your eyes firmly fixed on what's ahead, but something tells you to check your instruments and see where you've been as well as where you're going.

Now, you're getting mixed messages. You're an international brand but your offering here in Ireland is very different from what's to be had elsewhere (for 'very different', read much better); you have a name, Quality, that's taken in vain by pretty much every other accommodation offer in Ireland ("yes", you find yourself saying, "but ours is real quality"); your customers seem to come for the prices and stay for the service (now where have we heard that before?); they're loyal but even they seem to be confused about exactly what it is you stand for and do best.

Add to that the general mystification surrounding Ireland's star-crossed accommodation ratings

system, which you've blithely ignored in your own rush towards excellence, and the picture becomes even more blurred.

It seems you're sending out mixed signals. So what do you do? Hope for the best? Keep your head down and just keep on going?

Instead, following a particularly hectic summer of 2005, the team at Quality Hotels Ireland decided to take stock, work out what they do well and why that makes sense for their customers, pin down their position in the market, and set their course to shoot beyond the stars.

There's No Stopping Me

First stop was to consider the brand. Or perhaps 'stop' isn't quite the right word, for a chain of busy hotels doesn't have the luxury of grinding to a halt to spend a week in the workshop. Instead, the team paused briefly for a pit stop to take us on board. Our approach to brand-building uses storytelling as a tool of enquiry and delivery and, at Quality, the stories weren't long in coming.

It was exhilarating. There was a real buzz to our first meeting with the team and I have rarely met with such enthusiasm. They literally crackled with energy as they described their experience of taking the brand from a standing start to the success it is today.

What became apparent was that this was a team that was intent on delivering its own particular brand of hospitality. First, there was the commitment to smart design that was evident in the way that they had cleverly made the most of their development budgets to produce cheerfully stylish and well-equipped hotels that belied the modest room and service rates.

But beyond that, there was a real loyalty to people, both to guests and to colleagues. This was borne out in the stories they told. Guests wrote to say how they had been wowed by the little touches that made all the difference: the easy friendliness of the staff, the decent-sized mug rather than the precious tea-cup in the rooms and the practical and comfortable duvets rather than the awkward sheet and counterpane on the beds. There was the story of the hotel manager who had more than halved his own office in order to create a permanent training area for his staff and of another who had come to the rescue of a famished guest by nipping down to the local chipper for a takeaway after the kitchen closed.

What struck us most was how this was a group that seemed to genuinely like its customers and take pleasure in their company. They had their own take on hospitality which was in marked contrast to much of the often stuffy, anxious and busy-at-the-expense-of-the-guest varieties on offer elsewhere.

We suggested a brand model that positioned Quality Ireland as the young pretender, who has been groomed to take over the family business but abdicates in order to follow his true love. He has the know-how and professional grounding in the business but wants to move beyond that to make his own mark. He has a strong sense of the here and now, of seizing the moment and makes us feel special by inviting us to share in the pleasure he takes in looking after us. This is the same instinct we have seen at work in some of the exciting new chefs and winemakers currently rewriting tradition and breathing new life into what they love.

This positioning matched with Quality's own sense of the enthusiasm and ambition they have for their business and with the feedback they have from their customers. The team adopted it with gusto and set about putting it to work in their operations and communications.

I'm Having A Ball

Next stop was Bloom, the creative agency that was tasked with translating this brand position into an advertising campaign. Bloom's Robert Coyle described the challenge in looking for that "something extra that lifts what your client does above the ordinary and separates them from the competition". Armed with the brand-positioning brief, the creative team visited a selection of Quality Hotels and was struck by how the claims of genuine affection were borne out in the behaviour of the hotel staff and in the little details that make all the difference to a visit.

Robert suggested that Quality reminded them of the "open house, the friend's place where you met up before heading out for the evening. You know the kind of place, always smells of coffee and something good and quick to eat, with the lights on downstairs and filled with people, music and talk. Nothing was too much trouble for Quality Hotels, you truly were welcomed in."

Bloom is inclined to taglines that are colloquial and immediate and knew they had found one for Quality when someone from the team remarked, "the thing about Quality Hotels is that they're big on the little things."

"We're big on the little things" has become the basis for an advertising campaign that celebrates the little details – the practical drinks mug, the comfortable duvet, the complimentary broadband – and uses them to communicate how Quality Hotels seems to get the big picture, small picture balance just right. In a market where all the talk is of facilities and service, it enables Quality to speak with a distinctive voice about a different type of hotel.

Then it was over to Host PR, where Tim Magee was keen to determine if Quality could live up to the brand promise before spreading the word. As Tim put it, "the media is used to being sold grand-sounding ideas that turn out to have little substance to them. We hear of hotel staff whose traditional welcome veers from the blasé to the uninterested. None of the Quality Hotel experiences where we stayed was perfect but the response from their people always was. 'We're big on the little things' was backed up in everything we

saw and we're confident in going to our media colleagues with a story that really stands up."

Finally, Adrian Sherry, Sales & Marketing Director at Quality Hotels, had this to say of the brand's makeover, "Although a very challenging process, ultimately it proved timely and very rewarding. It helped to give an already dynamic and energised team a sense of identity and common purpose. What's more, it helped us to gather together an excellent group of like-minded specialists to communicate our message to our market.

This process was like a trip to the barber's. You're always too busy for it, but when you eventually make the time to go, you look much better and wonder why you left it for so long."

Burning Through The Sky...

Then it was all systems go. Armed with a light-hearted presentation, the base brand team embarked on a whistle-stop tour to tell over 400 colleagues in eight Quality hotels across the country what they'd been up to and to introduce the new tagline and offer a sneak preview of radio and TV advertising.

Their enthusiasm continues to be infectious. The team is now working hard to live up to the brand promise in their existing hotels whilst planning for the development of others. It's hospitality, Jim, but not as we know it! Thanks to their taking stock, they now have a clearer sense of what works for them and their customers and can continue their journey beyond the stars, confident in their quest to take Irish hospitality into a new dimension.