



Brandwatch

What's the story?

Previous Brandwatch analyses have covered marketing literature from major visitor attractions and cultural destinations. In this issue, press advertising comes under the microscope as our resident brand expert, Non-Executive Locum Director, **Tony Hodges**, tries to uncover a strong brand story within the hotel market. Without much success.

Once upon a time ...

From the very first morning that I spent in an advertising agency, back in the nineteenth century, it was clear that this was another world. The first research document I was given to read was titled 'An analysis of the Katie Boyle wearout factor'. (I kid you not.) This was the world of Camay beauty soap, once a world of dreams and luxury. Later that first morning, there was a screening of the Camay historical reel and I was reminded of the brand's earliest commercials. The memories flooded back, for these were the moving images of my childhood, from the earliest days of commercial television in the UK. In fact the first spots were shot for cinema, on which Camay was launched here. A theme song that any old baby boomer could still sing you today: 'You'll feel a little lovelier each day, with fabulous pink Camay'. Sixty-second commercials that looked like miniature Hollywood movies, shot by celebrated movie directors. The one I remember most vividly was titled, like a movie, 'Grand Hotel'. In 60 seconds you were transported to a fantasy land of elegant balls, sumptuous dinners, marble bathrooms and, of course, very rich lather. Each commercial created a lasting identity for the brand by telling a story, beautifully, expensively but, at heart, quite simply. A good story well told, I learnt, made for highly effective advertising.

Years later, it became clear to many elders of the tribe that the idea of a good story was far more important in business than just the key to an effective advertising campaign. We realised that, more and more, brands which stood the test of time were distinguished by

the story each could tell. Recent research by the Dragon consultancy (led by an erstwhile colleague, of whom I am inordinately proud) demonstrates the power of the brand story in distinguishing companies, for instance the classic David and Goliath story of Virgin and BA. The most influential academic commentator on this subject, Dr Rolf Jensen of The Copenhagen Institute of Future Studies, goes further still. 'Businesses', he writes, 'need to imagine their futures the way good novelists imagine their stories.' Read his work and be convinced of the truth behind his assertion. Dr Jensen tells a mean story himself.

... there was a missed opportunity ...

Which brings us, if circuitously, to the subject of this issue's Brandwatch: the upscale, international hotel. Now you might have thought that hotels were natural subjects for the storyteller. Anita Brookner certainly found it so, down by the lake. Richard Gere and Julia Roberts peeled that lovely old chestnut about the innocent hooker, in *Pretty Woman*, behind the revolving doors of a grand hotel. Perhaps you recall Neil Simon's 'Plaza Suite' or the Eagles' 'Hotel California'? Hotels were built for storytelling. Most of us can tell a story about an hotel experience, good or bad, which is burnt into our own memory. So you might have expected that, whatever their weaknesses of claim or layout or branding, advertising campaigns for hotels might exploit their potential to tell some engaging stories. Not just to seduce the reader, you understand, nor even just to provide the basis for an effective advertisement or campaign. Rather, to help distinguish one hotel brand from another.

Sadly, there is very little of distinction here. All too frequently this is advertising stuck in a time warp. Instead of articulate voices sharing interesting tales with an intelligent readership, we have vacuous models, copywriting clichés and endless promotion wheezes (which the perpetrators wrongly imagine build 'loyalty'). There are exceptions but, in the main, these advertisements suggest that marketing comes a long way down the list of priorities for hotel owners, despite its cost. Somewhere between the property investor

We couldn't decide
which deal to offer so
just take them all.



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- Two \$30 flight credits for any airline anywhere and
- Special Hilton® and Doubletree® fares may apply

By now, the average stay at one of our 400 participating Hilton and Doubletree hotels will get you more than a five-figure "Deal" (What Doubletree checks in with International offers)

For Easy Escapes deals up to book reservations, visit:

HiltonEasyEscapes.com or DoubletreeEasyEscapes.com



destination: Escape from the routine

The business world has never been so demanding. And you never know when you'll have to leave the office for a moment to attend to a family member or a friend. So why not take a moment to escape from the routine? At Sheraton, you can enjoy the best of both worlds. You can enjoy the best of both worlds. You can enjoy the best of both worlds.

At Sheraton, you can enjoy the best of both worlds. You can enjoy the best of both worlds. You can enjoy the best of both worlds.

At Sheraton, you can enjoy the best of both worlds. You can enjoy the best of both worlds. You can enjoy the best of both worlds.

At Sheraton, you can enjoy the best of both worlds. You can enjoy the best of both worlds. You can enjoy the best of both worlds.

At Sheraton, just a few trips on business earn two Free Weekends on us.

At Sheraton, you can enjoy the best of both worlds. You can enjoy the best of both worlds. You can enjoy the best of both worlds.

At Sheraton, you can enjoy the best of both worlds. You can enjoy the best of both worlds. You can enjoy the best of both worlds.

Enter.
Enjoy.
Refresh.
Relax.
Dine.
Dream.
Restore.
Earn 1,000 miles.
Repeat at your next Renaissance hotel.

