

PRAISE FOR GO LUCK YOURSELF

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“A fabulous book on the underappreciated role of luck in business, brimming with fresh stories and practical advice.”

Richard Shotton – Author of The Choice Factory

“Go Luck Yourself is like wandering round a gallery of great strategic thinking... and then getting to take it all home with you to make your own place look better. Fresh, fun, generous, fascinating – this a book stuffed full of stimulating ideas for any restless challenger to steal and use.”

Adam Morgan – Author of Eating the Big Fish and A Beautiful Constraint

“Andy is as insightful and practical as he is punchy and funny. Maybe you’ll buy this book for the title, but I guarantee you’ll find yourself returning to it whenever you could use a little luck.”

Elle McCarthy – VP, Brand at Electronic Arts

“I really enjoyed this. It’s a fascinating subject and Andy’s style is very readable. The selection is as much fun as the pick and mix at Woolworth’s, but without the security guard watching your every move.”

Zaid Al-Qassab – CMO of Channel 4

“This really is the perfect strategist’s handbook, with great examples, anecdotes, quotes, facts and advice. I found myself time and time again thinking ‘I wish I’d come up with that’ and now having read it, I just might.”

Bridget Angear – Founding Partner at Craig + Bridget

“This brilliant book will change the way you think. Hugely practical and spilling over with examples and inspiration... all delivered with the wit and charm that we have come to expect from Andy Nairn.”

Richard Huntington – Chairman and CSO of Saatchi & Saatchi London

“A rare and generous thing; a strategy book that’s not only spectacularly useful but also an absolute joy to read. Buy and devour – and get one for everyone in your team.”

Katie Mackay-Sinclair – Partner, Mother

“Don’t try to improve your luck by forking out your hard-earned cash on expensive charms, amulets and talismans, buy this book instead. You won’t regret it.”

Helen Rhodes – ECD of BBC Creative

“Prepare to get well and truly lucked. Your team/agency/client/brand/customers will thank you.”

Caroline Pay – CCO of Headspace

“The one thing that ALL successful people have in common is a conscious relationship with luck. Luck is now something that you can practise daily. What a gift.”

Jonathan Mildenhall – CMO of Dave

**GO LUCK
YOURSELF**

GO LUCK YOURSELF

**40 WAYS TO STACK
THE ODDS IN YOUR
BRAND'S FAVOUR**

ANDY NAIRN



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Harriman
House

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Next, thanks to my long-time partners, Helen and Danny. I am incredibly fortunate to have such talented and generous friends, let alone ones who are such good fun to work with. And of course, a big shout out to all my other colleagues and clients past and present. In particular, to Jim Bletsas for designing such a great cover and Loz Horner, Ruth Chadwick and Vickie Ridley for reviewing my first draft.

On that point, I've been reminded how kind our supposedly cut-throat industry can be. So I'm extremely grateful to everybody who has cast an eye over my efforts, offered comments and given interviews. I'm afraid there are too many to mention here but Richard Shotton was particularly helpful when this idea was simply a glimmer in my eye.

Finally, thanks to my editors Craig Pearce and Emma Tinker, and everyone at Harriman House. Writing a book has been a voyage into the unknown for me, so it has been a privilege to have such expert and understanding guides.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Nairn has led a charmed life. He stumbled into advertising after studying Law at Edinburgh University. Almost 30 years later, he's one of the world's most respected brand strategists and a founder of one of the UK's most successful creative agencies.

Lucky Generals has been shortlisted for *Campaign* magazine's Agency of the Year for five years in a row and Andy has been named the country's top strategist for the last three in a row. He has also been listed as one of the top five creative people in world advertising by *Business Insider*.

Now he wants to share his luck with others, so he's donating his royalties to Commercial Break: an organisation that helps working-class talent break into the creative industries.

INTRODUCTION

Luck is a four-letter word in business circles.

You won't hear it at the AGM or read it in the annual report. Neither will you find it in any case study, training manual or résumé. As for books like this – well, a recent survey of business journals found that only 2% of them go anywhere near the subject.

This strikes me as odd. Because, after almost 30 years in advertising, I've often been struck by the pivotal role that chance plays. And when I talk privately with senior business people, they say the same.

