

Blog archive.

There's a recession remember!

Why is it that, when we are being reminded constantly by the news programmes that we are in the depths of recession, businesses make it so difficult for us to spend money with them. It is the big businesses that get this wrong and it is the big businesses that are going to the wall. A lot of the recession is man-made and it is the men and women who put these ridiculous systems, the products of endless meetings, in place, that actually thwart the customers' attempts to spend money with them.

I have just become incredibly frustrated trying to sort out an outstanding direct debit which failed as a result of the transfer of my bank account. I kept being told that the company's systems wouldn't allow the most logical of resolutions - take two month's payments in one go. And the company's heavy handed attitude was to issue me with a threatening letter in bold print. Only after the intervention of the "Sales Training Manager" that we got the matter sorted.

BMW's main dealer in Portsmouth has lost out too. Failing to respond to telephone messages for a week meant they could not fit the car in for its MOT in time. Luckily KwikFit managed to have a system that allowed me to do it...and with a friendly member of staff on the end of the phone.

Provide customer service now or just give up and put up the "closing down" sign. This is the survival of the fittest.

30 March 2009

The BBC sharing skills

As discussed [previously](#), we are now a service industry-based economy and our education system has had to adapt to the new skills required for our commercial leaders of tomorrow. A growing sector is the media and the ability for those currently in the education system today to be able to string two words together in a reasonably coherent way, has never been more important.

I reject the dismissal that we now have a schools' population who can only text and therefore speak in a strange abbreviated form. Those who are so ready to criticise school pupils for this are usually exactly the people who suffer the opposite inflection in their working life, using more words than are actually required, or language which is meaningless. Please save me from "*stakeholder engagement*" and "*aspirational beaonicity*". On reflection some brevity in communication would be greatly welcomed.

And so, after that rambling introduction, congratulations to the BBC for their School Report day. This has given school pupils around the country the opportunity to understand the importance that news gathering has to society, and given them the chance to try it for themselves under the guidance of BBC mentors. Read more about this project [here](#).

26 March 2009

POST SCRIPT: I am so glad that my computer's spellcheck still rejects the word "beaonicity". Shame it accepts stakeholder, one of the worst words in the English language.

Well done Nestlé!

Whilst we would obviously like to take the credit for the decision makers at Nestle having read our blog and acted upon it, I suspect that the timing means they had already decided to remove plastic from the packaging of Easter eggs this year. A full-page colour advertisement on page 10 of *The Times* today announces that their medium Easter eggs this year have the same size egg, 25% less packaging and no plastic. More importantly they haven't reduced the chocolate. In case anyone is wondering, I am quite partial to KitKat Chunky...and our postal address is to the right of this column above the photograph of an aircraft nose-cone.

If other food companies are going to follow the lead set by Nestlé, does this mean a return to simpler times when 6oz of cheddar were wrapped in a piece of greaseproof paper and put in a paper bag? Or might I still be able to buy, somewhere, a quarter of pineapple chunks, out of a big glass jar, given to me in a paper bag? Let's abolish plastic packaging everywhere!

24 March 2009

And it isn't just the chocolate!

Well, while we are relishing the focus of blame for the impending end of the world being directed away from aviation, albeit briefly, I hear that yet another source of carbon emissions rests with the chocolate industry!

Last year 3,000 tonnes of packaging was generated by the production of Easter eggs.

Our conscience is slightly salvaged by the news that 59% of us believe that Easter eggs are over-packaged. I suspect that the response offered to this particular poll (*Packaging in Perspective*, The Advisory Committee on Packaging) is probably prompted by our actual belief that the packaging makes the egg look better than it is. This year don't bother with a flash looking, but thin, egg. Just buy a huge bar of chocolate. You can justify it by not having contributed to the resulting packaging mountain. But of course there are 900g of methane generated for every litre of milk that has gone into the bar's production.

21 March 2009

Don't just blame aviation!

The aviation industry is used to being under the spotlight of the environmental lobby, with constant criticism of its carbon emissions. But it isn't just aviation!

Cadbury has introduced a programme working towards reducing carbon emissions related to chocolate production! The programme includes measures to change the diet of milk-producing cows, who are currently responsible for 80kg to 120kg of methane a year...each! This equates to 900g of methane for every litre of milk produced.

So next time you gaze up at an aircraft while eating chocolate, think: with a glass and a half of milk famously going into every bar, that chocolate is not as environmentally innocent as you think...even if it is organic.

21 March 2009

Come follow the brand!

For some years now my father has driven Ford cars. The main criterion for his selection is that the nearest dealership to where he lives is a Ford franchise. To be honest, if all you need out of a car is reliability and ease of service, then that is not a bad criterion to use.

He has however always quoted Ford as being a good example of a strong brand because in its 106 year history, it has never changed its logo. In these days when "brand protection", "brand management" and "brand development" are such popular phrases in the business lexicon, it is hard to imagine a group of American businessmen at the start of the last century, sitting round a flip chart with a quill pen, having a focus group meeting about what the Ford brand will "look and feel like".

I was having a conversation with a colleague over coffee this week discussing another new concept: a company's "tone of voice". This is the language used by a business to communicate with its "audience" (for which read customers, members of the public and, heaven help us, other "stakeholders"). The NHS defines its tone of voice by explaining "The words we use should closely follow and support our principles and values. They need to demonstrate our: professionalism; clarity; respect; accessibility; straightforwardness." (NHS Brand Values website).

