

THE BLEND



About The Blend

Filling The Space 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, The Westport Woods Hotel and The Hole In The Wall Pub.

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FILLING THE SPACE BY GERARD TANNAM

Waiting In The Wings
Last time out in The Blend, I wrote of the space that lies between a business and its customers and of the importance of stepping in there and taking charge. Given that a stage actor deals with a similar sense of space, I also suggested that the business owner might look to the world of theatre for a lead in taking that step.

During my own years of event management, I often saw the raw power of the performer at work (whether as singer or musician, master of ceremonies or play actor) and the hold he or she had over the audience. I saw how the actor filled the space, using a combination of voice, gesture and movement, to create a world and invite the audience to share it. By and large, this happened in a spirit of diversion or entertainment and didn't immediately suggest to me any application beyond that.

Learning The Lines

My own appreciation for the power of this approach in business came some years later, when a client came to me and suggested that he would like to employ a group of actors to help him tackle some divisions between his sales, installation and administration staff. He and his managers had tried various other approaches, including the traditional methods of training, had talked the issues to death without success and he was at the end of his tether. He had recalled the somewhat dated, but still powerful, series of training videos

made by the comic actor John Cleese and wondered whether there wasn't something in this approach that might work.

You may have seen these videos? From memory, they featured Cleese hamming it up for the camera to demonstrate the difference between the wrong and the right way to approach typical issues such as customer service, staff interviews and conflict resolution. They were powerful largely because they moved us beyond talking about ideas in the abstract and brought them to life for us instead.

My client wished to commission his own short play, which he planned to stage at his company's annual conference. We began to explore the idea further and decided that it would be even more powerful if we drew our actors from within the company itself and brought a theatre director to work with them in plotting the play, writing the script and rehearsing it.

The outcome was extraordinary. After some initial misgivings, the three actors selected to play the parts of sales, installation and administration staff took to their roles with gusto and brought the house down at their conference. Each of the three strutted about and boasted of the importance of their role for the business, going so far as to suggest that, "without me, the others are nothing". They played for laughs, of course, and were duly rewarded, but the play-acting also allowed the audience to experience for themselves how it

felt to be on the receiving end of poor attitude and selfish behaviour. They talked excitedly about what they had seen and heard, and my client reported an instant and lasting change in the way in which people in the three divisions saw and dealt with each other.

This was an eye-opener for me. I had seen before the ability of the actor to entertain and charm an audience; now, I saw a power to bring to life the relationships between the different parts of a business. It was a short step to wondering how this might apply to the rest of a business, and in particular, the relationship between a business and its customers. Which is, of course, where we came in just now.

Enter Theatre-Learning Stage Left

So how does such an approach work when applied in the world of hospitality? I spoke recently to Annette Tierney of Jikijela, the theatre-based learning company, and her clients Philip Lee and Sinead Larkin, General Manager and Human Resources Manager respectively of The Clarion Hotel in Sligo. The three have worked together on a programme aimed at bringing the hotel staff both into the space between the various departments in the business and into the space between the business and its customers.

Philip takes up the story: "Traditionally, hotels are run on a departmental basis and, if I'm OK, I'm not really worried whether you are or not. We wanted to create an atmosphere of collective responsibility. We were looking at

ways of creating a forum for thinking that wasn't conditioned or stereotyped, particularly in a competitive market where we had to look at operating in different ways to our competitors."

For Sinead, it didn't stop there: "From a customer's perspective, we felt that the only way to build a better experience for the customer was to make everyone responsible for the customer experience whilst they were in the hotel."

As Annette puts it, the three set out to design a day that would offer an experience to the team that would be, "more than a manual simply telling people what to do and how to do it." Instead, they designed a series of dramatic experiences aimed at inviting the team to step out of their own shoes and into those of their colleagues and customers.

Treading The Boards

First, they decided to hold the training day in the local Hawkswell Theatre. The staff traveled from the hotel, somewhat wary that they were to be subjected to the mix of team-building games and wooden role-play exercises that make up much of a traditional training day. The plainly theatrical space suggested that this day would be a little different; or perhaps a lot different. What followed was a range of scripted and improvised pieces, some involving the team as audience, some as critics and some as players, all of them aimed at breaking down the barriers that stop us stepping into the space.

Philip has his own take on why this works as well as it does: "Theatre-based training is

different. All of the senses are used, including the sense of space. Normal training allows you to keep the barriers up. This training breaks down the barriers and takes the blinkers off."

Sinead believes it goes even further: "With drama, everybody is equal. Management can sometimes become a paper trail and when you bring drama to it, you can involve the team much more easily than standing up and reading out of a book."

Annette finds that it is also about the way in which issues are experienced and lessons learned. She suggests that, "Because it's more light-hearted, it gets people out of themselves in a way that traditional training often doesn't. It's not light and frothy but it is fun. They feel better about themselves. When they see an episode played out and acknowledge what isn't working and how it might be improved, they recognise their own part in similar episodes without experiencing it as a heavy-handed reprimand."

She describes the atmosphere as having 'an element of reminiscing' that makes the lesson more memorable and allows participants to refer back to it afterwards as something experienced together rather than heard from the mouth of a remote speaker or read from lecture notes.

Dramatic Impact

And what is the lasting effect of such training? Philip and Sinead list a whole range. High on the list is the improved levels of communication: "people from other departments are now talking with one another and working together in a way that they hadn't before."

This has had a direct impact on the customer experience: "Previously, a guest with an enquiry would often be sent to another department, whereas now the staff-member takes direct responsibility to find a solution and make it happen. There's less tension too between the departments and, of course, the guest picks up on it."

Philip believes this is only natural: "We will only treat our customer with respect if we treat each other with respect. It's not a question of just going through the motions."

They were also surprised at how individual members of the team stepped into their roles, both on the day and afterwards: "Some people, who we hadn't expected to do well, really shone. We saw an apparent introvert grow more confident and extrovert, whilst others who we thought would take it in their stride didn't make the step up." They described how it made it much clearer to everyone what was required to play their role in the business and who was up for it (and who wasn't).

Noises Off

It is perhaps surprising that an approach, which invites us to enter a world of make-believe, has the effect of somehow making the world in we operate more real. But not only does it make it more real, it also makes it more memorable and ensures that what we learn there stays with us and enables us to step with greater confidence into the vital space that lies between us and our customers.

For more on Jikijela's particular brand of make-believe, step into their space at www.jikijela.com