

# THE BLEND



## THE EMPTY SPACE BY GERARD TANNAM

**W**hat Lies Between..? Many years ago, shortly after I left school, a friend who was studying theatre gave me a favourite book to read. It wasn't a very long book but, for reasons I don't remember, I didn't make much headway beyond the first few pages. However, the name of the book, which was also its central idea, has stayed with me since and has grown to influence me more and more as I step further into the world of business and brand.

As I recall, the title of the book was The Empty Space, and its writer encouraged an understanding of what happens in theatre as about what takes place in the space between an actor and his audience. I'm sure that the writer went on to say a lot more but this simple framework has served to bring the relationships that underpin a business into sharp focus for both me and my clients and encouraged us to get to grips with what is happening in that space between a business and its customer.

It was Shakespeare, I think, in another book that I didn't quite finish, who famously suggested that we might see the world as a stage on which each of us must play a part. This seems to me to be good advice for any business, but particularly for one that delivers an experience to its customer as its core

proposition, such as those we find in the areas of hospitality and tourism.

### A Note Of Caution

But what exactly does it mean to the business owner to see the relationship in these terms? I believe it plays out in a number of ways. The first is in striking a note of warning and is found in the idea of the empty space itself. Clearly, a space that remains empty, whether a hotel, a restaurant or a tourist attraction, is a space that is working for nobody. To my mind, for example, there is nothing quite as forlorn as the classic Irish seaside town in winter, with its air of abandonment, and its attractions wound down and boarded up and waiting for something to happen. In a similar way, we can abandon the space between our customer and us, and make it unattractive to the passerby. Empty space suggests a vital business imperative, the need for people to step in and make that something happen.

As we know from experience, a business without customers is very quickly not a business at all. This empty space begs to be taken in hand and it is the first responsibility of the business owner to take charge of what happens there. Too often, we shirk that responsibility and run the business with a sense of wounded entitlement, waiting for someone else to fill the space. Sometimes,

someone else – a neighbouring attraction, a tourism authority or a new air route – delivers those customers; sometimes, they don't. But even when the physical space is filled for reasons beyond our control, it remains our responsibility to make sure that the gap between the business and its audience is bridged so that the business is full in every sense.

### What Happens There?

A second way in which it plays out is in the questions it raises about the space itself, and what is happening there. If we are to attract and keep our customers, it is clear that what happens in our space must make sense for them. Otherwise, there is no incentive in their giving us their time, their attention or their money. They will simply go somewhere else. We must nail down our core proposition and be satisfied that it draws our customer into the space between, that is, into a relationship with us. We must move beyond the idea that this is something that happens by accident, something over which we have little influence. If our customer has indeed wandered in to our space by chance, then we must ensure that he or she remains or returns by our design. It is not enough to simply hope for the best.

We must be clear what happens there, what type of relationship is sought and what



## About The Blend

The Empty 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.

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benefits it offers. There is a danger in using the word 'relationship' that we think of it as a lifelong connection. But this is not always the case. For example, there is no point in our trying to establish a long, meaningful relationship with a customer when a more fleeting, pragmatic exchange is what is required. A boutique hotel typically fills the space in a very different way to the city centre hostel. Each of them satisfies a need for accommodation, but there is a world of difference in how that need is felt by their customers. Each must define the space between it and its customer and determine which relationship best delivers what is required.

However, we must not fall into the trap of believing that because a relationship is short-lived, it is either unimportant or not there at all. Even when a customer steps briefly into our space, a crucial relationship is established, and in the end, it is the quality of that relationship that will determine whether or not our business is profitable. If the customer seeks a quick, convenient overnight stay in the city before departing for the airport, then we must establish a relationship that enables us to deliver on that in a way that our competitors cannot easily copy or replace. The invitation to step into our space must be compelling and the reasons to remain there or return even more so.

### Filling The Space

The notion of the empty space is also helpful to us in terms of suggesting to us how we might go about filling it. As we have seen

earlier, there is a useful overlap between the ideas of physical space and emotional or 'relationship' space. If this idea of empty space, which was first found in a book about theatre, suggests a theatrical solution in filling it, then so much the better.

Now, it is important here that we clear up any confusion about what we mean by theatre. Just as we have seen how the word 'relationship' can be understood in the heavier senses of the word, so too can the word 'theatre' be taken to mean overly dramatic gesture and ham-acting. We do not intend to use the term in this way. Instead, we appeal to the sense of theatre that is to be found in the usual interaction between one person and another, the kind that unfolds, for example, when we observe what happens at an airport reunion or in a lively discussion between friends over dinner.

These moments are naturally alive with colour and gesture and are rich in nuance and suggestion. In a similar way, we can instill an everyday service with its own significance. A humble cup of tea may be served up ceremoniously, the guest shown to their seat with a flourish. Theatre invests what we do for our customers with much more than the simple mechanics of the transaction. A sense of theatre will help us determine how we might best play out the exchange that takes place at check-in in our boutique hotel or city-centre hostel. In one instance, the theatre may be more elaborate; in the other, more spare; but in each scenario what we say and do and how we do it speaks volumes to our customer

about what is happening in the relationship between us.

This sense of theatre offers us the opportunity to define shared space. For the customer, this then becomes 'our' space, the place to come to when he or she wants to have a certain need met. We can then invite our customer into that space by the use of gesture and language (whether in person, print or electronically) that is particular to our relationship.

As business-owners, this helps us to tackle two of the greater challenges facing us in competitive territory: first, how to be distinctive in our offer and second, where to find inspiration in promoting that offer to our customers. This use of theatre, with its focus on the dynamics of our relationship with our customers, enables us to establish a business empathy with them that moves far beyond a simple description of what happens in our shared space and gives them added incentive to choose us.

### Watch This Space...

So, we have found a world of possibilities in one half-remembered book title. Imagine what we might do if I had managed to read the book from start to finish! Perhaps I'll dig it out and make a fresh assault.

In the meantime, I will continue to explore what theatre can bring to the hotel and restaurant experience, seek out some practical examples of how it works in the field and, next time out in The Blend, will report back to you on what I've found.