1,000 BONUS MILES
PER STAY PLUS 3 MILES PER U.S. \$1 SPENT

Welcome to Renaissance hotels and our Sky's the Limit Bonus. This year, you can earn 1,000 bonus miles just for staying at Renaissance hotels. The 3 components of the bonus are: 1,000 bonus miles for every stay at a Renaissance hotel. 3 bonus miles for every U.S. dollar spent at Renaissance hotels. 3 bonus miles for every U.S. dollar spent at Renaissance hotels.

For more details, call your travel agent at 1-800-888-8888 or visit www.renaissancehotels.com

and the operations chief, most hotel boards have lost the plot when it comes to communicating with the potential guest. If advertising reflects the advertiser, what image does most hotel advertising conjure of the client? There he is. Look. Over there. Leaning up against that marble pillar. Overweight, overage, overtanned. Lighting up his fat cigar with hundred dollar bills.

... and a serious waste of money ...

Now you might think that hoteliers are big spenders on advertising. After all, if one spends a quarter of a billion pounds sterling on a major city centre hotel, one might set aside a decent budget to ensure one's potential guest is persuaded to give it a try. Indeed, considering the fortunes spent on hotel literature, frequent traveller schemes, and 'sleep well' chocolates on the pillow, a few pounds spent on brand-building advertising would surely make sense.

Yet major international hotels are remarkably modest spenders on advertising. In the last full year reported, 2000, only Hilton spent over US\$30 million in media across the major European markets, and half a dozen groups spent between US\$15 and 30 million. These may seem large numbers but, spread across these markets, they look thin to this observer. Perhaps the hoteliers do not truly believe that advertising is worth the investment. Well, if that is the view, why bother to advertise at all? There are many proven ways to waste marketing funds but two of the most serious are to spend below a threshold of visibility and to spend on advertising to which no-one pays any attention. And, big budgets or small, there are few examples here of advertising that command attention.

... as famous names debased their currency ...

Are you a frequent international business traveller? (An F.I.B.T., as the travel marketers would have it.) Do you tend to travel with the same airline or two, stay with the same hotel brand where you can? Most



of us do. That is why we spend our time counting points, opening direct mail shots, getting irritated by so-called loyalty schemes misspelling our names. These one-to-one communications are an ideal way for hotels to provide discounts without appearing desperate in public. Couched in warm, intimate language, these incentives, privately offered, make the guest feel privileged and the hotel considerate (rather than cheap). Put these offers in the public domain of mainstream media and the brand looks needy. Can't they fill their rooms?

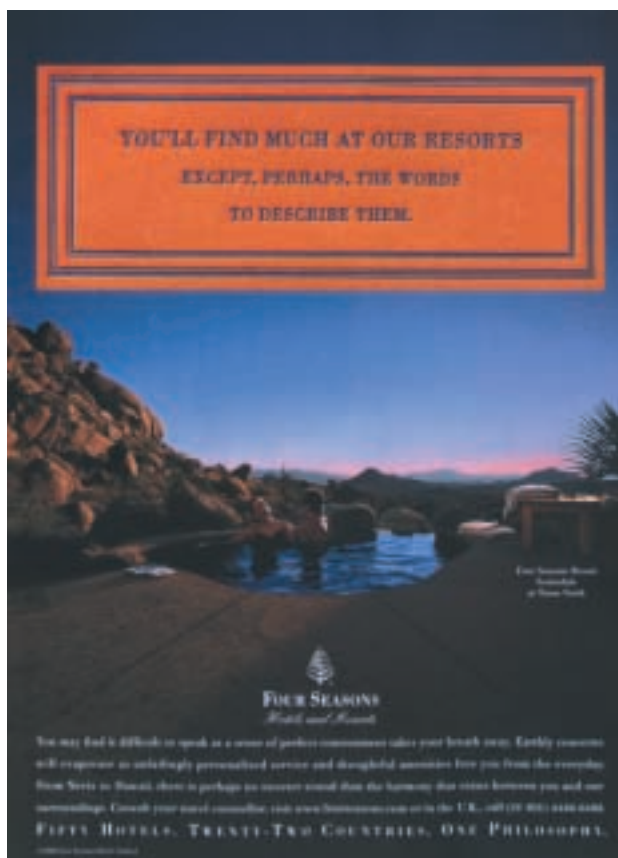
So come along Marriott, Sheraton, Renaissance, even Hilton, you redoubtable old warrior: why are you wasting good money on advertising offers that should be the basis of your direct marketing activities? Are you in trouble? Could you not fill your rooms by service that created repeat business by effective mailshots, by advertising that persuaded non-users to sample your delights? Advertising is a very expensive marketing weapon if its primary function is to carry sales promotion messages. Advertising becomes a supremely economic proposition when it builds a brand as it drives sales. Not one of these sales promotion advertisements tells a story that will help build these brands. Each one does its bit to debase the brand's coinage. (And, no, none of these advertisements was developed after September 11th, so there is no excuse there, either.)