In this book, I want to break the taboo.

I'll draw on my own experience – but also everything from architecture to zoology – to explore the role of luck in building a brand. Then I'll provide practical advice that will help you stack the odds in your brand's favour.

That last bit is crucial, because it strikes at the heart of the silence. Luck remains a dirty secret because it's seen to undermine the virtues of hard work, talent and intelligence that are at the heart of any successful business culture. Frankly, if commercial success is dictated by some shadowy force called Fate, then we might as well all give up. But I'm not arguing that.

Instead, I believe that luck exists – and also that you can improve it. And I'll explain how, in four sections.

In Section 1, I'll set out the need to *appreciate what you've got*. Like individuals who don't always recognise their privileges, companies

are often blind to their inherited advantages. In this section I'll encourage you to reappraise existing assets that you might currently be overlooking. In many cases, brand owners already have something really special that just needs revitalising, not completely reinventing.

Then in Section 2, I'll deal with the need to *look out for opportunities everywhere*. Chance often presents itself unexpectedly and requires an open mind to spot it. Here, I'll encourage you to be alert to inspiration from other spheres and from other perspectives. As the novelist Sally Koslow says, you need to “learn to recognise good luck when it's waving to you”.

In Section 3, I'll cover the potential to *turn misfortune into good fortune*. This part will be all about optimism and durability: I'll describe how people and brands have overcome crises, criticism, flaws, limitations, hate and taboos. I'll show you how to see opportunities for your brand, even in the most difficult of circumstances. In fact, I'll show how you can emerge from the darkness, stronger than you were before.

Finally, in Section 4 I'll explain how you can *practise being lucky*. This isn't just a nod to Gary Player's famous observation that “the harder I practise, the luckier I get”. Instead, I'll argue that the pursuit of good fortune requires conscious attention in its own right – *over and above* the honing of your core skills (and sometimes, instead of this). Here, I'll discuss practical ways to build luck into your organisation's systems, processes and corporate culture.

Before we jump in, I'll mention a couple of caveats.

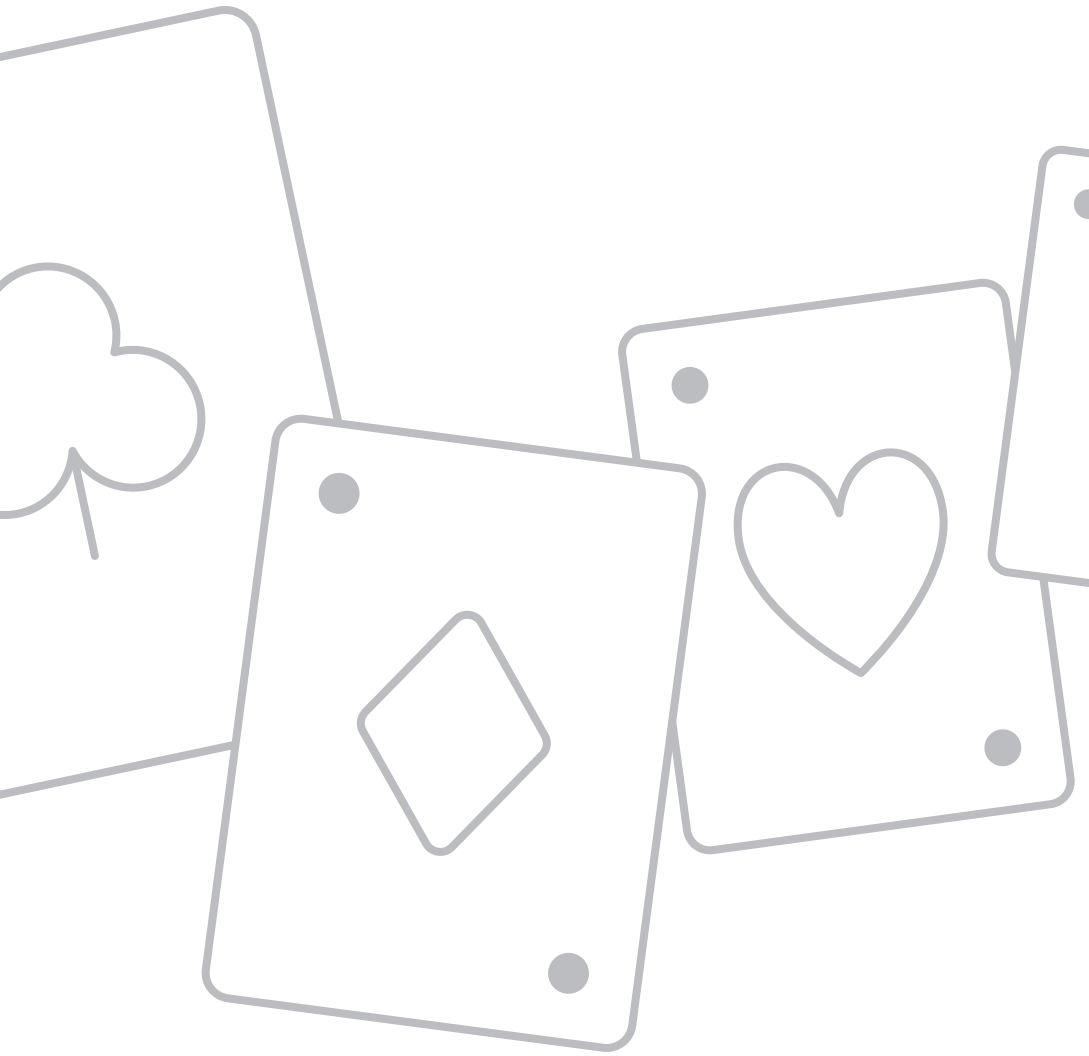
First, while this is very much my personal account, there are obviously hundreds of people who have helped me on the dozens of projects I describe here and over my career generally. In particular, I have two longstanding (and long-suffering) business partners – Helen Calcraft and Danny Brooke-Taylor – whose names could easily appear on every page of this book, were it not for the risk of repetition. They do pop up occasionally in person (and throughout,

