

PROVERBIAL PROVOCATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

NEVERBELOSTFORWORDS

# Hitler & Gandhi

Does treading the same path as your peers ever make you feel queasy?

I've been reading 'The Vegetarian', a novel by South Korean author, Han Kang. In it, the central female character seems to be going slowly insane following a dream that persuaded her to stop eating meat.

It's a curious thing – how people who suddenly make a life-transforming decision are treated as if they've lost the plot. People become unnecessarily defensive.

An Academic once said to me: "Hitler was vegetarian, too, you know." I replied, "So was Gandhi. What's your point?"

Words are never neutral. We use them positively or negatively. There's no middle ground. If only we were more aware of that in business.

As with fiction, so it is in the world of business. The words we use either work against us or for us. Bad or good. Hitler or Gandhi.

Trouble is, as business professionals, we put so much emphasis on the visual today that we forget the importance of the verbal.

Pick up any of your company's marketing materials. Ask yourself – Hitler or Gandhi?





# Which Chinese Emperor?

Creative agencies rarely employ quality writers in-house. Clients can tell.

A marketing colleague of mine, director of a good London creative agency, recently disclosed that his clients were all too frequently telling him they loved the agency's strategic and visual output, but their words were just not up to it.

Well, I knew this because he'd called me in to copy-rescue an almost lost cause with a long-standing client.

We were sitting on a bench in a mid-range Japanese restaurant on Brick Lane. The talk turned to things Oriental.

We both appreciated how branding can seem so much like the Emperor's New Clothes, purely because an important element is missing. The content.

In a world where everything is visual, we see past it, looking for meaning. And, if the content just isn't there, the brand stands naked before the world.

We left it there and I picked up the tab. As we stepped out into the rain, the question lingered...

Which Chinese Emperor would you want your brand to resemble?

Effectively, this is a question most agencies are asking their clients.

And, of course, no brand or marketing manager wants that at all. But, do they have a choice?

I strapped the belt of my trenchcoat and headed underground.





# Pollocks

A picture paints a thousand words? It's never a good idea to get me on that one.

You see, I always want to ask, "Which words? Tell me your thousand words." Then I get frustrated when people clam up.

My father in law reckons art is Constable and Stubbs ("They can paint") and never Perry or Kiefer ("They can't").

I think he's missing the point, as my ex-colleague at The Guardian, Waldemar Januszczak might say. Good art is art that is itself and the best it can possibly be.

So much for the visual – and we live in such a visual world. Can words be art, too? Joyce and Proust 'can write'.

So, why are we even more sceptical about them than we are about Mondrian and Pollock who 'can't paint'?

We don't pay enough attention to the meaning we put into words.

I see this in business every day. So much responsibility piled on the shoulders of design. Yet the words let it down, time after time.

If you're a brand or marketing director who still believes a picture paints a thousand words, I have something to say to you: some words weigh more than others.





# No to Reginald, Yes to Emily

What's in a name? No pixels, pantones or fancy-dan roundels, let me tell you.

Look back into your family history. It'll be a couple of generations before you come upon a name like Reginald. Do you know any young chaps called that today?

With Emily, there's a conundrum. Pre-WW1 and most definitely post-post-modern. What do we think of that?

Around the Millennium, naming was a big money spinner for the London agency I worked for.

Clients would spend thousands on the right moniker, screened across all classes of company, throughout Europe, Asia and the Americas.

All that money wasted on a company name! The Daily Mail loathed it so much, it couldn't stop writing about it.

But point taken. Neither art nor science, naming is simply a process. Point taken.

What I love about it is that it's entirely verbal – not an infographic or interstitial in sight.

How to do it well without consulting the Daily Mail?

Reginald says: ask everyone in the company to send in their favourite names and we'll vote for the one we like the best.

Emily says: let's think about what we stand for, educate a small team about the perils and pitfalls, bring in a wordsmith to conduct the orchestra.

Long and short of it is, best practice dictates No to Reginald and Yes to Emily.





# The word in the herd

The one about the man who can and the cat in the hat.

I'm hearing they've found an unpublished manuscript from the man who brought us the cat in the hat.

One way or two, you'll have a view. After all, "Be who you are and say what you feel," said Dr Seuss. "Those who mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind."

This great man, this wonderful person responsible for instilling my love of words, the power behind my determination to put rhythm back into business language, the biggest thing in Business since B.

I've been having a dream lately. In it, Dr Seuss keeps reminding me that words have a rhythm you just must see. And I agree. Oh, I agree wholeheartedly.

So, whatever you might have heard, hear it from the master. Take the friction from your diction and express it faster.

He published over 40 books, selling half a billion copies - even more than J K Rowling's Harry Potter. *Green Eggs and Ham* resulted from a bet that he could not write a book using only 50 words.

"I am Sam; that; do not like; you green eggs and ham; them; would here or there; anywhere; in a house with mouse; eat box fox; car they; could; may will see tree; let me be; train on; say the dark; rain; goat; boat; so try may; if; good; thank."

Get the picture?





# Words create worlds

And now for something completely different.

That's another fine mess you've gotten me into.  
You stupid boy.  
Mange tout, mange tout.  
I don't believe it.  
Ain't bovered.  
Yeah, I know.  
Nudge, nudge, know what I mean?  
My arse!  
Loadsamoney!  
I didn't get where I am today...  
How very dare you.  
It's all in the best possible taste.  
Shut that door.  
You dirty old man.  
Garlic bread, it's the future.  
Just like that.

Calm down, calm down!  
Oh my God, they killed Kenny.  
I have a cunning plan.  
Oh, Matron.  
Drink, Feck, Arse.  
Suits you, sir.  
It's goodnight from me and it's goodnight from him.  
Lovely jubbly.  
Is it because I is black?  
Ooh, you are awful, but I like you.  
Don't panic!  
Does my bum look big in this?

If you recognise around 87% of these catchphrases, you know how much words matter in every walk of life. Even in business.





# Help me, Ben

London. Autumn. 3 in the afternoon. The business office of Ben Blade, Word Detective.  
Across the desk, legs crossed, Esther Broad plc.

Ben: "What's a fine brand like you doing with a small firm like me?"

Esther: "It's personal. Can I trust you?"

Ben: "Be my guest."

Esther: "I'm sick and tired of avatars and digifreaks, people I hire in fancy offices and never see again."

Ben: "You've got the money. You can work with designers who look like you, sound like you...I don't see the problem."

Esther: "Emperor dressers, star-spangled gurus and their latest academic theories..."

Ben: "Listen, I hang around brands where they don't even know what language means, even though they're up to their vernaculars in it. I can tell you stories about dumb brands who can't see the word for the trees, where people spend millions to avoid justifying their existence in plain English. I could tell you..."

Esther: "Ben, you have a certain...reputation. I need a man with a reputation. You find the words. You always find the words."



# Find the words



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