

THE BLEND



BRANDING TO THE POWER OF THREE BY GERARD TANNAM

Out On Its Own
Being different is often held out as the holy grail of marketing. The wisdom goes that the world belongs to those who are exceptional, amazing and remarkable. The others who simply fit in are seen as the also-rans, the ones who pass unremarked in the herd. Brand-owners are urged to cut through the clutter, build awareness and secure market-share by stepping out from the crowd and offering something startling and rare. They are to expend a great deal of effort in whittling out a unique selling proposition that enables the brand to stand out on its own in the market by being different.

Being different is certainly a starting point. But, in many instances, that's all it is: a starting point. In a world where the customer is spoiled for choice, it's no longer enough to be simply remarkable. Too often, remarkable leaves the customer cold. Too often, the customer is having his sleeve pulled from every side by vendors offering the eight, ninth and greater wonder of the world, each with its own unique selling proposition. He or she is dazzled, distracted and, at the finish, weary of being sold to. In the end, being unique can get in the way of the sale. More often, the customer is looking for something else.

More and more, the customer is not looking to be dazzled. That is not to say that he or she is

looking for more of the same. But the business will not achieve standout simply by being different. Instead, it must achieve something else entirely: significance in the mind and heart of the customer. In other words, the first and most important thing it must do is to make sense.

One Is The Loneliest Number

Anyone involved for any length of time in sales knows deep down the importance of making sense. What road warrior has not stood hapless at one time or another as the customer remained unmoved by the most persuasive arguments, the most compelling reasons to buy, simply because they did not make sense to him or to her at that particular time and place?

Which of us has not proudly declared our unique selling proposition, confidently backed it up with the award-winning words and images in our stunning brochure and website, only to retreat with our tail firmly between our legs as those proud words fell on deaf ears?

At those moments, being different clearly isn't enough. We have sweat blood and tears and paid through the nose for something remarkable to say and our customer couldn't care less. At such moments, we are out on our own, reciting empty formulas and apparently making little sense. Sometimes, all that's left for us is to lay aside what makes us different and look for something else.

Three's Company

Mind you, for three Irish road-warriors on a sales trip in downtown Chicago in 2003, the situation wasn't quite so dramatic. Brian Bourke of Glenlo Abbey, Joe O'Flynn of Rathsallagh House and Brian Britton of The Sandhouse Hotel were part of a promotional tour of key North American cities and were enjoying a beer together as they reviewed the success of the trip to date.

The following day, Brian and Brian were to continue on to Toronto, whilst Joe was to return to Rathsallagh and some pressing family business. As owners of individually-owned and family-run properties, the three had naturally been drawn to each other on this and previous trips and found that they had much in common. For a start, they shared a particular ethos of hospitality, one distinguished by a hands-on approach and personal touch. Each had a property that was in its own way remarkable and certainly different from much of what was on offer elsewhere. They also sought a similar type of guest, the discerning visitor seeking something out of the ordinary. You could argue that the three were more likely rivals rather than natural allies.

Yet, over a few friendly beers, one of these rivals was prompted to suggest that the two Brians would take Joe's Rathsallagh House brochures with them to Toronto and include



About The Blend

Branding To The Power Of Three 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, The Absolute Hotel Group, Temple Country Retreat & Spa, Action Recruitment, Quality Hotels (Ireland) and The Hole In The Wall Pub.

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them in their sales pitches to prospective customers. This simple initiative and apparently unremarkable act of generosity marked the beginning of what would shortly become the Emerald Triangle, a collaborative framework between Glenlo, Rathsallagh and Sandhouse that has had greater impact and delivered larger volumes of business than the three individual properties would have achieved on their own.

But why does a trinity of properties enjoy greater significance for its customers than the three remarkable businesses that make it up? I met with Brian Bourke of Glenlo to see what we might learn from his experience.

Equal And Opposite Sides

When Brian described the origins of the Emerald Triangle, he was quite matter-of-fact about it and keen to stress that it was less of a big idea or eureka moment and more of a natural coming together of like minds sharing a common purpose. Despite this happenstance, what did strike the three partners early on was that the Emerald Triangle offered them a different way in which to frame the Irish offer to the visitor from overseas. Whilst the triangular nature of the relationship was apparent from the relative positioning of the properties on the map of Ireland, it was the significance of where each stood relative to the other that provided the collective with a range of benefits that would make sense to a discerning guest.

Brian related how, within a certain radius of each property, the owner would have a rich local knowledge that he could draw upon and offer to his guest. Combined with the knowledge-store of the other two, this provided

access to a side of the Irish experience not typically available to the first-time visitor.

This was an argument that went much further than simply offering three remarkable properties under a single grouping. In joining the dots together to form a three-sided relationship, the Emerald Triangle represented something that was truly significant for the visitor and provided for a proposition that made real sense (even without the brochure and website that would later support it).

A Three-Way Relationship

I have suggested earlier that the customer makes sense of our offer in a number of ways. I suspect that the Emerald Triangle proposition adds up to something much more than the sum of its parts thanks to a wide range of other things that makes the initial happenstance more than just a happy coincidence.

Historically, the number three has enjoyed great significance in the hearts and minds of peoples from around the world. Meaningful things appear in threes in the stories that our ancestors used to make sense of the world in which they lived. In this particular instance, it would not be surprising if an emerald triangle recalled another trinity, the shamrock, that has long been associated with Ireland as a tourist destination.

Nor would it be surprising if that same trinity, in all of those senses, seems to suggest a complicity that would make the Emerald Triangle offer an especially attractive one. First, it might promise that the same good sense that caused Brian, Joe and Brian to rely upon and choose one another might make for compelling reasons for us to trust and choose them.

Second, it might hint at some of the generosity and cheerfulness that marked the efforts of another trio in another time, whose "all for one and one for all" has become a byword for unselfish give-and-take. This same sense is echoed in Brian's good-natured observation that a booking for any one of the three properties is a "win for us all".

Third, it might provide for the belief that by signing up to journey through the Emerald Triangle, the visitor might see a secret or hidden side of Ireland that is available only to the favoured guest.

And fourth, for those whose job it is to promote Ireland overseas, the "trinity of charming, country properties" (The Toronto Star) might suggest a unity of purpose that makes for a risk-free proposition when choosing which offers to highlight as part of the Irish portfolio. For as King Solomon once observed: "A three-ply cord is not easily severed".

Branding To The Power Of Three

Whether it is for some or all of these reasons that the Emerald Triangle works, it seems that the instincts of the three founding partners have been on the mark. In the links that they have forged with each other, we catch something of the significance of what they might offer to us as customers: the care, generosity and thoughtfulness of a custom-made approach and the permanence and good sense of the relationships on which it is founded.

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