as the royal ‘we’) and I couldn’t have done any of this without them. Apologies to anyone else that I’ve missed out along the way, in the interest of streamlining my stories.

Second, I’m conscious that I write as someone who has spent his entire working life in the West (especially in the UK and the USA). I recognise that many other cultures have very different attitudes to luck – it often carries less of a stigma in business, or in life generally. However, I believe that my strategies for success are universal and I have tried to include examples from all over the world to make this point.

Finally, my desire to draw on an eclectic range of sources has its drawbacks. In some places, I cite unsavoury characters, including ruthless leaders, criminals and bigots. I hope it goes without saying that I’m not endorsing their broader actions or opinions. But just in case: I’m not.

Right. Having got all that out of the way, let’s begin by looking for luck close to home and exploring the need to appreciate what you’ve got.





SECTION

1

**APPRECIATE
WHAT YOU'VE
GOT**

WARREN BUFFETT IS one of the richest people in history.

Interestingly, he puts a lot of his success down to luck. In particular, he has memorably talked about “winning the ovarian lottery”. In other words, he recognises how fortunate he was, just to be born a privileged, white male, in 20th-century America.

The human inequalities caused by inherited luck are outside the scope of this book. But I do think some broad parallels apply to brands. Some companies have built up enormous advantages over their competition – privileges which they can pass on to successive brand custodians. For instance: greater awareness, distribution, pricing muscle and pipelines of innovation.

So should you simply accept your place in the corporate pecking order?

Certainly not. If you’re responsible for a challenger brand, you should seek out the advantages that you do have, rather than bemoan the ones you don’t. And if you’re looking after a market leader, you should be careful not to be complacent.

Either way, the first step towards improving your fortunes is to appreciate what you already have. For as Roald Dahl once wrote: “We are all a great deal luckier than we realise.”

In this section, I’ll explore some of the sources of good fortune which companies are most likely to overlook – including the brand’s name, provenance, historical legacy, obscure product features and cultural connections.

I’ll also talk about the powerful assets that can make budgets go further – like brand characters, employees, data and owned media.

