

Wally Olins

Viewpoints

Life in the sixties in the design business:
or as Groucho said, 'How we rose from
nothing to a state of extreme poverty.'
Campaign, 26 October 2001

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I learn from elegiac outpourings in coffee table books and on TV that the 60's were some kind of golden age for creative businesses. Everybody felt liberated and independent. Maybe. But for people like me, working in small, struggling, financially fragile businesses, it certainly did not feel like it at the time.

In Wolff Olins there were about 12 of us working behind a converted shop front in Parkway Camden Town.

We had a fair amount of talent; graphic designers, product designers, architects and a sprinkling of marketing people – those were very early days for marketing people in design companies.

The company called itself a design consultancy, and we hovered uneasily between the rather pretentious, narrow, introverted and insecure world of design and the more vigorous, commercially successful, louche world of advertising. There wasn't really a design business. There was no trade newspaper, although there were some magazines mostly illustrating Italian toilets and Danish light fittings. There was also the Council of Industrial Design who saw its main job as improving public taste, a bit of an uphill struggle, and there were lots of jobbing designers - some good, some bad, most indifferent.

In the early days, Wolff Olins' work centred on a mixed diet of exhibition stands, packaging, brochures, signing systems and some product design. The term corporate identity had only just been invented, and brands were mostly labels on jars of jam and washing powder.

We knew we wanted to do complete corporate identity jobs for our clients. But we had to define what identity was. There were no rules and not many examples to follow. So we had to work it out for ourselves.

But our problem was also how to get known. In the 60's, the only companies that really mattered in the communication business were advertising agencies. They did everything. If you had a communication problem, you went to the agency. They solved it. Logos or symbols as they were then called? The agency did them for free. Packaging? The agency did that too. Exhibition stands? The agency had a department.

Most advertising agencies regarded us with a mixture of incomprehension and disdain. They assumed either that we were a supplier/sub-contractor to them, or that we nursed secret ambitions to become a fully fledged proper ad agency ourselves. They simply could not believe that complementary let alone competitive suppliers could exist in the communications business.

To get on in the communications world, make a mark and get noticed, we had to do things that ad agencies didn't or couldn't. We were lucky. We designed prototype restaurants for Lyons, then a big name in catering, and we developed a very high profile identity programme for a paint company Hadfields, a computer company English Electric Computers and for BOC the gases company, which in a much

modified and diluted form is still current. At the time we did this work, nothing much had been seen like it.

Wolff Olins also had a hand in putting the final nails in the coffin of the British motor cycle industry. We worked with Norton Villiers to redesign their final throw, the Norton Commando. The bike was too big to get inside our little converted shop in Camden Town so when it rained we covered it up with a tarpaulin. I used to wonder whether the Japanese were designing their bikes that way.

All this work and more stuff for people like Bovis, Bowyers, P&O and others was quite startling and high profile. It was clearly commercial and it was evidently in the world of communication but it was nothing to do with advertising. So it, and we, began to be noticed.

By the mid 70's life in the design world had changed completely. People like James Pilditch, Terence Conran and a bit later Rodney Fitch and Michael Peters had big business ambitions. A new world of retail design, interiors and corporate design was created. Design companies grew, both in size and reputation.

Ad agencies and design companies began to collaborate; clients began to get knowledgeable and a bit more choosy. Trade magazines like Design Week and Blueprint appeared. Design commentators like Peter York, Deyan Sudjic and the subsequently ubiquitous Stephen Bayley emerged and by then – that is say the early 80's, design was an established, more or less mainstream activity. The very big job that reinforced Wolff Olins' reputation in the 80's was 3i, the first major financial services company to use design in a big way.

Then suddenly round about the late 80's, everything became a Brand; political parties, universities, football clubs, airlines. And the brand began to take over the corporation. Previously companies like Unilever had created and developed brands. Now the new companies Virgin, Body Shop were themselves brands. Branding moved from products to services, simply because the service sector exploded. Mobile phone companies, utilities, financial service groups all suddenly demanded brands. At the same time conventional advertising broke into shards, and new and powerful forms of promotion and communications developed, from direct mail to multi-media. So simultaneously advertising agencies became less important and other communications companies not just design consultants but PR companies, direct mail houses, multi media shops and others elbowed their way into the action.

Design consultants rapidly transformed themselves into brand consultants. Sometimes the transformation was cosmetic; in just a few instances it was real. And that's when they really became significant players, competing with and sometimes collaborating with McKinsey, Bain and other major consultants. Most of the top brand consultants grew both organically and by acquisition. They expanded into Europe, some even internationally, some went public. In the last recession of the early 90's quite a few went bust. Since then many brand consultants have been acquired by major communication groups. Now they have become global mainstream service businesses.

Have we lost something? Yes, our innocence. Have we gained anything? Commercial nous, sophistication and a real place in the sun. Not a bad swap, I suppose.