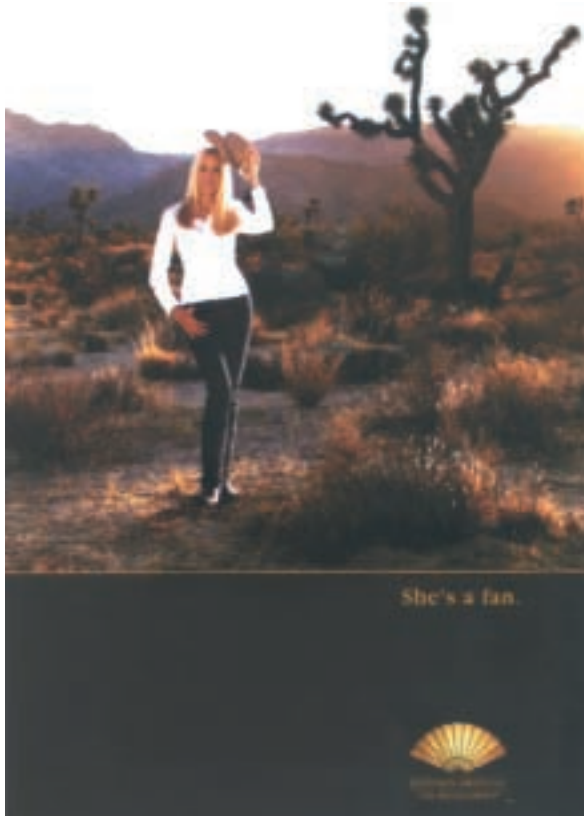
... others embraced cliché after cliché ...

Here are three hotel brands that ought to know better. Four Seasons. Hyatt. Le Meridien. Each owns highly individual properties. Each charges an arm and a leg yet has loyal and satisfied guests. Each has product stories which it studiously avoids telling. In other words, in each case the product is light years ahead of the advertising. (In marketing, this is called an opportunity.)

What each brand does well is the advertising cliché.

Stunning, successful woman on shimmering Meridien staircase. (How many successful female executives have you seen looking like a 22-year-old model?) 'Hotels that define success', the *sotto voce* headline oozes. Not success in advertising, mon cher.





Hyatt travels a risky road with its sub-branding strategy: Grand Hyatt, Park Hyatt, Hyatt Regency. Down that road lies dilution or confusion or both. Strategy aside, consider the skill with which the Grand Hyatt advertising turns cliché into art. Impossibly handsome male glares aggressively into the middle distance, stage left. Impossibly beautiful model (related to the Meridien heroine, perhaps?) clings to his arm as she peers, eyes wide and oddly fearful, into the middle-distance stage right (is that a jealous old admirer over there, with an axe?). What curious period charm we see here. Cliché clinging nervously to cliché. Perhaps I exaggerated earlier. There is a story in this advertisement. A horror story.

And now Four Seasons. Wonderful individual hotels in wonderful locations. The luxury sector defined. So let us show the luxury hotel cliché - couple in pool in exotic location - and ignore what makes Four Seasons individual. The art director strives to compensate for the absence of an idea but the copywriter sounds the death knell: 'You'll find much at our resorts except, perhaps, the words to describe them.' Still, the copy hazards an attempt at this elusive description, thus: 'From Nevis to Hawaii, there is perhaps no sweeter sound than the harmony that exists between you and our surroundings.' It suggests you 'consult your travel counsellor'. Do you have a travel counsellor? Pass the sick bag, Alice.

... whilst some tried to stand out.

Here are the best of the rest.

Let us forgive Mandarin Oriental, The Hotel Group, for its unashamed reliance on celebrity endorsement. This may work harder in these times of celebrity obsession than even it did yesterday and there is a touch of humour in the treatment. (Besides, I never tire of Ms Jerry Hall.) Let us even forgive Mandarin Oriental its punning copy theme, as 'She's a fan' leads the reader wincing to the group's very own fan-like icon. At least this is a campaign (other treatments feature Barry Humphries/Dame Edna, Whoopi Goldberg and Elle Macpherson, for even more impact). At least it tries to stand out and, in its simplistic way, succeeds. And at least it is based on a truth. Guests like to stay in the same places as (other) interesting people, especially famous ones. It is not a profound truth or a big idea or a compelling story but it is better than those that preceded it.

Then there is Westin. This brand is at least brave. (If you have the chance to stay in its highly individual W offshoot, do so. A cool, informal yet business-efficient, boutique hotel. But a chain. A brave product development strategy.) It has picked out one feature, albeit a ubiquitous feature, of the hotel offer - the bed - and claimed it for the Westin brand. It has coined the description 'The Heavenly Bed' and asserted you find this 'Only at Westin'. And if you stay at Westin, you will see that the marketing people have taken the advertising all the way through to the hotel, indeed to the bedroom. There are good principles at work here. One, a locomotive strategy, where one single offer leads the way for the rest of the hotel's services and keeps the advertising single-minded. Two, a pre-emptive strike, since no other hotel brand can now sensibly approach this basis of sale. Three, an integrated campaign where the advertising idea travels right across the mix to the guest's own in-use experience. How big a story this is, I know not, but this campaign does stand out. (In fact, in one instance, it stands out for entirely the wrong reasons. One advertisement is headlined: 'Your success in



