

THE BLEND



About The Blend

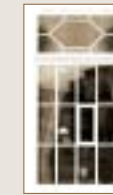
Bringing It All Back Home is part of a series of articles in which Gerard takes a look at how to cook up a great brand, samples some of the ingredients you'll need to make one of your own and weighs up the impact of branding on different parts of the business mix.

Gerard recently established his own company, Islandbridge, which delivers brand direction, planning and communications across a wide range of sectors including hospitality and tourism. Recent clients include Platinum Hotels, Liberty Limousines, The Westport Woods Hotel, HSMAL, The Smile Conference and the School of Hospitality Management & Tourism at DIT.

Gerard would like to hear your brand story and can be reached at gerard@islandbridge.com

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Arbutus Hotel Killarney

Design & layout
by Creative Inputs.

BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

BY GERARD TANNAM

What's The Story?

Every great business has a great story to tell. The task of every business owner is to find a compelling story and tell it.

In the last issue of The Blend, I described how we crafted a story for the new Liberty Limousine brand. In part, that story is a remarkable one because its owners chose to base it on some powerful values. As authors of a new business, they had a blank page on which to write a blueprint for where they would position the business, and how they would behave and communicate.

This time out, I will tell the story of a long-established business that faced another kind of choice. Like any business with over seventy years of history under its belt, the challenge for the owners of Killarney's Arbutus Hotel was not so much in finding a story to tell. Instead, they had the task of sifting through a lifetime's worth of stories and choosing the one that would best take them forward.

There Ever...

When I met with Killarney hotelier Sean Buckley at a holiday fair in early 2003, he was in something of a quandary. He knew that his hotel, The Arbutus, offered luxurious accommodation, great food and a warm welcome. But most of his competitors were claiming the same and, at times, he felt overwhelmed in the face of newer and bigger hotels with deeper pockets to fit out their properties and to sell their wares.

Sean was intrigued by my suggestion that every great business must find a compelling story to tell and invited me to visit him and his wife Carol in Killarney to talk more.

In my experience, very few business owners travel to meet you on your arrival by rail or by air. More often than not, the salesman is left to cool his heels in reception whilst his prospective client busies himself with more important matters. When Sean greeted me at Farnfore Airport with a heartfelt 'Welcome to the Kingdom!', and led me to his own car to complete the remaining twenty minute journey to Killarney, I suspected I might be in new territory.

A Killarney Original

Later, as I sat with Sean and Carol and heard their stories of the hotel and its guests; the little courtesies and attention to detail, Norrie's marvellous home cooking, the visitors who returned again and again, the intricate celtic deco carvings that adorned the hotel entrances and stairways, one extraordinary person and his story began to emerge. I asked them to tell me more.

The half-remembered details of a life begun over a century before came back. How Sean's grandfather, Tim, had been the last in a family of five boys, growing up on a farm on the border between Cork and Kerry. How he had stood in the market square in Killarney, remarking on the fine hotel that stood on the corner of College Street and vowing that he would return one day to own it. Like thousands before him and since, he took the boat to New York. But unlike most,

Tim Buckley returned after fourteen years to make good his promise. During those years in New York, he had worked as a night porter and a hackney cab driver, experiences that would stand to him in his future career.

That wasn't all. Before returning to Ireland, he had made a match with the remarkable Julia Daly, who spent the year before he arrived back in Ireland at the Ramsgrange Cookery School in Wexford learning the skills that would make the Arbutus promise of a warm welcome and world class hospitality a reality.

This was a story worth telling, one that vied for drama and spirit with those told in the small hours in the music and song of the hotel's Buckley's Bar. And, just as importantly, this was a unique story that would enable Sean and his team to speak with a distinctive voice in a crowded marketplace.