And I'll finish by highlighting the power of timing – often dismissed as a fluke, but something which takes real skill to get right.

Throughout, the message will be to seize the opportunities that are sitting under your nose. For as the celebrated psychologist Dr Tal Ben-Shahar says: “When you appreciate the good, the good appreciates.”

LUCKY NAME

ACCORDING TO MUMSNET, about one in five British parents regret their choice of children's names. Perhaps this is no wonder, given that baby names registered in the UK in recent years include *Marvellous*, *Isis*, *Danger* and *Shy*.

I reckon a similar ratio applies to marketers, although perhaps with less justification.

Many brand owners worry that their moniker isn't quite right. Maybe it's too long, too generic, too regional or just not catchy enough. Perhaps the advance of technology has rendered it archaic, or the foreign origins make it hard to pronounce. Alternatively, it's not search-friendly or not cut out for social. Whatever the reason, some marketers look at their brand name with something approaching parental regret.

I think this angst is a result of the pressure that has been piled on the naming decision over the years. In particular, the pioneers of positioning, Al Ries and Jack Trout, warned that naming was "the single most important marketing decision a company can make". They then listed nine features of a great brand name, saying that it should be "short, simple, suggestive of the category, unique, alliterative, speakable, spellable, shocking and personalised". To be fair, they didn't require every name to pass all nine tests, but they did urge marketers to tick off as many boxes as they could. Measured against this yardstick, you can see why many brand managers feel inadequate.

I'm not denying that this decision is really important. I remember how much time my partners and I spent on our own choice, before landing on Lucky Generals. But all my experience tells me that a good business maketh the name, not the other way round. Put simply, it's much more important to have a great product, which will then reflect well on the brand, than pin all your hopes on a clever play on words.

Unconvinced?

Consider the story of AskJeeves versus Google. The former is arguably a much better name for a search engine. It's certainly more suggestive of the category and brings a sense of human, intuitive service, whereas the latter just sounds like a faceless algorithm. We all know what happened next though.

Then there's MySpace and Facebook. The first is much more personal, inspirational and emotional – but it was left for dust by a clumsy reference to student yearbooks.

I could go on, but hopefully you get my point. If a *good* name is no guarantee of success, then a *bad* name shouldn't necessarily be viewed as a burden either. As with so many examples in this book, it's what you do with the hand you're dealt, that ultimately determines your luck.

I was reminded of this a few years ago, when I was working on Loyd Grossman's range of cooking sauces.

Brands that are named after celebrity founders are particularly tricky because their currency is so dependent on the fortunes of their namesakes. It's why many stars take a subtler approach these days, providing backing behind the scenes rather than on the pack. But back then, we were still in the era of Paul Newman's dressings, Linda McCartney's meat-free range and George Foreman's grills rather than Casamigos (George Clooney), Fenty (Rihanna) and Ivy Park (Beyoncé).

In Loyd's case, putting his face and name on the label had been a very deliberate choice. He'd launched the range in 1995, at a time when he was the presenter of two big shows on British television: *Masterchef* and *Through the Keyhole*. Before that, he'd worked for many years as a highly respected food critic. So his endorsement originally brought both fame and credibility. This wasn't just a celebrity selling his signature for a quick buck; he really cared about the product and played an active role in the development of new recipes. Over the next decade or so, the brand grew stronger and the range expanded from pasta sauces to encompass many more cuisines.

By 2009, though, sales were slowing. There were lots of reasons behind this, including increased competition from apparently similar (but actually inferior) rivals.

However, one factor was arguably that Loyd's own profile was not what it had been. In recent years, he'd chosen to prioritise other interests outside of TV and journalism (including guitar duties in a rather nifty punk band called The New Forbidden). As a result, a new generation of home cooks was growing up without a full understanding of Loyd's backstory.

Worse still, the main thing people *did* remember about Loyd was that he had a rather odd accent. Raised in Boston and then relocated to the UK, his mangled vowels sounded like an affectation, although they were completely genuine. It didn't seem like a great claim to fame, so his marketing team inevitably began to wonder whether it was time to evolve the brand name to something subtler. 'LG Sauces' was mooted. I wasn't sure. Not least because I didn't fancy breaking the news to the man himself!

