

Ideas

that make communications work

With so much sameness in professional services, differentiation is an on-going challenge. Ideas can create distinction. But professional services firms don't always exploit the power of ideas. **Grahame Jones** looks at where ideas come from, what they consist of and how they work.

In a communications-saturated business market, there is so much sameness. Every soap powder boasts 'whiter-than-white' results, most political parties look the same and say the same things, and most firms in professional services, no matter what their sector, say the same messages in very similar ways. All this leaves the consumer confused and unimpressed. With so much similarity, the challenge for any marketer battling for recognition in an over-crowded market place is to win a space in the consumer's mind! Positioning is everything and this is where good ideas make all the difference.

Ideas come in different shapes and sizes. From the big, knock-them-dead variety to a series of small considered decisions, ideas can take many forms. It all depends on the brief. Contrary to perceptions, designers do not lay in the bath waiting for a great idea to hit them. Neither do they originate ideas. This may seem a strange thing to say, but when designer's talk about original ideas they mean one that's fresh, distinctive and unexpected – at least in its chosen context. There is nothing new about using cultural icons to express diversity, but when Global law firm Baker & McKenzie featured geisha girls, Australian road signs, The Eiffel Tower and an American footballer in images of London landmarks for their

graduate recruitment campaign 'Expand your horizons', a strikingly different angle was introduced. It was uniquely relevant to them at that particular point in time.

So how can ideas be expressed and delivered?

Across all types of communications and media: brand names, visual identity, literature, advertising, direct mail, internal communications and digital media. Delivered by razor-sharp concepts or subtly expressed through the use of a particular typestyle, image, paper stock or even the shape and size of the required medium. Yet again, it comes back to relevance.

Inevitably there are hurdles to overcome and unlike consumer brands, most professional service firms are generally conservative. Producing something different and distinctive might be regarded as moving to a lighter shade of blue! Yet with so much similarity (and so many blue identities!), daring to be different, adopting a bolder approach and then being consistent is now essential to influencing potential customers. The case study of Advent International shows what is possible. Other clients have been equally bold; the following is a glimpse of what can be achieved, divided into two parts: concept and expression.



Concept

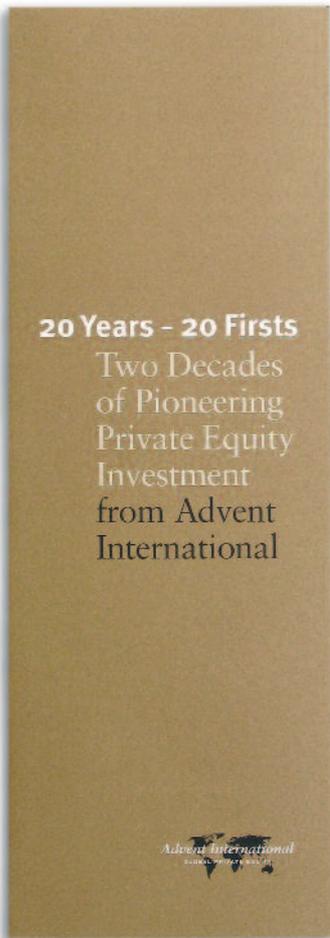
The starting point for producing good ideas is a good brief. To work successfully the designer first needs all the facts in order to unravel often complex information and then go on to create something that is easily understood, memorable and above all effective. This process takes time. The right answer is there, but does not always emerge straight away.

Sometimes the solution is obvious and it's important to remember that designers will see things from a different perspective. When designing a visual identity for management consultants Hornagold & Hills, the solution was found in their existing logo – and by taking one element from it a graphic theme was developed to express their proposition of 'creating change'. This graphic device is now used coherently across all their communications. Like the familiarity established with Nike's 'tick' logo, the aim was to give Hornagold & Hills a strong visual theme with the ability to stay in their audience's mind. We worked with them to achieve a result that was in fact deceptively simple.

Establishing a core idea and then developing it as a theme is a key technique. For Bechtel, who supply project management services to the telecoms market, we had to communicate the concept of complex networks management. Our solution was to use a visual analogy: the natural networks found in nature provide numerous opportunities to keep the message fresh and interesting. Unsurprisingly, Bechtel's competitors adopt more orthodox methods and yet feedback from research has shown that audiences remember Bechtel's approach. In other words, they have created that crucial connection with their market!

Involving your audience directly is another effective technique. For JPMorgan, we developed a smaller A6 format concertina-style booklet that required the recipient to unfold it and discover the message for themselves. This different and original idea fitted perfectly with the firm's personality.





