

A Seer for Our Times

The Legend of Dr Rolf Jensen

By Tony Hodges

Dr Rolf Jensen is the prophet of what has been dubbed the Age of Imagination. His book *The Dream Society* has moved quietly to the forefront of books on business published in recent years. In an interview with brand commentator Tony Hodges, he reveals why he represents an idea for our times.

He looks more like a favourite uncle than a hotshot lecture star. His Harold Wilson pipe and quiet voice belie his credentials as the man who changed the way companies think. His twinkling eye and wit challenge your preconceptions about Scandinavian academics. What you get with Rolf Jensen is unpredictable substance rather than any pre-ordained style. Forget the label. He is a brand of now, the man who put the story back in business.

His name has been passed around senior executives in Europe and the U.S.A. for the past five years. I was introduced to *The Dream Society* by the man who now chairs Saatchi & Saatchi Europe and we know this is also on the bookshelf of his counterpart at Grey. Their client in Cincinnati, the President of Procter & Gamble, has taken Jensen's words on board as much as has the entrepreneur behind myhotel. At a recent minister-level think tank in Croatia, the man fronting the country's new TV station followed my paean to storytelling with his own to Jensen's. Locum Managing Director, James Alexander, features the book in key presentations. The word is out, spreading one to one: a very 21st century contagion.

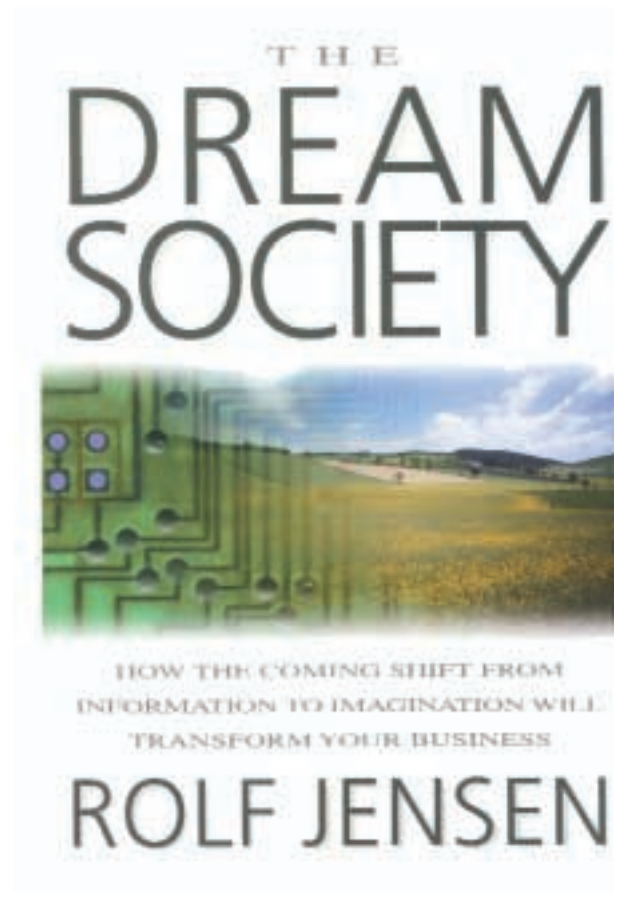
We are meeting in London after his contribution to the World Tourism Conference, ostensibly to discuss his next work, *Dream Society II*, or *Heartstorm* as it is currently titled, a guide to the practice of storytelling. But there is more to the man than the books.

Dr Jensen is at heart an academic (to crystallise the central issue of his life). He started out as a political scientist: 'completely rational, find out the facts... emotions? Try to avoid them.' In that role it was 'difficult to understand the power of ideology or personalities'. He moved on to the civil service, with the Danish Ministry of Defence and then Ministry of Foreign Affairs – 'a heroic bureaucrat, trying to improve things' – but did not enjoy the experience.

Then crucially, in 1983, he joined The Copenhagen Institute for Future Studies, a private sector organisation which was 'not for profit but not for loss either'. Here he stayed for eighteen years, most of that time as Managing Director, and here he became 'fascinated by future studies and even more fascinated by the art of storytelling'. These were his rites of passage from left brain to right, from reason to passion.



