

Rigorous Magic

Communication Ideas and Their Application

Jim Taylor & Steve Hatch



John Wiley & Sons, Ltd

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To Sophie

(SH)

To Tom, Joe & Amy

(JT)

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Foreword

WHAT IS AN IDEA? WHAT KIND OF IDEA IS IT? HOW can the idea be used? Does it have range and longevity? Is it any good?

Rigorous Magic could easily have been titled 'Fragile: handle with extreme care'. In writing a book about communication ideas Steve Hatch and Jim Taylor have attempted to define the ephemeral and classify the abstract and in so doing provide a road map to all of us that consider ourselves part of the community that attempts to succeed in taking products and services to market.

Communication ideas in the broadest sense are the rocket fuel of brand marketing. In the absence of sustainable unique selling propositions ideas become the principal ownable asset in categories that are devoid of clear product differentiation in format or performance.

To quote John Ford CEO of The One Centre in Sydney 'We believe a Brand Idea connects your business opportunity with a cause. A Brand Idea engages people behind your cause. And a Brand Idea embodies a clear belief and behaviour structure guiding and inspiring all you do, ensuring business and brand work as one'.

As the challenge of marketing to ever more knowing consumers increasingly becomes that of establishing and maintaining positive brand perception this book is important as it focuses on an exceptionally valuable commodity and the application of that commodity to commercial success. Among its most valuable contributions is to focus on the idea itself rather than on ownership of the idea.

Too many factions from creative agencies to media agencies and brand consultancies not forgetting PR firms, direct marketing agencies and design consultants have expended too much of their energy into claiming the right of authorship of ideas. It is probable that their efforts would be better served in uniting around the task in order to deliver the ideas that elevate brand performance from the mundane to the exceptional. Jim and Steve also place great emphasis on the role of the client or brand owner and his role in the conception, development and exploitation of ideas and in so doing answer one important question and, covertly at least, ask another.

The question answered is 'who occupies the central role in integrated marketing?' *Rigorous Magic* makes it clear the obligation falls squarely on the client to act as the ultimate brand steward and it is their responsibility to identify and marshal resources which may not be neatly aligned in a single

marketing services organisation. This presents a challenge for everyone in the value chain, not least the client himself as the art of 'getting the children to play nicely' is often far from simple. In the case of any exercise that requires the determination of right and wrong in an area that is inextricably bound with both subjectivity and creativity, those with 'creative XXXX' on their business card tend to push themselves forward and focus on the visual expression of the idea rather than the idea itself.

The question asked implicitly rather than explicitly is about the tenure of the brand stewards themselves. Given the extreme significance of ideas in driving commercial performance it seems surprising that businesses actively rotate key people away from designated brands at quite the speed they do. From the perspective of rapid learning and experience it is easily understood but there is always a suspicion that ideas and their expression are vulnerable when change is made as it is a place where apparent change can be executed quickly and thus a temptation is offered to someone who wants to make their mark. It is certainly easier to influence ideas than it is to re-tool the factory. At the very least the message to business is that the development and protection of communication ideas is a higher order function not to be tinkered with lightly.

Rigorous Magic is useful in its exploration of ideas in the broadest sense but really delivers against the development of communication ideas in particular which as Jim and Steve point out have the potential to energise brands and consumer constituencies and in so doing drive the value of the brand itself. Within the frame of communication ideas Jim and

Steve identify three key categories (and seven sub categories) which in itself helps the stakeholders to define what they are looking for and what their expectations might be in terms of scope and durability. Essentially these classify higher and lower order thinking. At lower levels we can only expect to impact execution whereas at the highest level – the brand idea – we can expect the whole behaviour of the brand to follow a new path. In the communications world this hierarchy or classification of ideas has in many respects followed the evolution of the marketing services gene pool.

In a period when advertising agencies led by advertising creatives dominated it was no surprise that advertising ideas dominated and also no surprise that many of these ideas were really tag lines dressed in the clothes of strategy. As media services developed as a competence at first within and now without the ad agency structure, ideas that involved contextual framework, symbiosis between message and environment and media platforms began to gain attention and traction. All these concepts are alive and operating in a media channel near you but today in an environment of fragmented and increasingly focused and expert services the hunt for the higher order brand idea represents the Holy Grail.

Brand ideas represent the zenith of opportunity as they create commercial value and they create an almost self sustaining ecosystem of ad ideas, executional ideas and activation opportunities and create territory for platforms that can be owned and leveraged over time. Jim and Steve successfully communicate this point with iconic examples like Dove that embodies a very high level brand idea that successfully touches the ground in every executional outlet from advertising to

cause related marketing. Incidentally, Ogilvy, the creators of the Campaign for Real Beauty, would describe the notion as 'the big ideal' rather than 'the big idea'. A big ideal sits at the nexus of brand performance, consumer need and social imperative and that makes it very big indeed.