There are obvious examples of companies who successfully set great importance on this: Innocent drinks, Virgin Atlantic and the less well known Tyrrell's Chips are three examples. But how did we reach they point where this became an industry in its own right? Is brand important to the bottom line of a business and, if so, who says so?

19 March 2009

Customer Service RIP

We were once a great industrial nation. These days, we are told, we are a country built upon the service industry. Well there seems to be little evidence of it. What has happened to customer services? They're closed! I have recently changed bank account and the bank has done a good job in moving my direct debits. That is, they have written to the beneficiaries of my direct debits and advised them of the new details.

That should be an end to it...shouldn't it? The problem is that we have become so automated that businesses can't cope with anything other than standard enquiries. How often have you got to "push button 9" on a telephone call before being given the option to speak to a human. That is because businesses want us to fit into neat pigeon holes. So two of my payees, having been unable to marry the letter from the bank with my account, merely resort to send out threatening letters claiming all sorts of action if I fail to send them money immediately. Strangely they seem to think it necessary to put the main threat in bold, just to be more threatening. Wouldn't it be simpler to send me a personal letter asking why, after ten years of paying them on time, every time, the payment has not been collected?

And another thing. Southern Electric, now part of some multi-geographic area conglomerate (Scottish and Manchester I think), seem to think that the simple answer to any complaint is money! I don't want compensation...an explanation would do!

18 March 2009

"Everybody's talking at me"

The news that Ryanair has decided to allow the use of mobile telephones on board their flights, has been seen as the end of the last refuge from the intrusion of other people's telephonic conversations. I noticed that Southern Railways has now put an irritating and patronising message on their passenger information screens advising that mobile telephone conversations can be disturbing to fellow passengers.

However it is a pity that Southern do not practise what they preach. They perpetually announce every station on the line after departing each stop and then advising you where the next station is going to be...not once but twice. Once, through a disembodied voice, automatically, and once from the ever helpful conductor. This is in a quiet zone as well. Can't we take responsibility for getting ourselves on the right train and benefit from a little silence?

21 February 2009

The end of Birmingham's apostrophes

It is outrageous that Birmingham City Council has decided to drop the apostrophe from road signs. King's Norton becomes Kings Norton because the councillors it seems do not understand when it should be used and when it should not.

Any follower of Lynne Truss's famous book *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* will know the significance of the little apostrophe. It may be small but it is very important. One of my favourite examples of the misuse of the apostrophe was a series of changes made to a sign advertising a garden statuary company on the A23 just south of Pease Pottage services. The sign started as a hand-painted job bearing the word **STATU S**. Realising this was incomplete, an erroneous apostrophe was added, thus forming **STATU'S**. This was then removed and the letters rearranged to form entirely the wrong word **STATUS**. About a year after its first appearance, the sign was replaced with a professionally produced sign correctly bearing the word **STATUES**.

Moving away from apostrophes though, on the A272 between Cowfold and West Grinstead is a fish shop which has two signs that generate an amusing vision **Prawns £1 a pint** and **Coley for Pets**. The former suggests a line of inebriated prawns queuing for a cut price pint of bitter, while the latter suggests white fish make good animal companions. Any other good examples? Click [here](#) and tell me!

1 February 2009

The economic affect on Earl Grey

There was a report last week from, unsurprisingly tea merchant Twinings, that the "credit crunch", "current economic climate" or "recession" (depending on which paper you read) was affecting tea sales.

Apparently, tea-drinkers are not choosing to buy high-end teas, such as Earl Grey and Lapsang Souchong, but are buying supermarket budget brands, because they are feeling the pinch.

The demographic of high-end tea drinkers is more likely to be the Waitrose shopper, rather than those who use Aldi and, as has been proven, less immediately affected by the recession. So what is Twining suggesting?

Without being too cynical, I smell a PR stunt. The differential between the cost of a box of PG Tips tea leaves and a similar sized box of Twinings Earl Grey is not that much and not the sort of economy needing to be made by the average Waitrose shopper. Is this just a way of achieving column inches for nothing?

25 January 2009

Lockerbie 20 years on

Today is the twentieth anniversary of the Lockerbie disaster which took the lives of 270 people when a Boeing 747 on Pan Am's flight 103 was blown up over a small Scottish town which, until then, few people had heard of.

The people of Lockerbie have balanced remembrance of those, including some of their own people, killed that night, with hope for future generations. One such example is the establishment of an education programme in conjunction with Syracuse University in New York which lost 37 of their own students in the disaster.

Other legacies of Lockerbie include substantially increased security at our airports. Such security gets tighter with each terrorist atrocity or uncovered plot. Remember next time that you are in a long queue and are being put to the minor inconvenience of having to put your liquids in a plastic bag, such security, expensive for airports to implement, is there for a reason.

More American citizens were killed in Lockerbie than in any other terrorist attack before or since - with the exception of the attacks of 11th September. Attacks which themselves have led to additional security.

In the queue think of the 270 people in Lockerbie and the thousands killed in the USA and in other attacks.

A short delay is a small price to pay.

21 December 2008