

THE BLEND



WHEN GREAT BRANDS COME IN SMALL PACKAGES

BY GERARD TANNAM

The Difficult Choice

There is a nameless but familiar fear that lurks in our hearts when we come to consider whether to brand our business or not. It is the same fear that stalks us when we are called to join the ranks of any group in uniform. In this bad dream, we offer up our solitary career in exchange for strength in numbers and trade the free rein we've enjoyed until then for a lifetime in harness. In this place, the faceless ranks toe the line and carry out their ordained roles by rote with little elbowroom or space to stretch their legs.

At one time, branding was seen as the preserve of the multinational or very large company but more and more, the smaller enterprise sees the role that a strong brand can play in establishing and defending competitive advantage and moves to consider branding its own product or service.

But as it does so, the only choice seems to be between the individual condition and the collective state and that nameless dread can contrive to make the small business step back nervously from the brink and decide to take its chances on its own.

Think Big, Act Small

When I met with Brian Fahy and the team at Action Recruitment to discuss the development of their brand, this unspoken fear seemed to be

lurking. This was a business that took a personal approach, celebrated the individual and, in Brian's own words, believed that you must "cherish your weirdos". It was no surprise then that this business-team, which prided itself on its personal touch, feared that it might lose its sense of self in the branding process.

As is often the case, my first task was to tackle and allay this fear and suggest that our branding route might seek to steer a course between the special traits and idiosyncrasies of the individual, and the collective strength in numbers of the many. In this Action Recruitment would not be alone. Whilst many of the household names that are global brands do take a uniform, cookie-cutting approach to their business, there are a small number that celebrate the individual whilst delivering success to their owners. On the one hand, think McDonald's, IBM and Coca Cola while on the other, brands such as Starbucks, Apple and Ben & Jerry's.

At the same time, we did not want to fall into the trap of looking only to global brands for a lead. In some ways, this would be a little like looking to celebrity for tips on how to conduct our personal lives. The approach that we would take would owe less to the cult of personality and more to the strength of relationship that Action already enjoyed with its customers. And so we looked to those

relationships and asked what it is that the people at Action do best and how we might play to their strengths in building a brand for the business.

Sizing Up Action

In meeting with the Action team, we heard not only how they celebrated the individual, but also how they approached the whole tangled world of recruitment. In apparent contrast with many of their competitors, Action saw the business of hiring as a deeply personal one, not just for themselves, but also for the client companies and candidates looking for a fit.

And not just any fit, but the right one. Action did not see the point in simply making up the numbers, in putting forward candidates who bore token resemblance to what was required by the client. Instead, they spoke of their commitment to making the right match, to teasing out the detail of the role to be filled and the job to be done and making sure that their own preferred candidate had all that was needed and more to make a success of it.

And again unlike many of their rivals, Action looked closely at the match from both sides and made sure that the prospective employer was the right one for the candidate (for a disgruntled employee can quickly become an ex-employee or, even worse, a disruptive and stubborn one).



About The Blend

When Great Brands Come In Small Packages 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



When Size Matters

We heard what Action had to say about themselves but what did their own customers have to say about them? When we came to meet with the client companies and candidates that Action had placed, we learned that Brian and his team had, if anything, understated the value that their customers placed on their role of honest broker.

Clients and candidates alike talked of Action's independent spirit, and of their perception and resourcefulness in bringing people together. They marveled at the extraordinary breadth of contacts and connections that Action maintained across the world (particularly amongst the Irish hospitality diaspora).

They spoke of their personal touch and of their ability to inspire both great trust and goodwill in those they worked for and with. We heard of a certain old-world courtesy and charm and of how Action's 'honesty to a fault' stood out in a world that was often self-serving or expedient. Some clients talked fondly of the Action team as a touch romantic, inclined to see the best in people, but nevertheless shrewd judges of character. All acknowledged the effectiveness of an Action Recruitment match and their ability to get to grips with an assignment and source the right kind of people.

Small Is The New Big

As we met with partners on both sides of the match and heard their stories, we found it difficult to ignore the echoes of other matchmakers in other places and different times. When people spoke of the calculation

and world-weariness of many of the recruiters vying for their business, we were reminded of a time when courtly or romantic love began to win out over the political matches and arranged marriages of a jaded society. Whilst starry-eyed employers and employees are a rarity and few job placements are for life, we nevertheless heard people talk about the essential spark that must be felt by both partners if the arrangement is to work.

In particular, we were struck by how many of the modern tests and programmes designed to crunch their way through resumes and vital statistics to deliver the ideal combination failed to account for the even more vital human chemistry that is at the heart of the perfect match. We were reminded above all that matchmaking or recruitment in the hospitality industries is a deeply personal business and that the agency that loses touch with its people and its personal networks is in danger of losing touch with the business itself and simply going through the motions.

In many ways, we saw how the challenge of keeping it personal in recruitment mirrors that same branding challenge that Brian and his team had at the outset. Just as the matchmaker must reconcile the claims of the individual and the collective, the personal and the professional, so the brand-builder must work to strike a balance between the particular and the universal. In their resolute defence of the personal, in their refusal to allow theirs to become a faceless business, Action Recruitment had intuitively tapped

into one of the essential components of the successful match.

Perhaps unwittingly, they had also anticipated what influential thinker Seth Godin wrote recently when he considered how a smart company might behave in the sprawling but joined-up age of the worldwide web. As Seth puts it: "Big used to matter. Big meant economies of scale. There was a good reason for this. Value was added in ways that big organizations were good at. And then small happened. Small means the founder makes a far greater percentage of the customer interactions. Small means the founder is close to the decisions that matter and can make them, quick. A small firm is succeeding because they're good, not because they're big."

The challenge then for Action Recruitment is not to be global in the traditional sense of the world but to extend their reach through their personal network, to keep using their smallness as competitive advantage. They must insist that the profiling and other analysing and organising tools at their disposal do not smooth over their own distinctive way of doing business. As matchmakers, they must continue to keep it both professional and personal, which will enable them to occupy a valued place in the heart of both the clients and the candidates with whom they do business.

To see for yourself how the Action Recruitment brand matches up, visit www.ActionRecruitment.ie