It's all well and good using examples that we all recognise but significant value emanates from the book as a result of the exploration of purely theoretical articulations of brand ideas that rate their potential and relevance and this among other aspects of the work really help to create an actionable codification of the category.

If there is just a single mantra to carry with you when you turn the final page it is that ideas may be born from inspiration but that all the most durable (de facto the best) are a synthesis of insight, creativity, brand understanding and judgement. This in turn requires a blend of skills of relative scarcity and a role for people who might not normally define themselves as an 'ideas person'. What is clear, however, is that all the players in the creation game have to commit themselves to immersion in the category, its trade environment, communication channels and in consumer behaviour if their contribution is to be of real value.

Finally a cautionary note. A volume as instructional as *Rigorous Magic* might inadvertently find itself in use as some kind of rule book and as a source of corporate and creative dogma. Nothing could be more dangerous than that, nor further from their intentions. The one certainty of today's consumer context is that constant change will require rapid refreshment of ideas and execution and there is a danger that brands and

businesses can become enslaved by the very same big idea that was intended to be the path to liberation. Evolution in consumer behaviour does not stop and the advent of social networking and peer to peer transmission about brands and the world that surrounds them has created a fluidity that we have not seen before. It implies a relentlessness that needs to be matched by all of us who want and need to succeed.

Rob Norman
GroupM



Figure 0.1 Rob Norman

Preface

'RIGOUR' AND 'MAGIC' ARE CONCEPTS WHICH MAY not seem to go together. At least, not at first. After all, 'rigour' is for university professors applying the cold steel of logic to a doctoral thesis. It is for hard-eyed scientists analysing the latest set of research data. And magic? Well, that's just a bunch of silly tricks and cheap illusions, isn't it? Fit for nothing better than a pre-school kiddies' party.

The trouble is, nobody takes magic seriously these days and for that we blame Walt Disney. Wonderful though Disney movies are, they have done magic a grave disservice. In the cartoons we all grew up with, magic was always the lazy way out. A casual wave of the wand or a sprinkle of dust or a rub on the old lamp and . . . Shazam! . . . Salvation! . . . Redemption! . . . Your dreams come true! . . . Your wish is my command! But magic hasn't always been seen like that.

The first magicians were an ancient Persian priestly caste skilled in subjects such as mathematics and astrology and the

interpretation of dreams. These 'magi', as they were known, first entered the Western consciousness as the three wise men of the Bible story. They were figures who commanded instant respect, even awe, wherever they appeared. They were men of learning, men of wisdom and, yes, almost certainly, men of rigour.

But hang on a moment. What, you may be asking, does all this have to do with communication ideas? Well, fifty years ago if anyone had told you that an underarm spray could be turned into an infallible aphrodisiac or that a smelly sneaker was a prestigious fashion accessory or that a cheap butter substitute could save your life or that gravy was a way of keeping families together, you would have laughed in their face. But today all these propositions have proved to be not just plausible, but profitable beyond the wildest dreams of previous generations.

Of course, the functional benefits of all products have improved greatly over the past fifty years, but that goes no way to explaining it. What really distinguishes the enormous power and profitability of a great brand from an also-ran is very simple: the magic of communication ideas. A wave of the magical communications wand over Axe made it the sexiest anti-perspirant on the block. It was a sprinkle of communications dust that turned Nike into a cultural phenomenon, that put Flora on the health agenda, that took Bisto into the heart of the British family.

But this was not shallow Disney magic. This was not about cheap trickery. Their successes were not about coining a clever phrase or striking it lucky or simply being at the right place

at the right time. There was a rigour behind all these magical processes and it is this 'rigorous magic' that we intend to explore in this book.

Clearing the fog

Ideas are strange things. They can have incredible transformative power but our experience is there's a lack of understanding about what they are and how they work. Our motivation for writing this book came from a belief that communication ideas are the cornerstone of modern marketing but need to be far better understood.

When brands do have an honest to goodness fantastic idea, it's thrilling. But all too often ideas are loose and ill defined, often using alliteration or some other literary device to conceal the absence of meaning or real heart. More often still, a strategic idea is sold by presenting a great execution that's instantly gratifying but disguises the fact that the idea is a false dawn with a limited life expectancy or breadth of application.

A lot of great things have been written about ideas as concepts but there is less in the way of practical help in understanding what they are, how to have them and how to know if you've got a good one. What we wanted to do was to write a book that offered practical advice and techniques that really work, as well as inspirational examples of ideas in action.