Cut to a rather awkward meeting with Loyd and his brand team. We pored over the data. We reviewed the competition in excruciating detail. We looked at the new products that were coming through. In short, we talked about everything apart from the one thing we needed to. The poor man must have thought we were behaving very oddly.

Eventually, I'd had enough and bravely took things into my own hands. By which I mean I passed a note to my partner Helen and asked *her* to do something. And guess what? When she gingerly mentioned the fact that the one thing people associated with Loyd was his voice, he laughed out loud. It turned out that this was not news to him at all because “even my childraaaaaan make fuhhhhn of me awwwwl the tihhhhme”.

This was the breakthrough we needed. Instead of shying away from the supposed problem, we embraced it. We stuck with the name but developed a line to breathe new life into it:

“Sauces with a distinctive voice.”

We then created some funny advertising, featuring people doing impressions of Loyd as they cooked. Even Loyd got in on the act, with a brilliant, self-deprecating cameo of his own.

It wasn't just entertainment for the sake of it. It was a powerful reminder of Loyd's culinary credentials and the fact that his sauces were a cut above the rest. All served up with a generous helping of wit. A decade or so on, the brand is still going strong.

Which just goes to show, there's really no such thing as a bad name, as long as you have a good imagination.

GO LUCK YOURSELF

Convention says: A problematic name will wreck your chances of success.

Luck says: Your name is what you make of it.

So ask yourself: How might your brand name give you a more distinctive voice?



LUCKY PLACE

CONSETT IS JUST a small town in the north-east of England but it used to have the biggest steelworks in the world.

I know this because several of my family worked at the plant and in the surrounding coalmines which fed its furnaces. When we visited Consett as kids, we were always amazed by the red dust which covered everything. It was like visiting Mars, except the aliens were very friendly and called you ‘pet’.

Sadly, the steelworks closed in 1980 and 4,500 people were made redundant. The coalmines followed soon afterwards and before long, Consett had the highest level of unemployment in the whole of Western Europe. The iron oxide powder still caked the streets, but it now had sinister associations: it was increasingly linked to a host of serious lung conditions. In short, Consett was the least likely place in the world to launch a premium food brand. But in 1982, that’s exactly what four local men did.

The team had spotted a gap for a range of posh snacks, incorporating flavours from all over the world – but without the snootiness that the 1980s was already becoming known for. So they named their brand Phileas Fogg, after the hero of Jules Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days*. But their masterstroke was to emphasise that the nerve centre of the operation was “Medomsley Road, Consett”. They even created a fictional airport (Consett International), which was supposed to be the gateway to the “cultural centre of Europe”.

It was all very tongue in cheek, of course, but focusing on these humble roots was a brilliant way to make the product feel accessible.

Medomsley Road became a household name and the local council had to field hundreds of enquiries about the non-existent transport hub. Within 12 years, the unlikely Geordie gourmets had sold the business to United Biscuits for about £24 million.

Phileas Fogg is interesting for our purposes, because it shows that there's no such thing as a 'bad place' to come from. Many marketers only think about provenance when their brand hails from somewhere classically beautiful, cool or wholesome. Hence all those whisky ads set in the Scottish Highlands, all the sportswear brands positioned in America's inner cities and all the food packaging that cues the Mediterranean. These conventions make sense – but you can arguably make more impact by hero-ing a more unusual home.

The story of Medomsley Road is also fascinating because it shows how an apparently narrow provenance story can have broad appeal. This is important because marketers often worry that highlighting their geographic origins might be a turn-off to people from elsewhere. The team behind Phileas Fogg clearly didn't want to confine sales to one street in Consett: they were using their roots to demonstrate a much broader, down-to-earth stance.

Whether we like it or not, places aren't just postcodes: they carry regional associations, stereotypes and quirks. So if you can define the local spirit as an attitude, rather than a literal location, you can garner much wider appeal than you might think.

That's certainly been the experience of another regional upstart, based about 100 miles down the A1 from Consett. Yorkshire Tea was third in the tea market when we pitched for the business in 2016. The top two players – PG Tips and Tetley – had held sway for decades and were considered pretty invincible, given Britons' reluctance to change tea brands. The market was in long-term decline too, so attracting

completely new users would be impossible. And to cap it all, we had one of those pitches where everything seemed to go wrong.