Top Left: Rolf Jensen, Copenhagen



A Story For Our Times

'The Dream Society' was first published in May 1999 in the USA, then in Denmark, now in seven countries. It has quietly sold over 50,000 copies, without even crossing over to the mainstream marketplace: a serious number for a serious business book.

The idea for the book came from a client assignment. Jensen and his team in Copenhagen were asked the astute question: 'What happens after the Age of Information?'. It was understood that each successive epoch in the history of man had consumed itself more quickly than the last, from millennia for the hunter-gatherer era to a mere couple of centuries for the industrial age. The Age of Information was burning itself out in a matter of years, before our eyes. The Copenhagen team drew a scenario called the Age of Imagination and that vision became *The Dream Society*, an era when 'businesses imagine their futures the way good novelists imagine their stories'.

The book emerged at the same time as Rosser Reeves' classic thesis of the Unique Selling Proposition (c.1941) was looking tired and overburdened by its sheer logic (coincidentally just as the advertising agency band Reeves helped create was disappearing, finally and without trace).

At the same time, the excesses of visually-driven, image-obsessed advertising were increasing the odds against that succession. Branding based on labels held as little promise as the rule of reason (of '9 out of 10 cats prefer it'). Rolf Jensen's book reminded us that our greatest brand successes were rooted in stories, where logic served the purpose of narrative and narrative served the power of passion.

Rolf quotes Starbucks' Scot Bedbury (the man who also gave us the words 'Just Do It'): 'A brand is a metaphysical story that's evolving all the time. This connects with something very deep – a fundamental human appreciation of mythology'. Rolf and I share an appreciation of the stories behind Jack Daniel's Tennessee Whiskey, tales about the good ol' days. (I write as the proud owner of Plot No. g47266, Moore County, Tennessee, and recipient of missives from the Tennessee Squire Association, the most recent requesting that I 'grant a permanent easement across your place (to) allow the local residents access to one of the better fishing spots on Mulberry Creek! How could you not love this brand and its story?')

The Dream Society cites NASA's vision – 'we boldly expand frontiers in air and space to inspire and save America and to benefit the quality of life on earth' – in all its *Star Trek* glory, the ultimate adventure story. He points to the Aga stove, once wrongly seen as a status appliance, but actually an

appliance 'with a story of family togetherness... something that abounded back when family values and gender roles were not up for discussion and before mass production robbed products of their spirit':

He asserts, however, that 'affluent countries are rich in a material sense, yet they are poor in myths and legends'. That the new material for the Age of Imagination – stories, myths and legends – are found in large concentrations 'among the populations least affected by modern society's rational view of the world'. He sees that Hollywood's leadership in story merchandising 'needs more and better raw materials for its movies'. He entertains the thought that 'in 2025, Greenland's main export will be legends and fairy tales; that Australia's primary product industry will have been surpassed by aborigines selling their legends'. (Perhaps it is happening sooner than he thought, as we ruminate upon *Lord of the Rings* and its relationship to New Zealand and 'the legend of the long white cloud')

Destinations For Our Times

Jensen has written of 'The World as a Theme Park' – perhaps not as acutely as Julian Barnes in *England, England* (do read this if you have not already) but roaming more widely. He worries that 'our demand for stories is greater than can be met at the present', that 'the drama is beginning to evaporate from even the most imposing of nature's huge monuments'. He references Everest and the Sherpas' story of the summit as 'a holy place possessing powers that transform men', now being littered by the empty cans and plastic wrappers of tourist climbers. 'We are running out of real fairy tales so we have to dream up new ones'.

In *The Dream Society* he focuses on important natural habitats at risk from mass tourism and, simultaneously, on the importance of attractions that are genuine and recognised as such; he points out the Great Pyramid at Giza as showing 'the longest payback horizon in world history', by way of example.

