

A brand design for sporting life

Football and rugby clubs that announce profits are like snow tigers in Hampstead – rare – yet everyone's talking about the moneymaking potential of brand power. **Paul McManus**, creative partner at bluegoose, argues the brand design case.

Fantastic news! Football is no longer just a sport – it really is big business. Shareholders. Profits. Turnover. Annual reports. Directors answerable to customers. Consultants brought in to review the brand. Sub-brands. Identities. Guidelines. Hiring. Firing. We're running a business here. We've got budgets and timetables to meet.

Fantastic, isn't it? Or am I right in thinking that out of the 72 Nationwide Football League clubs, just five actually made a profit last year? And what about the Premiership? Perhaps this indicates that there may be a bit of a problem here. "Early days," I hear the chairman cry. "Time will tell. The Premiership will solve the problem. A new stadium! Profits will come..." Hands up everyone who would bet their house and all its contents on that. It's not that the belief in the potential isn't there, just that experience suggests that at most clubs it just isn't being realised.

Learning from the big boys

There is undoubtedly a new emphasis being placed by football, rugby and county cricket clubs on learning from the wider business world. The sponge effect: appreciate, soak-in and improve on standard marketing practices. Chairmen are recruiting experienced marketers from 'outside' to advise from within and develop strategy. Brian Sims at Bath Rugby and Kate Linnell at Aston Villa are both from F1 – surely the agreed master of targeted marketing strategy in sport. Our own recent experience working with Bath on draft proposals for a new Junior Membership Scheme highlighted to us the improved understanding that is already evident. In addition, Ed Coan at Watford presents an impressive marketing strategy for the smaller club, "creating and sustaining a brand identity that seeks to represent a town and a specific locality".

Davide de Maestri, brand director at Liverpool, talks about the 'noble purpose' reflected in the Liverpool brand. The respect the club seeks is built upon the application of its brand: from the badge to the kit, the stadium to the video sleeve, quality has been identified as the prime persuader of intent.

Manchester United, Everton and Arsenal have each appointed experienced marketing agencies to think global. Tottenham Hotspur is the latest Premiership club with a glorious history to look seriously at the power of its brand – the club is currently recruiting a

commercial director to oversee brand development on a world scale. Not just saying it but acting it are the new watchwords.

Lower down the ladder, people willingly offer expertise, vigorously talk-up the brand and espouse the grand strategy for profitability. Yet at the same time the fundamental element that will make a brand dynamic and desirable is often overlooked. It underpins development into new markets, it creates a consistency of thought and action that reinforces business decisions, inevitably affecting profitability. What is this key element?



Supporting the marketing strategy

First, let's look at some specific examples away from the 'club' environment. Think about Nike. Why is Nike such a strong brand right now? Yes, there are the allied associations that raise profile and affect sales: Tiger Woods, Paul Scholes, Luis Figo, the Freestyle advert. They all help to perpetuate the theme of cool, but what is the essence? Then there's the Apple computer brand: with its fast, efficient and user-friendly interface, it is always held up to be an innovative leader. It has also shrugged off an industry downturn by delivering a \$66m net profit during its fourth quarter of 2001. But what's the first thing that comes to mind when people think Apple?

Yes, you've got it: the key element is design. Both Nike and Apple use design to set standards, to establish key disciplines and rules to build brands. Design gives fundamental support to their marketing strategy and consistently reflects their brand values. They get as close to the audience as possible and employ new and innovative ways of reaching their targets. Just go to the Nike website or spend five minutes on an iBook and you'll know what I mean.

Given the strength of evidence that can be presented, how can we explain why so many sporting clubs attach little or no importance at all to creative design and marketing? Many decision makers may be wary of cost implications. They may mistakenly assume that good design comes at a higher price when, in reality, bad design costs the club more, even when it thinks it pays less for it. They may also believe that the spectator is historically expected to display total devotion and loyalty to the club whatever it does on or off the field.

If football and rugby are to be described as 'passion brands', it could account for many clubs not sensing a need to do much at all. These are the clubs that will inevitably find themselves unable to adapt any marketing strategy they do have to ever-developing market trends. Barrie Pierpoint, former group executive and board director of Leicester City FC, writes that "unless clubs begin to adopt a more market-led and professional approach towards their customers and trading activities – many professional clubs risk becoming severely exposed and ill-equipped to compete in a changing environment." (*The Future of Football. Challenges for the Twenty-First Century*, Frank Cass Publications 2000).

Contributing to profitability

So what to do? Think big! This doesn't always mean big budgets, but certainly big ideas and big thinking. When bluegoose initially reviewed activity in the sports sector, we looked at what many clubs and organisations were doing and asked, 'where's the fire? Where's the hot-blooded passion?' We sought to apply basic design disciplines gained from our experiences in the corporate and consumer sectors. Our experience revealed that the extent to which design has become embedded in the structures and cultures of UK businesses varies significantly. There's a recognisable pattern, what we call the 'design management continuum', in which three main approaches can be identified:

- **An aesthetics-only approach to design:** organisations at the lower end of the continuum tend not to actively manage any aspect of their visual communications;
- **Design used as a tactical tool:** here, organisations often attempt to develop and manage their visual communications (usually starting with corporate identity), yet design is still very much an 'output';

■ **Design as a strategic resource:** towards the top of the continuum, organisations recognise that harnessing the power of design both as an 'output' and a 'process' is the way to achieve significant returns on a design investment.