Despite all this, we fluked it. Or as the marketing director, Dom Dwight, told us later, we “lost the pitch but won the business”. The reason he took a gamble on us was that he saw the glimmer of an idea in one of our half-baked routes. It involved making more of the mantra that adorned the factory wall: “We do things proper.” We felt this was a brilliant statement of the company’s commitment to quality, expressed with an authentic Yorkshire accent.

What we hadn’t quite cracked was how to make this philosophy famous, fun and nationally relevant. After all, ‘God’s own county’ has a reputation for taking itself quite seriously and the idea of making a proper cup of tea could have felt quite dour, functional and parochial.

Well, we kept travelling back and forth to Harrogate, without quite nailing it. But gradually, we noticed something interesting. That Yorkshire philosophy of doing things ‘proper’ didn’t just apply to the tea production process; it seemed to spill into all the other aspects of the company culture. There was just something about the people up there and their determination to do everything well. Even the receptionists’ welcome seemed to be friendlier and more personal than elsewhere.

This got us thinking: a story about tea production might be boring, but what if we celebrated all the other things that the company did ‘proper’? I mean, we all have to do small jobs at work sometimes. And as our creatives Nick and Lee observed: “We know that when the small jobs are done well, it’s a sure sign that the big ones are done well too.”

This breakthrough led to a new idea:

“Yorkshire Tea – where *everything’s* done proper” (my italics).

To bring this to life in advertising, we hired celebrities to do menial jobs around the company HQ. Importantly, they were all

from Yorkshire, but national treasures too. For example, Michael Parkinson did the interviews, the Kaiser Chiefs provided the hold music and Sean Bean did the team pep talk.

It was an idea with regional roots but countrywide appeal – as shown by the fact that Yorkshire Tea became the biggest-selling tea brand in Britain within three years.

And do you know which region showed the biggest growth at launch? Lancashire. As any Northerner will tell you, a campaign that can persuade Lancastrians to buy a product called ‘Yorkshire Tea’ must have been proper great.

GO LUCK YOURSELF

Convention says: Only brands from glamorous places should do provenance.

Luck says: There's no such thing as a 'bad place'.

So ask yourself: How could you channel your local spirit?



LUCKY LEGACY

ANTIQUES ROADSHOW IS one of the longest-running series in British television. Since its debut in 1979, generations of viewers have marvelled at the treasures which lucky punters have found in their attics. Often they have inherited these artefacts from their forebears and dismissed them as worthless, only to be corrected by the experts.

There was the glass vase being used as a peanut dispenser (it later went for £42k). The leather jacket that turned out to be JFK's (valued at £200k). The decrepit old camera (£320k) and the not-so-humble plant pot (£560k). We laugh at people using priceless meteorites as doorstops and rare tapestries as curtains. But sometimes, businesses are guilty of far greater negligence.

Often, organisations are sitting on the brand equivalent of these treasures – except the assets may be worth tens of millions rather than hundreds of thousands. The artefacts might be old slogans, ad campaigns, promotional mechanics or graphic devices. Or they might simply be an archive of amazing stories, photographs and packaging. Once you blow off the dust, these can reveal themselves to be as powerful as they ever were, but all too often they remain forgotten and unloved.

Sometimes, this neglect is due to genuine ignorance. With CMOs and agencies changing on average every three years, corporate memories can be dangerously short. But in other cases, the decision is more deliberate and represents the desire of new brooms to

sweep the past behind them. In an industry where history is seen as the preserve of dinosaurs, the very idea of looking back is viewed as anathema.

All these themes were evident when we found ourselves working on Hovis, back in 2008. The long-time brand leader in bread had recently been toppled by regional challenger Warburtons. Market share was in steep decline and disgruntled retailers were threatening to cut distribution. Morale among the 6,500 bakery workers was low. As a result, the brand's owner Premier Foods was in peril. A *Sunday Times* article depicted the CEO in a toaster, with the headline: "Is Premier toast?" Pundits were united as to the cause of all this: the Hovis brand was old-fashioned and in urgent need of modernisation.

