

THE BLEND



About The Blend

That Certain Something 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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THAT CERTAIN SOMETHING BY GERARD TANNAM

Lost For Words

Have you ever noticed how difficult it is to pin down some of our more essential ideas or experiences? We know something important has happened or is happening and hurry to tell the others. But when we open our mouths to begin, we find ourselves at a loss to tell what we've gone through and how it took place. The idea proves elusive, the event hard to take a hold of. We struggle to put it into words. All we know is that something vital remains just beyond us, out of our reach and impossible to tie down.

This is particularly frustrating if you are in the marketing or communications business, which, as I have argued elsewhere, most of us are (whatever our job titles might suggest). We are in the business of influencing choice and find ourselves called upon to persuade, coax or inspire others towards one course of action or another.

This failure to capture what we mean reminds me of the frustration felt by a political adversary of Eamon De Valera's, who, maddened by the slippery tactics of his opponent following a long and fruitless day at the negotiating table, remarked bitterly to his aides that, "dealing with that fellow is like trying to pick up quicksilver with a fork." On overhearing it, De Valera is said to have replied, "Why doesn't he try using a spoon?".

Very witty, Mr. De Valera, and, no doubt, very fine advice indeed, but where do we find our

spoon? In my own experience, the Irish leader might just as easily say to us, "Why don't you try using a brand?". The role of the brand is often to help us influence choice by cupping our ideas or experiences so that others may sample them more easily before they slip through our fingers again.

What's The Big Idea?

A similar mix of exciting ideas and frustrations marked my first meeting with Dr. Sheila Flanagan and Alex Gibson of the Dublin Institute of Technology's School of Hospitality Management and Tourism.

The School has a long tradition of excellence, dating back to the first half of the last century. Its graduates include leading hoteliers, tourism chiefs and venue managers in countries across the world. Its relationships with industry players in Ireland and beyond stretch back to the emergence of hospitality and tourism as key parts of the social, cultural and economic mix of the modern world. Its influence is felt, directly and indirectly, wherever one person seeks out the hospitality of a professional in Ireland and in many other parts of the world.

Yet, despite this influence, the School often struggled to describe what it has to offer to a prospective student or industry partner. Like many other institutions that are in a constant state of evolution, the School found itself in charge of a vast, sprawling network of

connections that simply wouldn't stay still long enough to be pinned down and committed to words or pictures.

At the same time, Sheila and Alex and their colleagues at the School were only too keenly aware that the world in which they operated was growing increasingly competitive and that they needed to capture the big idea that lay at the heart of the School if they were to influence the choices of students and industry players.

They sensed that the big idea might be best caught by putting down their fork and taking up a spoon instead and invited us to help them in finding one.

If These Walls Could Talk

So where do you begin to find such a spoon? Our first task was to wade into the core of this vast network to meet with the students, staff and industry players and hear the stories of what happens in the School from one day to the next and then afterwards when the students scatter to different corners of the world.

We were lucky in that the School had recently hosted the reunion of a group who had graduated some twenty years before and many of the staff who had attended the celebration dinner were able to tell us how their former students recalled their own days at the School and how they judged the enormous influence that the School had on

their lives and on the lives of those they worked with.

We heard stories of the first day of the new School year and the arrival of the new students, fresh-faced and uncertain of what lay ahead. Picture it for yourself: the milling about of hundreds of young people, the older ones greeting old friends and moving about knowingly and confidently, the younger ones suddenly isolated and unsure of what happens next, all of them caught up in a fever pitch of excitement.

For many of these students, this is a first time away from home and they drop into the chaos of this opening day, in a strange place in a strange city, with very mixed feelings. On the one hand, they have brought with them a belief, not yet a conviction, that a career in hospitality or tourism is what they want and have some talent for; on the other, they are suddenly a long way from home and from all that is known and familiar, and now that belief seems a little naïve and unrealistic.

We heard as well of the days that follow, of how they find their feet, make new friends, try and err, learn first a little and then a lot, and discover through the mix of the practical and the learned that, yes, yes, they might have a real talent for this.

And we heard too of the personal and professional triumphs, how the freshly appointed graduate surprises herself and seizes the chance to turn a difficult or a frantic situation around by displaying a skilful blend of leadership that is personal, practical, and assured.

And Then, As If By...

Perhaps, like us, you hear echoes in these stories of others you have heard somewhere before? They say there is nothing new under the sun, no new stories, only the old ones dressed up and retold for a new audience. In many ways, a brand is one of these retellings and so we listened out for the older stories that might offer us something for our brand story.

We heard the timeless story of the young initiate, one marked out for greatness, who arrives with his fellows at the academy where he will learn through a mix of exercise and study how to fulfil his destiny. Along the way, he will face difficulties and have to discover his strengths and conquer those demons that threaten to hold him back and destroy him.

In the story, he is both warrior and healer and, just like him, our young hospitality hero must learn to be warlike in how he tackles his business and the bottom line, and nurturing in how he handles his guests.

One of the most recent retellings of this story in book and film is in the Harry Potter series, and our Harry must step into the powerful space that lies between the guest and his host and display his own magic touch. Picture the tired and frustrated traveller or the hungry guest, out of sorts and a long way from home. We took this story as our inspiration and chose to understand the check-in desk at hotel or airport and the dining or the conference room as places where the host must tame difficult and demanding situations for his guests by apparently weaving his magic.

Spelling It Out

This choice of story offered the School a powerful way of understanding their brand and telling others about it. It started in the naming of the initiative as MagicTouch Partners, developed into a draft Charter for partnership and extended into discussions between the School team and industry that saw sixteen of the top players in the Irish hospitality, tourism, leisure and event sectors come on board as founding partners.

The School team now talk about the brand offering them a fresh sense of drive and purpose and they and their partners report deeper and more rewarding exchanges that translate into a range of exciting initiatives. These include a more dynamic framework for placing students for work experience, highly effective participation by industry partners in Open Days and promotional visits to schools, greater exposure for students at an earlier stage in their studies to the worlds in which they might later work (through access to partner guest lecturers and mentors), and the invaluable trading of information and know-how in terms of industry best practice and trends.

The partnership continues to grow and a number of international players are also being welcomed onboard. You could say that in the quicksilver world of the modern host and guest, the School and its partners are casting their own powerful spell.

If you would like to learn more about the MagicTouch Partners, just click your fingers and visit www.magictouch.ie