The third approach inevitably offers the greatest scope for brand development, whatever the size of marketing budget allocated and whoever the target audience may be.

Though small, think big

Another example: you can imagine that Brentford Football Club doesn't have huge financial resources. However, it does have a big thinking marketing and PR team led by Suzuki 1400cc-riding MD Gary Hargraves. So, first of all, a vision for where the club wants to be and what it wants to achieve was established. Brand values – what the club stands for in the wider community – were agreed. A corporate style was developed to reflect the degree of professionalism necessary to attract new business partners and give existing stakeholders greater confidence. A culture change programme started to eliminate any negative attitudes both inside the club and among its core fanbase. A 'tone of voice' was adopted across an ever-widening range of communications to the supporters as well as local, national and international businesses.

A crucial factor consistent throughout every stage of Brentford's process of brand development was design implementation. Simplicity and consistency were crucial: at all times the club has to be accessible, so 'customers' feel part of the developments, can talk to key people and contribute to the success. A big 'I am' corporate structure would only alienate support.

"From the outset," says Hargraves, "we didn't want to change the club's badge and re-invent ourselves. We wanted that certain 'something' that would give us more flexibility with a contemporary, corporate feel. The design processes we set in place gave us the foundations on which we could build our marketing plan. Once we proved that we were serious about our own brand development, we could then convince our business partners they could trust us with theirs."

Watford's Ed Coan adds to this point: "We have spent considerable effort in developing an overall design look for the main Watford brand and the architecture that goes with it. It is absolutely vital that everything the club produces has a look and feel that not only reflects quality but is consistent. What I would say is that if you take Watford as a case study of a brand-building exercise at a smaller sized club, it has worked. It's worked on a basic design level, it's worked on the

level of bringing the club more in touch with its fanbase and the wider community, and it's worked on a commercial level."

"And profits?," interjects that curious chairman. Watford's approach is vindicated by the facts: it now has more sponsors in the Nationwide League First Division than it had during its time in the Premiership. The two main club sponsors are Toshiba and Total Oil – global brands that are not involved by accident – both of which have strong family and youth-orientated community programmes in place with the club.

These are Nationwide League clubs, showing many bigger and richer clubs how to recognise the importance of design in communicating the brand.

Working closely with Fulham in its build-up to the Premiership, it was also evident that here was another club embracing the design ethic with wholehearted enthusiasm. Once core disciplines were established, Fulham adhered to key design rules and created the foundation for success on the very top rung.



Corporate hospitality pack for Fulham FC

An in house design facility was established to co-ordinate output and reduce long-term costs. Solutions to recurring problems such as getting the brand noticed in a crowded marketplace, selling sponsorship, matchday hospitality and club merchandise were all led by design. Again, the club developed its 'tone of voice' to fit the brand: every communication reflects its vision and values. The essence: Fulham began by acting Premiership and now is Premiership. The implementation of creative design, the standards the club sets itself in everything it does, allows it to communicate the vision quickly and, more importantly, cost-effectively. It always refers back to 'living the vision'.

Another example: the recently reorganised Englandfans is the FA's new membership club, replacing the much maligned England Members Club. As part of its culture change, a new brand was created with design implementation at the forefront of its new

appeal. No longer perceived as a hotbed of thuggery, it uses design to carefully present itself as a broad-based, family-focused organisation where the England flag is not viewed as an indicator of impending violence abroad. Under the control of James Worrell, head of business development at the FA, it is a real life change management programme in action. The standard of its visual communications has proved pivotal in the success of the launch. This is borne out, Mr Chairman, by Englandfans achieving over 15,000 members in a wide regional sweep, of which 25% are totally new to the club.

So, time to conclude. To summarise – time is money. We can see that successful and profitable businesses prove time and again that an understanding of design and its effective implementation must be a paramount consideration when developing the master plan. The so-called smaller clubs can attest to the truth that creative design does not need to be expensive. The thinking needs to be fresh and it needs to be thorough. An understanding by any agency of the club's strategy, its intrinsic values and beliefs, cannot be compromised. Design must ultimately support the marketing strategy by...

■... aiming directly at the target audience: customer, partner, sponsor, stakeholder. Get as close to the audience as possible by tapping into the 'personal', the individual.

■... conveying a sense of belonging: the target audience is a key contributor to the club's success.

■... endeavouring to be innovative at all times: fresh, memorable, exclusive from its competitors. Make the experience different every time.

■...simplifying the message as much as possible: uncomplicated, realistic and accessible. Clear and effective design is not a black art.

■...getting people to talk together: enrich, inform and enliven. There needs to be a reaction that people can relate to and on which they can express opinions.

■...enabling the audience to feel empowered, able to participate and contribute to the success of the club.

■...being consistent in the message portrayed, always reflecting the club's vision and values.

■...above all, the creative application of design disciplines across a marketing strategy will allow the club to live the vision and communicate it to the outside world in a cost-effective and time-effective framework.

Realise the potential. Think big and then, Mr Chairman, you can seriously get down to thinking about when the profits will come. ■

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