

Creativity in Changing Times: *Designing for the Downturn*

Safe as houses. Money in the bank. What will be the next certainty to be challenged? As we peer out of the bunker of bad news, it's not surprising that many businesses and government departments are hesitant, cautious – or just downright panicked – about how (and what!) to communicate to their customers and stakeholders.

Read on for the full story.





At DesignTactics, we have strong views on this kind of thing. We've been shaping opinion and shifting units for our clients in good times and bad – and some of us vividly remember the challenges of designing before the boom. We've also had the advantage of hearing the inside stories from different clients in many sectors – and while everyone is facing similar challenges, only some are acting positively to try and change their situation. We're in the business of creating new perspectives: we use visual and written language to build a belief and – hopefully – effect change. Nobody here understands derivatives or can explain the funding of banking bailouts – but we spend every day leveraging the intuition and emotions of our target audiences to change the way they think, and hopefully, the way they act. Given this expertise, we've gathered our thoughts on how marketing and design can make a difference to your business in challenging times.

Don't Panic!

This isn't really a piece of design or marketing advice – but it needs to be said. Turn off the 24-hour news cycle; tune out the nagging voice of your financial controller: Take a few minutes to be still and connect with your breathing. A calm head and a clear sense of focus will always hold their value.

Don't just sit there – do something.

Now that you're in a calm place, get off your backside and act on the issues that caused panic in the first place. There seems to be a reflex response by many businesses and government departments to suspend marketing and design work when a crisis hits; but it's not always the right decision. We're not suggesting you should still brand your corporate jet - but if you need to influence opinion or create sales, don't stop talking to your audience. By all means change the message, and seek value in the way it's delivered – but don't stop.

Check your message


Brand positioning is the keystone to success at the best of times – but it's the oxygen of survival when times are tough. Do you know what your brand stands for? Does your packaging and communications material reflect this – clearly, uniquely and memorably? Your customers are now exercising far greater care when they spend their money; are you working hard enough to win their considered choice?

Change your message

We're not advocating a radical overhaul – but every marketing message must now be viewed in a completely new context. Every audience has new fears and new budgets. Yet despite this, they still have basic emotional needs: Your customers will still need to be comforted; to be content; to feel better about themselves; to treat themselves; to indulge and to be indulged. The difference now is that many consumers are looking for different ways to meet those needs. What was previously aspirational may now be unattainable – but this leaves a gap for an aspirational experience that could now be met by a more mainstream brand.

Map the landscape – and beware the middle ground

It's often said that the top end of any market is immune to the chill winds of economic change. Recent experiences in Ireland seem to challenge this assumption – it seems that instability and uncertainty of asset values will create pause for thought even amongst the very rich, as proven in the declining sales of high-end houses and cars.



Yet high-value discretionary spending is historically unaffected by downturns – luxury goods brands seem to find their customers in good times and bad, perhaps because they are an indulgence rather than an investment.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is a hunt for value that creates opportunities - once you can prove that quality isn't lost. Today's consumers won't tolerate yellow-pack levels of suffering to save a few cent.

The greatest risk for your product or service is to be caught in the middle - threatened by value brands from beneath, and pressurised by premium brands from above. The challenge in this context is to create a connection with your customers – so that they place a value on the trust, reliability and relevance of your offer, and are happy to pay a price for these intangibles.

Don't just appeal to reason – use emotion

In a competitive market, there is a strong temptation to resort to tactical measures to cling onto declining sales. In the short term, these measures can have a positive effect – but if overused they devalue your brand, whilst numbing your audience against future offers.

If you do need to convey a tactical message, try to do so in an emotional context: You need to create the desire before you offer the incentive; you need to identify the need before you suggest a solution. It is possible to offer a value message whilst strengthening the brand connection – considered design can achieve both.

Great design is an investment, not a cost

We're not immune to the pressure to provide value – and we will respond to requests for flexibility when budgets are cut. But the key point we make is that investment in your design and marketing is made to generate a return: Great design makes your case more convincing; it helps your message to connect; it builds trust and engagement with your audience.

Ultimately, it creates brand equity – and the only thing that can cause negative brand equity is when you stop talking to your customers.

Tangible Tales

Some true stories to provide perspective:

Southwest Airlines – the original low-cost airline – was born in a recession. The lesson here is not just that they offered value: it's that they did so in a way that was unheard of in their sector. **How can you innovate to compete?**

When our clients Waterford Stanley faced the challenge of rising oil prices, they countered by pushing the recession-proof capabilities and nostalgic character of their solid-fuel stoves - and sales soared. **Do you have a product in your portfolio that can be repositioned for tougher times?**

It's hard to believe it, but Starbucks first explosion of growth occurred in recession-hit America in the early nineties. While it seems counter-intuitive that pricey coffee could thrive in a downturn, what Starbucks were actually selling was an experience. Their infamous "third place" philosophy made their customers feel welcomed and special – for the price of a (relatively expensive) cup of coffee.

How could your business change the way your customers experience your products to create a greater connection?

Waterford Wedgwood's relentless drive to broaden their market appears to have killed the special relationship that customers once had with their brands. Like Burberry before them (but without the football terrace exposure), they're now paying the price for a decision to target growth at the expense of exclusivity. **Is your marketing activity sustaining the value of your brand, or are you damaging brand equity in the pursuit of sales?**

Having produced Annual and Marketing reports for Tourism Ireland for a number of years, we were asked to find cost savings when working on the most recently published Annual Report. By creating a report that was designed to be viewed on screen, we were able to dramatically reduce the print run - and extend its distribution. We were also able to improve the accessibility and functionality of the report with interactive links and an intuitive navigation facility between each section. **Are you open to new ways of getting out your message if they lower your production costs?**

Want to know more?

Read what some of our international colleagues have to say on this topic:

Why premium food brands are still doing well – and what they're doing to fight their corner:

<http://tinyurl.com/5fl8oc>

How tougher times forces brands to find their soul to survive – and why luxury brands may struggle if they've broadened their reach in better times:

<http://tinyurl.com/6pgwsd>

Harking back to the US experience in the early 90s - why brand equity is the best defence against falling sales:

<http://tinyurl.com/6h2csk>