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Case study Advent International

Leading global private equity firm Advent international had paid little attention to its marketing activities when Alison Spence joined them as group marketing director in 2001. Although recognised as a blue-chip firm amongst those in the know, the absence of a structured communications strategy had resulted in low awareness levels within the market. A perceptions audit indicated that the firm was seen as conservative and traditional and little was known about its USPs or leadership positioning. Spence’s challenge was two-fold: how to generate attention without compromising the integrity of the firm and how to achieve differentiation within a market where ‘me-too’ messaging was the norm. She realised that building the brand would not only take time, but that it was critical to create a brand identity that secured internal buy-in:

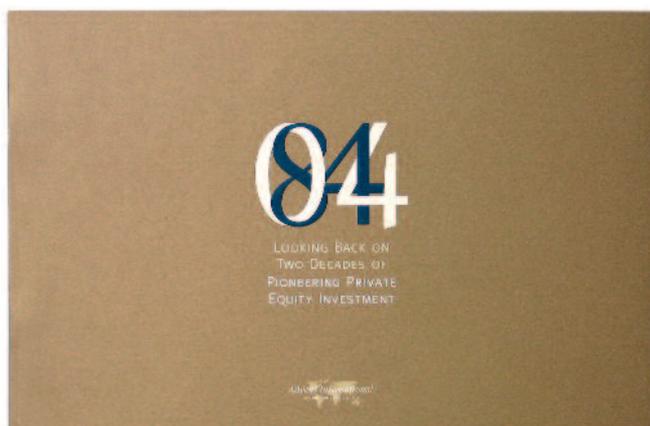
“I had a clear vision of how I wanted to Advent to be seen, but it couldn’t be done overnight, I had to take internal stakeholders with me.”

She adds: “Overnight rebranding exercises are often received with internal and external cynicism. Nothing is more alienating than a cosmetic brand dreamt up by a marketing department that people simply don’t buy into.”

Spence also realised that a bold approach was required given that Advent was playing ‘catch-up’ against a less well-qualified but better known competitor set. In support of a comprehensive communications strategy, her solution was to develop a high-impact visual identity outside traditional industry norms, using colour (gold) to subliminally suggest Advent’s leadership. She also set out to use differentiated formats to not only attract attention but to convey something different about the firm. Gold was originally added as a secondary colour to Advent’s base colour of blue (so as not to “scare the horses” in Spence’s words), with the longer term intention of making it the dominant colour. The blue has subsequently been replaced by black, with the new palette combining to reflect a confident and highly sophisticated firm.

“Group wide, our literature is deemed to have been the single most important ingredient in raising our profile,” says Spence. “Its impact extends across Europe, North and Latin America, attracting a steady stream of unsolicited feedback. The feel-good factor it generates internally, amongst the professional and marketing staff, is marked”.

Seven years later and Advent awareness levels are now up there with the industry leaders. “Laying claim to our rightful territory,” as Spence sums it up.



Expression

So many good ideas fall flat in the execution. Yet the way in which words, images, paper and format are used can and do strengthen a firm's positioning. Two of these – format and text – are surprisingly under-utilised creatively in professional services firms' communications.

All too often A4 (portrait) is the de facto size, but surely this does not always have to be the case. For instance, Advent International has developed their positioning around the use of unusual formats for their literature. So too, have lawyers Mishcon de Reya, who like to present them-selves as 'unconventional'. This is achieved partially through the use of different formats. For their private clients' newsletter, we designed an unexpectedly tall, oversized rectangular format, featuring illustrations to break away from convention; part of a series of original printed formats which stand out from the crowd and express Mishcon's personality.

Word power, like format, is often underestimated and underused. In professional services projecting a sophisticated image is seen as the key to success. For investment managers Granville, we created a brand-building ad campaign for their private equity division. Portraying Granville as approach-able was our objective, so wit and humour was used in a subtle and sophisticated way to achieve this in a sequence of adverts.

Good ideas are persuasive. Used strategically they can help businesses to outshine the competition. This process takes time and is incremental – the impact of each piece of communication must build on the previous one. Being bold and willing to take risks is also crucial, as is taking everyone, including the internal audience along with you. Once everyone is comfortable with a particular direction a momentum is established and expectations change. There is then a real opportunity to raise the creative stakes, which in turn gives greater scope for achieving lasting differentiation. Ideas have the power to do this; after all, ideas are what make communications work!

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About us

We are a design consultancy focused on helping create and build distinctive brand identities through visual identity, annual reports, marketing communications and digital media.

To see more of our work, visit www.soukiasjones.co.uk or alternatively call Grahame Jones on 020 7739 8869 or email him at grahame@soukiasjones.co.uk.