It's easy to see why so many observers reached this conclusion. Hovis is one of the UK's most venerable brands. Founded in 1886, its name is a contraction of the Latin phrase *hominis vis* ('the strength of man'). As if this wasn't archaic enough, there are ghost murals of the brand all over the country: faded advertisements that reinforce the idea of Hovis belonging to a bygone era.

Most of all, Hovis was associated with a very old-fashioned advertising campaign. Ridley Scott's 1974 story of a 'Boy on the bike' is one of the most famous TV spots of all time and its sepia tones are used as a cultural shorthand for nostalgia. Researchers complained that they only had to mention the brand's name in a focus group and people would start humming the brass band music and talking about cobbled streets. Successive ad agencies had tried to break free from this heritage, with bright animated styles and modern families, but to no avail. Hovis appeared to be irrevocably stuck in the past.

Against this gloomy backdrop, we were surprised to get a call from a new CMO called Jon Goldstone, asking us over to Hovis HQ in Windsor. I remember the meeting well. The newspapers that day were full of terrible economic news (it was the early stages of the Global Financial Crisis), which put a further dampener on the usual small talk.

Instead, Jon jumped straight into the business challenge, which he described as a “burning bridge”. Unless we took dramatic action, the brand (and possibly the company) would cease to exist. In the long term, he would need to overhaul the entire marketing mix, but in the meantime, he asked us to keep the flames at bay with “the ad campaign of the year”. No pressure.

What was great about this briefing was that Jon didn’t dictate the solution. Frankly he didn’t care what we did as long as we got him out of this hole. In particular, he didn’t flinch when we asked whether we could explore the company archives. Although this seemed an unlikely source of inspiration for a brand that urgently needed to bring itself up to date, we wondered whether there was anything that we could repurpose for the modern era. As it happened, there was.

What everybody had forgotten, in the rush to erase ‘Boy on the bike’ from history, was that there was a really strong line hiding at the end:

“As good for you today, as it’s always been.”

OK, it was a bit too focused on healthiness, because it had been conceived for an era when Hovis only made wholemeal bread. But my creative partner Danny pointed out that if we shortened it to “As good today as it’s always been”, we could communicate an array of messages about the modern range (from taste to innovation, brown bread to white). Best of all, the slogan wasn’t as backwards-looking as we remembered it. When we read it again, we could see that it did hark back to another era (“as it’s always been”), but really the emphasis was on the brand’s enduring relevance *today*.

This sparked another thought. What if we borrowed some of the narrative spirit of ‘Boy on the bike’, not just the line. Again, this felt counter-intuitive. But we reasoned that the ad was so iconic that it would be easier to build on it than obliterate it.

Step forward another lad, in a sepia-tinged setting. He started in a Victorian bakery, where he bought a loaf of bread (just like the boy in Ridley Scott’s classic). This was everything we’d been told to run a

mile from, but instead our lad ran through 122 years (and 122 seconds) of history: through crowds of suffragettes, WWI recruits, the Blitz, Coronation street parties, World Cup celebrations, striking miners and finally the Millennium fireworks. Eventually, he ran through a modern front door, put the loaf on the kitchen table and told his mum he was home. Phew.

This epic reworking of “As good today as it’s always been” was a smash hit. It built on the past, but literally brought the brand up to date. Its story of enduring goodness captured the hopes of the nation, which had now plunged into full-blown recession. Jon Goldstone not only got his wish for the ad of the year, the British public voted it their favourite campaign of the *decade*. And more importantly, sales rocketed. In fact, Hovis was the fastest-growing grocery brand of the year and the campaign was estimated to have boosted profits by about £90m.

Imagine finding that in your attic.

GO LUCK YOURSELF

Convention says: Looking backwards is a bad thing.

Luck says: Your brand's history can be a treasure trove of good ideas.

So ask yourself: What's in your brand's attic?



LUCKY FEET

YOU KNOW WHAT they say about men with big feet, don't you? Yes, well I'm afraid it's not true. In 1993, Canadian doctors measured the foot size and penile length of 63 men and found only a weak correlation between the two. A Korean study from 1999 was not much more encouraging. And neither was a British study from 2002.