People have been surprised that we were writing this book. We've had a lot of different responses from, 'But you work in a media agency!' to 'Haven't you got enough work to do?' to

our personal favourite, 'I'll buy it!' In many ways, the fact that we work for a media agency and decided to write this book is the point. Why so? Because nowadays most ideas transcend executional disciplines. And for this simple reason, all agency types have an equal right to originate and lay claim to them. All agencies are in the ideas business nowadays. And within our own company, Mediaedge:cia, we take them very seriously and believe they are the fulcrum of planning and a core element in 'what we do'.

Communications nowadays is far more complex than ever before and picking a way through the limitless options has never been more difficult. We don't intend to go into depth about the social, media and technological causes of these new challenges, as so much has already been written, but it's clear that the value chain in marketing services has changed for good and having an understanding of ideas, their activation and their distribution is important no matter what kind of organisation you work for. By clearing away some of the fog that surrounds the topic of ideas, we hope to offer a point of view on how brands can win in the future.

Labour of love

Great ideas are hard work. Creating and thoroughly testing them requires not just imagination but tenacity, diplomacy and the smartness to know when you require a contribution from someone with a different skill set.

We have a lot of respect for the creative process. It's extremely tough to create ideas and it's hard to objectively assess the

potential scope and power of the idea you have. This is one of the reasons for the mysticism. Ideas are hard to judge, particularly in the absence of execution. A couple of years ago we interviewed a range of industry figures from advertising agencies, media companies and brand consultancies about communication ideas and although they all had their own point of view on who is best placed to judge communication ideas, they all came up with the same answer to how you know if you've got a good idea. Kester Fielding, the Director of Global Media Procurement at Diageo put it most succinctly: 'Because it feels right.'

There's a reality in Kester's answer that's instantly appealing. To some extent we all know when an idea feels good. But what's the difference between bad and good? What's the difference between good and brilliant? And what are the different types of ideas that are out there?

In the footsteps of eccentrics

Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything* is one of those books you can return to again and again. In its 515 pages, it covers, well, pretty much everything, from the primordial soup to the here and now. Reading it, we were struck by how much of our knowledge of the natural world today is the result of the efforts of a certain barking mad Victorian gentleman.

You're probably familiar with Charles Darwin and his most famous book *The Origin Of Species*. But another of his works is less well-known: *The Formation of Vegetable Mould*,

Through the Action of Worms with Observations of their Habits.

In this incredible book Darwin wrote:

130 pages on the habits of worms.

47 pages on the amount of fine earth brought up by worms to the surface.

54 pages on the part worms have played in the burial of ancient buildings.

29 pages on the action of worms in the denudation of land.

Another 46 pages on the action of worms in the denudation of land continued.

An 8 page conclusion with index.

This guy really knew his worms.

And he wasn't alone in his obsessional nature. There were plenty of men in the Victorian era (and a fair number of women too), who spent years of their lives, often in foreign parts, trying to understand the world around them for the 'greater good' of Queen, country and empire. The one thing they all had in common can be deduced from that special word in the title of Darwin's book on worms – 'observations'. By spending their time observing the world around them, they were able to identify the most minute differences between species and, in categorising these differences, they were able to understand how the world around them worked. They might have seemed crazy, but you have to admit there's

something beautiful about their attention to detail and their unrelenting dedication.

Communication ideas are relatively new inventions but there are now enough of them around for us to observe, categorise and examine what is and isn't working in the marketplace. So, following in the footsteps of our Victorian ancestors and inspired by their diligence, we decided to dedicate our time to really exploring, deconstructing and categorising communication ideas.

At the heart of this lies an understanding of the different dimensions of ideas: the good vs. the bad and the strategic vs. the executional. Having read this far, you'd be forgiven for thinking that we're only interested in the more strategic type of ideas. Far from it, in fact we genuinely enjoy executional ideas. Execution is exciting, it's what consumers experience and see, it's what suppliers support and what sales peoples are inspired by. Execution is real. But like those obsessive Victorians, we've taken care to observe and understand that not only are there different types of strategic ideas but also a number of different executional ideas, some of which relate to each other, some of which exist on their own and all of which can benefit from being driven by a bigger strategic idea.

Who are we?

So, you might ask, why do we think that we've got the right to develop these theories and techniques? What places us in

a position of credibility when it comes to assessing the world of ideas? Well, we've both spent a long time at the coal-face. In our careers we've worked in almost every category and have been fortunate enough to have worked with and partnered some of the most exciting clients and agencies around. We've had experience working with all of the different types of ideas we discuss in this book, sometimes as creators and sometimes as executors. We've experienced what does and doesn't work from both sides of the fence and from this we've been able to build a framework of understanding to categorise what's going on in the marketplace.

