

THE BLEND

The Brand As Story

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WHEN WORDS FAIL US

Recently in The Blend, we have sifted through the various ingredients required to create a powerful brand and sampled a number of those ingredients in order to determine what part they play in the overall mix. Last time out, we considered how key values and features combined to deliver distinctive positioning and competitive advantage to a number of airline brands.

Now I'd like to take a brief look at what a former colleague of mine intriguingly calls 'the fat word issue'. Whether we consider categories as diverse as cars, soft drinks, fashion, mobile phones or hospitality, one thing is certain: the 'fat word issue' must be successfully addressed by the brand owner if the brand is to demonstrate the essential differences between it and its competitors in the category.

THE FAT WORDS ISSUE

In business, when we are challenged to describe a point of difference in our communications, we typically resort to words. We point to characteristics such as speedy, friendly, sexy and innovative and hope to persuade our audience of the unique nature of our particular offering. However, words very often fail us. The difficulty with words is that they can mean pretty much anything to anybody without a context. Whilst the speaker might mean one thing, the listeners, depending on their perspective, hear another.

Take for example a word like 'mother'. In the baby-care category, the term very neatly demonstrates the fat words issue. Despite appearances, the word 'mother' is a surprisingly complex one. On first consideration, it appears to be a very simple and effective way to assert values within a category such as baby-care where mothering is clearly central. None of us has any difficulty grasping the concept of 'mother', each of us knows at least one and we intuitively understand what a mother is. So far, so simple. If we wish to assert our values in the baby-care world, we only have to invoke the mothering

aspects of our brand and we are almost there. However, it's not quite as easy as that.

You might like to try this amongst a group of friends or colleagues: ask each in turn to say what the word 'mother' means to them. You will be surprised by the wide range of answers you will receive, particularly if the group contains a mix of ages and experience. A number of responses are likely to include terms such as nurturing, loving, warm and caring. But there will most likely be a number of unexpected contributions. For one young man about to leave home for college, the notion of 'mother' throws up images of meddling and restriction. For another, a young teenage girl, 'mother' means disagreement and angry exchanges ("you're not going out dressed like that"). For yet another teenage girl, it might mean confidante and 'best friend'. The differences will be most marked between any mothers in the group and the non-mothers. Even amongst the mothers you are likely to find a startling range of reactions. For the young mother, the word is likely to conjure up a whole range of positive and warm emotions. For the mother of teenagers, the responses you are more likely to hear include responsibility, hard work and worry.

The word mother is a fat word. It can mean many things to different people. The difficulties that this poses for any business that chooses to flatly describe itself as a mothering brand, are obvious. The brand is offering hostages to fortune and is likely to find confusion, even disagreement, in the marketplace as to what exactly it stands for.

SAMPLE OUR UNIQUE HOSPITALITY

The hospitality world has to contend with its own fat words. Open any tourist guidebook or take a quick glance at the personal ads in any newspaper. You will see words such as unique, luxurious, welcoming, well appointed and stylish. These are grossly overweight words. They mean nothing or next to nothing to the

reader. They are words that have been used and overused to such an extent that they have grown flabby and useless. They litter the advertisements, the websites and the brochures of hotels and restaurants throughout the industry and they communicate nothing that will convince the reader that this particular hotel or that restaurant offers something that is truly different from its competitors.

This lazy use of fat words is not confined simply to hotels and restaurants that have nothing distinctive to offer. The last ten years has seen a huge investment in terms of both the quality and choice of what is on offer in the world of hospitality. Many new hotels and restaurants have been carefully specified and built to the highest standards. Yet a great many of these fail to match this commitment and attention to detail in what they say about themselves when they speak



to their audience. If a property hopes to carve out a strong position for itself in the marketplace, it must commit to a similar level (in some instances, greater!) of planning and hard work as it determines just how it will be different from its many competitors.

In the case of the smaller business that is unable to commit the same resources to property development and promotion, the use of lazy language consigns the hotel or restaurant to slugging it out with competitors who very often have greater staying power and deeper pockets. The onus on all businesses, big and small, is to avoid the fat words in their communications and instead find a leaner language that offers a clear sense of what they uniquely propose to their market.

THE POWER OF STORY

Like many things in business, this is a lot easier said than done. It is next to impossible to simply pluck this leaner language out of thin air and apply it to a particular business. I mentioned earlier that one of the principle difficulties with fat words is that they grow fatter and more unwieldy when they are offered out of context. In order to slim them down, they must be put in context. The simplest and most powerful way in which to put words in context is to place them in a narrative or story.

A word which is offered in the context of a story is much more likely to carry impact and meaning than one that is required to stand alone. I do not necessarily mean a 'once upon a time' story (although stories of origin often do contain powerful pointers as to what makes one business different from another). The story is just as likely to be the sort that is told amongst friends in the pub or at a family gathering or after a particularly dramatic sports match.

For example, the fat word 'mother' is much more likely to have a clear sense of meaning when it is used in the exchange of anecdotes and reminiscences that follow the death of a mother at her funeral. In these stories, we gain a sharp understanding of just what made this particular mother different to others from the ways in which she mothered

her own children. Children, nieces and nephews and neighbours will offer their own recollections of the mother's life. This informal narrative puts a word such as mother or friend or mentor into sharp relief and allows us to use the word in a way that actually carries some meaning.

In smaller communities, we often get a sense of what distinguishes a man from the way in which he acquits himself in battle (or in its nearest contemporary equivalent in the average town, the local football or hurling match). The modern businessman is almost as likely to be required to prove his worth on the golf course as he is in the boardroom.

In a similar way, we must put words such as luxury, traditional and welcoming into context. In our everyday exchanges we readily use narrative and story, analogy and metaphor to sharpen our meaning and this is a habit we must learn too when we come to communicate the distinctions in our own businesses. If we can weave the details of our own business experience into a compelling narrative, we stand a much greater chance of engaging with the customer and developing a long-term relationship.

TELLING THE BRAND STORY

Next time out in The Blend, I will explore some of the ways in which the brand story can be told, including through the use of design, imagery, gesture and language. I will do so with particular reference to the narratives that can effectively link both what we say about our businesses and how we deliver on that promise. This is likely to be of particular interest to the smaller business as it offers a route to business development that removes us from the toe-to-toe battles that distinguish much of the current price and facilities-led competition for the customer and allows us to make an appeal to our audience that is truly different.

ABOUT THE BLEND

The Brand As Story is part of a regular series of articles in which Gerard takes a look at how to cook up a great brand, samples some of the ingredients that you'll need to make one of your own and weighs up the impact of branding on different parts of the business mix including marketing, PR, recruitment and training.

Gerard is Strategic Director at Creative Inputs, an Irish branding and design agency that works with businesses across a wide range of sectors including hospitality and tourism. Recent clients include the McEniff Hotel Group (for which Gerard developed the get!together! & go!kids! brands), Platinum Hotels, The Westport Woods Hotel, The K Club, The Mullingar Park Hotel, The Arbutus Hotel, The HSMIA, Smile, The National Library and IMMA.

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