In fact, it appears that there are very few advantages to having big feet. A further study from 2011 (yes, it does seem odd that there is so much research in this area...) found that women prefer men with average-sized feet anyway. Worse still, a Swedish report from 2016 suggested that life expectancy decreases as shoe size increases. There doesn't even seem to be any benefit to runners: the consensus among sports scientists seems to be that any marginal gains in stride are more than cancelled out by extra weight.

In traditional marketing terms then, this makes big feet pretty useless. They don't provide the *meaningful differentiation* we are taught to pursue.

This concept has been at the heart of the advertising discipline since at least the 1930s. Sometimes the terminology changes – for instance the Unique Selling Proposition (USP) lost favour to the idea of an Emotional Selling Proposition (ESP) in the 1990s. But the basic argument has remained the same: brands need to find a point of difference that is valued by other people. A compelling benefit, not something pointless like my facetious foot-based example.

This sacred belief has made life difficult for companies all over the world. Successive marketers have embarked on quests to find something different to say – only to find that this is almost impossible in many categories. The entire market research industry has been set up to help, but anyone who has ever run a focus group will tell you that respondents often don't care about the propositions which are offered up.

Ad agencies have got in on the act too: one British agency famously offered to “interrogate your product until it confesses to its strengths”. It all sounds like a lot of hard work, doesn't it? Which is the exact opposite of what consumers want when they are shopping.

In the last few years, this model has been turned on its head by the work of Professor Byron Sharp and his colleagues at the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute in Adelaide. Sharp has revolutionised marketing by using empirical research to find out how consumers really buy and *How Brands Grow* (the title of his breakthrough book).

One of Sharp's most iconoclastic findings is that meaningful differentiation isn't always necessary for commercial success. Instead, companies should build *distinctive* qualities which help their brands stand out and make them easier to find. Crucially, these attributes don't need to have any intrinsic purpose or profound meaning: they can be something as simple as a colour, a logo, a tagline or a shape.

This new way of looking at the world should be good news for many marketers. Instead of slogging away, trying to find a non-existent USP, they should first consider what distinctive assets they have.

Many organisations will have these assets but may have rejected them as pointless. Perhaps they have a striking colour but have struggled to articulate what deeper meaning that hue symbolises. Or maybe they have an unusual shape that doesn't really serve a purpose. In the old model, these could be considered unfortunate – but with this fresh perspective, they might emerge as very lucky indeed.

Peter Mayhew from Barnes in Surrey would probably have agreed with this point of view. Born in 1944, he developed an overactive pituitary gland and grew to 7 feet 3 inches tall, with size 17.5 shoes. Apart from this, there was nothing remarkable about him. He had no exceptional talents. He was neither athletically inclined nor academically gifted. He was just a kind, unassuming man who went on to work as a porter in a London hospital – until his distinguishing feature got him his lucky break.

This came in 1976, when a local reporter visited Peter's place of work and became transfixed by the size of the gentle giant's feet. The journalist encouraged Mayhew to write to the *Guinness Book of Records* and although this came to nothing, he later wrote an article about him and his clodhoppers.

By further chance, this attracted the attention of a movie producer called Charles Schneer, who was casting for his latest blockbuster, *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger*. Schneer asked Mayhew to play the Minotaur and shortly afterwards another producer named Gary Kurtz came calling about a new space adventure film. This movie had been rejected by a host of studios but later became one of the biggest franchises of all time: *Star Wars*. Mayhew played the beloved character of Chewbacca from 1977 to 2015.

You could say that he landed on his feet.

My point is that sometimes, it's OK to be pointless. Mayhew's distinctive feature apparently served no purpose in life. But it did help him stand out and made him easy to find. In a world where consumers don't want to spend ages thinking through their choices, that's a pretty good steer for most brands too.

GO LUCK YOURSELF

Convention says: Brands need to find a meaningful difference.

Luck says: It's better to be stupidly distinctive than deeply different.

So ask yourself: What's your most unusual feature, even if it seems pointless?