He also develops a perfectly Scandinavian theme in extolling companies who are 'doing well by doing good' and predicts a large and growing market for 'conviction' stories. During our discussions he quotes Arie de Geus, the Dutch author of *The Living Company* and his championship of a biological paradigm for companies; there is clearly a connection between this corporate shift from 'well-oiled machine' (industrial era)



Ireland brandstory: 'the island of memories'

and 'networking organisation' (information era) to 'tribal groups working to common objectives' and Jensen's vision of the shift from the IBMs and Hewlett-Packards to the company as 'a social unit – a tribe with no employees, but with participants instead':

It is later on and in his latest work – *Heartstorm* – that the good doctor brings together his progressive thinking on company values and his expectations for destinations.

In his projection that stories which surround material consumption will fade before increasingly important ideas and emotions, Jensen charts the decline of socialism, communism



Paris brandstory: maternal city or boudoir?

and capitalism. He foresees the emergence of non-materialist ideologies, such as the story of the local community and its model of the good life, 'a simple life, a life close to the family, close to nature'.

We have both written, of the new role of storytelling for cities in the era of rigorous competition (see *Brandwatch*, December 2003). We both see Paris as a feminine city, with 'Moulin Rouge' as its unique, iconic story (though where he sees a maternal city, I see something closer to the boudoir). We both note the advantage which 'hero' cities like London, New York and Paris have and the opportunities for storytelling that abound, there and beyond.

Then, when exploring the topic of nation as destination, we simultaneously alight on the issue of the 'nation brand story' as we both describe it. Equally, Jensen recognises the difficulty of translating that identity into a motivating story for visitors when often it is based on aggressive differentiation from the visitors' own nation. This echoes Ludovic Kennedy's famous notion of 'sleeping with an elephant', as triumphantly addressed by New Zealand's legend (not Australia's) and Ireland's too (not Britain's, i.e. 'the island of Ireland' let alone 'the island of memories'). He also understands the impossibility of control of the nation brand in telling its true story, in the context of political, media and message complexity. His recommendation is to listen to specialists. His glimmer of hope is to focus on cultural stories and a future for cultural diversity.

So now he has set out to create his own culture.



New York, a 'hero' city

A Company For Our Times

Dr Rolf Jensen finally opened his own company doors on April 2nd, 2001, Hans Christian Andersen's birthday. ('I found that out afterwards', he admits with a twinkle.)

Unsurprisingly, he called it Dream Company.

The company is not only in the dream business, you suspect it is his dream business.

Dream Company has two employees, where before, at the Copenhagen Institute of Future Studies, Jensen had a staff of 40 to manage 'and you have to decide whether you are a director...or not!'

He is now able to divide his time between writing, lecturing and consulting. He sees himself as 'a subcontractor that can be a guru for teaching and inspiration' – back to duality. He accepts the description of 'guru for hire, condottiere'. In setting up the company, he wanted to write the sequel to *The Dream Society*, which represents the theory: *Heartstorm* would be the tool. His fees are high, quite rightly, but money is not a driver: 'I am interested in what I do. I am not an academic sitting there thinking for my own pleasure. The real satisfaction comes when you have dialogue with a client.' He explains by telling an obscure but hilarious tale of one man's search for a parrot that gave good dialogue and his frustration with the attractive parrot he was being sold on its quality as a thinker (a premium price was not forthcoming).

His professional life is a reflection of his conclusions. He seeks personal satisfaction – 'sometimes it is nice to sit at a desk and write' – and sees it increase in contact with others

– 'at other times it is important to get out and share it'. He loves teaching tricks of the trade – 'tell us a story about when you have been on top of the world and there is no problem, everyone is a born storyteller'. He sees himself at his best in a group discussion, preparing his charges for take off, getting them up to speed on a short runway, 'not quite vertical ... a Fokker 50 not a spacecraft'. And he continues to ponder the issues facing 21st century society from an intensely individual standpoint.

So the conversation embraces religion, where 'the small ones are winning'; the boom in personal therapy and yoga, as we 'draw a self-portrait'; the market for inner self 'where the money is moving'. Whether you translate these conclusions into the need for a life coach, the future for customisation, or the opportunity for your own 'dream company', you can see Jensen's point.

He tells a good story and loves it too. No matter how modest Jensen may be, he is truly a seer for our times.



New Zealand a 'legend'

Stimulated by Dr Rolf Jensen's work, Tony Hodges established a firm called brandstory. To see why, check www.dreamcompany.dk. To see how, check www.brandstory.co.uk