

THE BLEND

How To Raise & Keep A Brand

Gerard Tannam

TO BRAND OR NOT TO BRAND? THAT WAS THE QUESTION.

Last time out in The Blend, like businesses everywhere considering how to gain an edge, we asked whether to brand or not to brand. In many ways, that was the easy part. Brands are here to stay and for many of us, it's not so much a question of whether to as much as how to.

Chop, chop, look sharp now, there's work to be done!

Decision made, we're usually eager to get out there and put the brand to work! But before we rush off and busy ourselves with the day-to-day tasks of running a business, it might be useful for us to take just a moment longer to consider what's important in raising and keeping a brand. And, more particularly, what does it take to make a hospitality brand work for us?

NO SURPRISE HERE. IT'S ABOUT PEOPLE

In all walks of business, people buy people. There are almost as many definitions of what brands are and how they work as there are brand consultants but when it comes down to it, brands are always about people, the people who sell and the people who buy, and the relationships between them.

The challenge then in raising a brand is to describe what sort of people we are, how we relate to others and how that makes us different.

At the heart of people and their relationships are values. We know what sort of relationship we can expect from someone when we know what values drive the business. So it follows that branding must be about values too. It is ultimately on the basis of people and values that we will distinguish ourselves from others and gain competitive edge.

COMMON & UNCOMMON VALUES

So which values exactly?

In every business sector, there are particular values that are essential and non-negotiable. These are the common values that underpin the services or products offered. In banking, we expect to find honesty and security; in a motor vehicle, safety and reliability. In a hotel or restaurant then, it makes little sense to crow about hospitality or hygiene. These are expected of us. They simply allow us to participate (although their absence will cut the legs out from under our brand faster than anything else). In a mature market, they do not make us different. Yet many businesses talk as if they do.

It is the uncommon values that enable us to distinguish what we do from others in our industry. If the banker can add innovation and care to the mix, he is likely to grab our attention. The accountant who brings imagination and strategic planning to the table becomes a business advisor. Similarly, the hotelier or restaurateur who adds uncommon values to those already

expected of the offering is able to make a difference.

TIRED & OVERUSED

However, it isn't enough for the business owner to simply assert these values. Many of the words that we adopt to talk about our values are tired and overused. Despite our good intent they have come to mean nothing in terms of offering a competitive edge. Think how often words such as convenient, well appointed, luxurious and innovative creep into advertising copy and what little impact they have on us thanks to their overuse.

Far too many hotels talk about hospitality without showing how they deliver it in a way that is different to their competitors. Restaurants across the country speak of innovation whilst serving up food that is indistinguishable from that of their neighbours.

The challenge in developing a competitive brand is in digging deep to the heart of the business proposition and demanding of it something truly exceptional in terms of values. This is not a simple task but without it there is nothing that the business can say about itself that will deliver the sustainable advantage that we seek.



BEGIN WITH A QUESTION.

In seeking to brand a hospitality business and to determine the unique relationship that it will enjoy with its people (which will naturally include guests but which should also embrace its staff, its suppliers and its public), we must begin with a simple question: What's truly different about what I have to offer?

Taken at face value this is a difficult question to answer. Typically, in a mature market there is little to distinguish one offering from another in terms of features or content. We are not alone in offering executive suites, children's menus or rocket salad.

At a product or service level then, this question yields very little of value for the brand (although it does prompt the vital recognition that continuing to market on the basis of claims that can be pretty much made by any rival business is a futile exercise).

The knee-jerk reaction is to resort to price or package offer. Take a look at the back page of the Irish Times on any given day and there are countless offers and packages jostling for position. In attempting to distinguish one from the other, it becomes apparent that this sort of pitching offers an unsafe basis on which to establish competitive advantage.

The difficulty with price-based marketing is that you are always likely to be out muscled by somebody with deeper pockets and greater nerve. Similarly, making your pitch solely on the basis of features such as packages or special menus leaves you open to being out-manoeuvred by competitors who simply add that combination or better to their mix.

THEN ASK ANOTHER.

And so we must ask another question: How do I deliver my service in a way that is demonstrably different from other businesses and that offers a defensible advantage?

This obliges us to confront the essential 'who' and 'how' of our business rather than the more incidental 'what'. If we agree that people buy people, then what we are demanding of our business is that we deliver our service in a way that enables

the market to determine just 'whom' they are choosing to buy from. If our guests choose us on the basis of who we are and how we do things rather than what we offer, then they are unlikely to switch allegiance on a whim.

This should drive us towards describing the personality of the business, the values that drive it and the benefits that they deliver.

Few guests at a Four Seasons Hotel will have difficulty distinguishing how the people there are different from those at a Jury's property. They do things differently. The values driving the business are not the same. In this way, Four Seasons' hospitality is very distinct from Jury's hospitality.

Similarly, the very different people behind the Mustard Seed and Thornton's restaurants are always evident to their guests in how they deliver their food and each offers an innovation that is as distinct from the other as it is from the remainder of the market.

AND THEN WHAT?

Once we've determined how we're different from our competitors, we need to build on that difference. Our task then is to determine how we might communicate that difference effectively to others and, just as importantly, how we can continue to deliver on it time after time for our guests.

Next time out in The Blend, we'll consider some of the ways in which we might do that.

ABOUT THE BLEND

How To Raise & Keep A Brand is one in a regular series of articles in which Gerard will take a look at how to cook up a great brand, sample some of the ingredients that you'll need to make one of your own and weigh 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, The HSMIAI, The K Club, Platinum Hotels, Carlow's Eigse Festival, Dunbrody Country House Hotel & Cookery School, The National Library, IMMA and The Arbutus Hotel.

Gerard would love to hear how you're getting on with your own brand and can be contacted at: gtannam@creativeinputs.ie

