



'Quick-Fix' or Slow-Decline

Schools marketing departments tell me they are inundated by eager agencies offering Corporate Branding as a one-stop solutions. We visited a school recently where the management had invested in very convincing "brand" but in spite of that, the Head was concerned, because of falling rolls, particularly by a severe lack of response to uptake in the pre-prep department.

We looked at the existing prospectus package and noticed that the designer had allocated a tiny DL leaflet to that department. The design concept had driven the solution, which, although attractive, in this case, had failed to give the pre-prep department the importance it deserved. Design solutions should convey information effectively, and should not impose artificial constraints on important information.

We visited another School whose academic reputation was good, yet its corporate image was very poorly implemented. It appeared there was no specific typeface for the school logo. Inevitably the website, prospectus and mail shots all suffered from a lack of visual coordination. For a school that provides a culture of excellence for its students, it's no longer acceptable to muddle along with a confused marketing strategy.

We live in a society where the public are more visually literate than they have ever been. Both of these schools have suffered because of poor advice, and the apparent appeal of 'one-stop' solutions.

There are a number of agencies offering 'one-stop' solutions that claim to resolve all marketing issues. I think this 'can do' philosophy has a compelling appeal to a number of Schools, but a quick-fix is not that simple. I started my career as a graphic designer working for Sir Norman Foster and at the time he would (and the company still does) call upon the expertise of specialist consultants to undertake a project, structural engineers, for example. Similarly I question the ability of these 'one-stop' marketing' companies to exercise 'best practise' for a school. It would be a brave claim for a company to be sufficiently talented to undertake the school's photography, corporate design, prospectus design, DVD filming and web construction, yet they do!

We talk to a wide range of schools across the country regarding prospectus design and a surprising number complain that agencies are increasingly offering design solutions that have failed to promote a thorough understanding of the dynamics of their school. Perhaps the true qualities of the school are being lost in the name of 'creative design'. We have seen a plethora of images of smiling children that give little idea of what a school really has to offer. If your school needs to convey its real qualities we believe we can help. We don't claim to be a 'one-stop' solution but can provide sound advice on a school's marketing strategy.

Someone once said 'that good design never gets noticed' – clearly there is an element of truth in this. Of course prospectus design isn't an end itself but a communication vehicle, it should be, in our opinion, subordinate to its subject, even understated.

In our view, the primary task of the prospectus is to excite and inform, but not to disclose all. Its purpose is to reflect the qualities that make each school 'special'; it is only by a thorough understanding of the school that this is achievable. It needs to persuade parents and children to visit a school for themselves.

Increasingly parents are looking for breadth in education for their children. Sport can cultivate teamwork and cooperation. Drama, music and art can encourage creativity, individuality and enriches the soul. Vigorous debate can build confidence and self-expression. Outward bound courses help to build interdependence. Social concern initiatives receive few accolades, but in many schools children experience the rewards of helping the less fortunate members of our community.

JWA are continually analysing how best a school can effectively communicate its breadth of curriculum. We consider it essential to spend time familiarising ourselves with the life of the school, talking to staff, taking meaningful photographs to gain a better understanding of what makes each school 'special'.

What makes it special, its academic achievements, its location, its ambience, and its legacy? What is it, specifically, that the children enjoy about the school? It could be the brilliant teaching, the exceptional staff pupil relationship, the friendly atmosphere, or perhaps, a healthy spirit of mutual respect. These are factors, which are difficult to capture without a deeper knowledge of the school. Prospectuses will only be different in appearance when they honestly reflect the life and spirit of each unique institution.

It may be that one of the reasons we have accumulated a distinctive client list, is because we take our own photographs. We are driven by the school's calendar; our visits begin to enable us to discover the spirit and life of a school. We know that each school has its own distinct character and benefits and it is our responsibility to tease out those qualities to do justice to the school. Only then will our solutions continue to be unique.

To maintain best practice it is vital we maintain careful monitoring of the printing process. Poor printing can undermine all the effort put into the design and photographic process. Similarly the choice of paper can make a real difference to the feel and presentation of the final product. For this reason we have developed a strong relationship with our printers. We encourage the use of recycled paper or FSC stock, as most schools are keen to support the environment.

We provide bespoke, creative solutions for school's marketing and are in a position to recommend talented consultants (who will follow the school's agreed corporate style) for Web and DVD design.

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