In all honesty, however, the real answer to this question is that we don't in fact have a particular right. Like you, we're fellow travellers who just happen to think that marketing is intrinsically interesting and that finding new ways to improve its effectiveness is a worthwhile way of spending time.

Acknowledgements

From the two of us:

It was Michael Jones, now CEO of Mediaedge:cia in South America, who put us up to it. Two years ago, there he was looking through a bible-like 160 page PowerPoint document we'd produced on ideas, when he remarked 'rather than producing such a long document, why don't you turn this into a book instead?' And so we decided to take him up on it, although with work pressures it took a while to get around to.

So thanks must go to Michael. But whilst he was the catalyst, there have been several other people at Mediaedge:cia who also helped us in different ways. Mel Varley and Tom George both gave us important support in freeing up our diaries for rare, brief moments. Nick Vale, who shared with us a lot of his views, particularly around the type of idea we call contextual frameworks. Charlie Wright and Joshua Rex, for their

help editing. Nathalie Alfred for the last minute boost. And importantly, Rob Norman, now at GroupM in New York, who helped us on structure, was kind enough to write a beautiful Foreword for us, and in many quiet ways, was just incredibly supportive. Many thanks, all of you.

And in fact, we'd like to thank Mediaedge:cia as a whole, for the passion the company has towards ideas. It's great to work for a company that practices what it preaches and is so future-facing.

Over and above our work colleagues, we need to thank Wiley for their amazing patience with us . . . considering we kept them waiting for 18 months. Thanks Claire and Viv in particular. And then there's Charlie Hiscocks and Clare Abley at SABMiller. Charlie, many thanks for giving us the opportunity to play with the world's best train set, drink the world's best beer, and for basically being the world's best client. Clare, thanks for sharing your views on how to research ideas.

And at a more personal level . . .

From Steve:

To Sophie, Phoebe and Frederick. Sophie, in the time it took me to produce one book you gave us two beautiful children. Thank you my love.

Lastly to Jim. Mate here's to your energy, your intelligence and your refusal to put up with good when great is within reach. You're the perfect travelling companion and a great

friend. Remember The Optimist and keep singing in The Ether.

From Jim:

Funnily enough, I'd like to also thank Steve for his friendship. Steve and I have endured the trials and tribulations of writing a book together, and come out smiling. No small feat in its own right. I'd also like to thank my darling wife Ali, for putting up with my tired grumpy self on weekends; and my three kids, Tom, Joe and Amy, who I hope one day will read this book and find it inspiring.

1

The heart of the matter

It means I'm dreaming, like when I'm dreaming of horses. – Sarah, aged 4

It means you thought of something that looks in your head and you can try it and it might look good. – Noah, aged 6

It's something like a brainwave that you come up with, that's normally pretty good, but it can be pretty bad, that normally leads to a plan. – Oliver, aged 7

FROM THE EARLIEST AGE, WE ALL HAVE A NOTION OF what an idea is, whether we're able to express it clearly or not. We all see ideas as inherently powerful things that can galvanise and drive us towards action. But when we embarked on our quest to explore the nature of ideas, it seemed at first that we were paddling upstream. We spoke to lots of different agencies right across the board and, without a shadow of a doubt, they all pay homage to the

importance of ideas as a driving force behind their work – be it a 30 second TVC, a promotion, a sponsorship property or an event. Yet there seemed to be a lot of confusion surrounding ideas. What exactly is an idea? Are there different types of idea? If so, what are they? And perhaps above all else – what the hell is a ‘Big Idea’? It seems as if everyone has to have a ‘Big Idea’ these days – but how do you know if you’ve got one?

So on the one hand, there is unanimous acceptance of the importance of ideas, but on the other, there are different interpretations as to what actually constitutes an idea. But gradually, we began to see the wood for the trees. Slowly but surely, like sunbeams piercing the fog, we were able to place these interpretations and points of view into a hierarchy of sorts – a hierarchy that we believe for the first time introduces a level of simplicity into the seemingly complex and mysterious world of ideas, as well as answering many of those thorny questions.

Selling ideas

Ideas are at the very heart of marketing and communications. This may sound obvious, but there are many people in our industry who have only just woken up to the fact. And for some, it still doesn’t seem quite right to be earning a living from something as ethereal, weightless and intangible as an idea. They’d much rather sell something that you can drop on your foot, like a reel of film or a poster or a point of sale display unit. Indeed, there was considerable consternation and debate when M.T. Rainey (of Rainey Kelly Campbell Roalfe)