Bringing It All Back Home

Whilst the story of Tim 'The Boss' Buckley offered exciting possibilities in terms of going to market, this was not simply a historical account to be taken down and dusted off to delight visitors. The real power of his story lies in its resonance with the Arbutus of today. It suggests that his grandson Sean's appearance at the Arrivals Hall in Farnfore that day was no accident. It speaks of the hotel's distinctive character and its deeply personal brand of hospitality in a world of increasingly anonymous places to stay.

From a strategic point of view, the challenge for Sean and Carol was to identify the values that powered the story of his grandfather and the hotel that he built, and to choose them for their own business. They could then begin to tell the story for themselves and for a new generation of visitors. The design team at Creative Inputs were tasked to create a visual identity for the hotel that would 'reflect a hotel of unmistakable character, which delivers its own distinctive brand of hospitality' and echo its essential values of care, assurance, tradition and intelligence.

The character of the Boss also shaped thinking in terms of the audience that the hotel would now address. Sean knew from his own experience that the hotel was at its best when it welcomed the discerning traveller, "one who knows his own mind", rather than the busload of touring visitors, stopping at one well located and suitably priced hotel after another. His grandfather had demonstrated similar confidence in the hotel many years before when he would take passengers arriving off the passenger liners at Cobh for lunch to what was then the finest large hotel in the province, Cork's Metropole Hotel, before completing the journey to his own hotel in Killarney.

Sean determined that his primary audience would be 'the independent-minded traveller, who seeks a definitive Killarney experience and the travel guide who prides himself on the quality of his portfolio and the success of his recommendations'. He knew that if he could tell his story in an engaging way to this audience he stood a much higher chance of success than before.

The Little Book

This brought the team to the hotel brochure. Again, the story of the Boss was hugely

influential. Tim Buckley had been a central figure in the town of Killarney during its development as a significant visitor centre. He is credited with developing some of the first package holidays in Ireland and, at his death in 1984, was referred to by senior figures in the industry as a 'father of Irish tourism'. During his life, his hotel stood large in the Killarney townscape and his own belief in the quality of what he had to offer was unshakeable.

This was a story worth telling, one that would enable the hotel to speak with a distinctive voice in a crowded marketplace.

This, combined with the discovery after his death that this apparently stern and unsentimental man had carried, in a little notebook close to his heart, the names and birthdates of each of his children and grandchildren, inspired and shaped the new brochure.

The Arbutus Little Book, an ingenious folding brochure no bigger than a business card, places the hotel squarely at the very heart of Killarney and the visitor experience. It tells the story of Tim and Julia and the hotel they built and features maps of the town and surrounding countryside along with Sean and Carol's personal recommendations on what to see in the area.

And They All Lived...

Two years on and The Arbutus Hotel continues to tell its story. The story itself has inspired and challenged the team in many different ways. Like the Boss, it often makes demands that are difficult to meet in the running of a busy hotel. The process of putting the brand at the heart of everything that they do is a slow one but Sean and Carol are steadily breathing life into the story both for the visitor and for those who work at the hotel to deliver its unique brand of hospitality.

Meanwhile, its effects are felt throughout the business. The Arbutus was recently invited to represent the quintessential Killarney hotel experience between 1900 & 1950 as part of town's 250 Year celebrations. The hotel has had its story retold by reviewers and writers in directories and listings and is beginning to achieve the positioning it seeks in the market for the discerning independent traveller.

Sean's colleagues throughout the hotel have heard the stories and a visitor stopping at the front desk or at the hotel bar is now likely to learn of the story behind John Grady's box or hear how a master carpenter (trained in Oberammergau in Germany) crafted the remarkable celtic deco detail on the stairs.

Finally, as Sean himself puts it: "In retelling the story of Tim Buckley and The Arbutus, we have regained confidence and belief in what we have to offer the visitor and are putting the hotel back where she belongs, at the heart of Killarney and the Killarney experience."

To hear more of the story, you can visit www.ArbutusKillarney.com (and ask for a brochure). Or better still, visit the hotel itself!