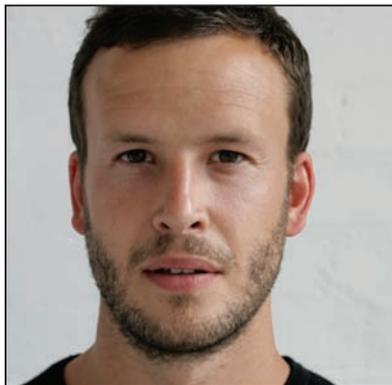


## Brand papers **Brand narrative**

# The never ending story



**Fixed brand identities always have a limited life. The answer is to create an open-ended narrative between brand and audience, writes Ben Wolstenholme**

Once upon a time, branding did exactly what it said on the tin – it branded. Usually, that meant creating a logo of some sort and then stamping that marque across everything an organisation did, made or said.

Over time, brands found themselves basking in the reflected glory of the successful organisations and products they represented and found themselves imbued with more human qualities – trust, strength, reliability, intelligence and so on. They had, perhaps inadvertently, developed personalities.

Branding became less about marking or distinguishing the property (tangible, intellectual or otherwise) of organisations and more about defining companies' identities and delineating assets from there.

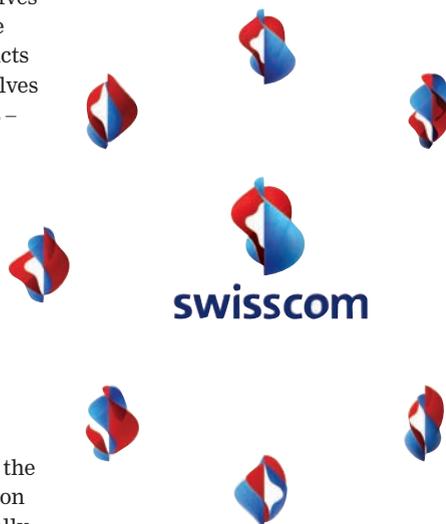
This is why, until fairly recently, the art of identity definition and creation tended to start with a big idea, usually based on values, keywords, a statement

of vision and mission, but generally something solid and real. It has been about facts, words and numbers, such as 'we will be the biggest/fastest/cleanest/best (delete where appropriate)'. This has not generally been open to discussion with the brand's audience.

While these big ideas may convey intent and direction, they are painfully inflexible. They shout, but they don't listen. They result in brands that are unable to create a dialogue with their audience because they are statements of fact and finality that cannot be added to or taken away from – they have no ongoing narrative for an audience to take part in.

It isn't good enough anymore. The rapid development of technologies means a truly successful identity must now be able to respond to a world of constantly changing platforms and attitudes. They have to be adaptable – living, even.

In response to this, we have seen the idea of creating a narrative – as opposed to hard, cold facts – come to the fore at the heart of branding. A narrative conveys emotion and the impression of life. Narrative, instead of static logos and sundry brand 'assets', can add life to a brand and allow consumers to have a sense of interaction across all platforms. Problem solved. Or is it?



**Swisscom: various divisions were unified**



**BP: branding speaks of hopes for future**

The issue with narrative is that while it communicates a wealth of emotion, if it is a closed narrative we still end up in the same place of inflexibility as before. An open narrative, however, ends (or pauses) with 'to be continued', instead of 'the end'.

### Power of narrative

Honda's 'The power of dreams' brand concept is a great example of a rich narrative that could enable an audience to create movies, images and stories that relate to the idea. Its story potential is massive. Imagine if that narrative was open – you could inject an element of co-creation, and by extension co-ownership, for the brand. It would create a living identity.

Positioning an open narrative at the heart of an identity demonstrates an appreciation of the fact that not everyone is the same and that brands need to communicate in various ways for different people. 'Truth' is more than facts and numbers could ever hope to capture. Truth is in the eye of the beholder – which is why a successful brand can only create a sense of truth by co-creating with its audience. It cannot do it alone; it must be able to interact.

An open narrative enables just such interaction because it is a seed – not a

## Brand narrative Brand papers

solution. It kick-starts a discussion, rather than concluding it. It is involving, conversational and responsive. It can adapt to shifting platforms, audiences, and sensibilities without compromising its identity.

Take, for example, Nike's 'Join the Chain' initiative. 'Join the Chain' was a simple website, where football lovers were invited to submit videos of themselves kicking a ball around. The only stipulation for people submitting videos was that the ball was played into them from screen left, and played out by them on screen right.

Nike then edited the videos together to create the impression that footballers, amateur and professional, young and old, all around the world, were playing together, creating a footballing chain. Nike empowered its audience and created a platform for them to create, share and contribute to their 'Just Do It' narrative.

### Built-in aspirations

Energy company BP's move to 'Beyond Petroleum' poses a fascinating question at the heart of its identity. A successful narrative has to be a precisely measured blend of two states of an organisation's being:

- The 'as-is' state, or what an organisation is now;
- The 'to be' state, or what an organisation wants and plans to become.

'Beyond Petroleum' is an example of this measured blend – it tells of what BP is at the moment, what it wants to be in the future, and it does so with 'to be continued' inherent in the telling of that story.

The path ahead leads to truly flexible identities. We worked with Nokia on its marketing concept 'Connecting People'. When it was coined, it was simply about cutting the wires of landlines and freeing people from locked geographical points of contact.

'Connecting People' aims to mean more now. It's about sharing and about many people connecting with many others – not just one to one.

The concept now means social togetherness across many platforms. Beyond simply revitalising its own



Google Earth: moves on the brand with a strong sense of working with its audience

brand, Nokia has also created Ovi, its services and software brand, which is a decisive step towards realising the full potential of an open 'Connecting People' narrative.

Taking this to another level, fashion label Weare allows anyone to participate in co-creating their own fashion item. Work we have done on this seeks to explore just how far you can push the notion that a brand, and even its product, can be part of an open narrative created collectively by an organisation and its audience.

I believe there is a need for a radical restructuring of the principles that drive identity creation. We have seen this trend about narrative crop up again and again.

### Brand personality

In our recent work for Swisscom, it has broadened from a technology and information offer to one embracing media and entertainment. It has meant an alignment from a number of divisions to a unified brand – essentially one phone line for all services.

Our objective was to create an identity that could form a clearly defined single axis around which every element of the restructured Swisscom organisation could move. We tried to understand the brand as a person with key behaviours and stories.

These were then captured as behaviour maps, which were used to inform the creative work across all elements and applications.

This method of structuring the identity creation process is arguably the only way to create identity systems that evolve in response to a brand's audiences. For Swisscom, this means incorporating user-generated photography in its brand communications and a moving logo that responds in real time to activity on the Swisscom network.

Google is another great example of this new fluidity because the brand and the offer don't get separated. With Google, you have a brand that is inseparable from the offer: the brand is the offer and the offer is the brand. But what is its narrative? There's no slogan or strapline, but if you dig around Google's website, you will find the closest thing it has have to one – 'Let's work together' – which is fascinating when you look at how that story works symbiotically with what Google does.

A service such as Google Earth has beautifully moved both the business and the brand on. There's still the look and feel of Google but the notion that the audience, working together, is able to build on a narrative platform is elemental to the success of the brand itself. Google Earth is the future: we can together build the narrative of our planet and Earth's living identity.

(To be continued...) ■

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