

# Rebranding without the Onion

**Paul Feldwick** and **Seamus O'Farrell** of Prostate Cancer UK relate the story of the rebranding of the Prostate Cancer Charity to give it a noisier profile and attract more research funding, with lessons for other organisations

**O**n New Year's Day 2013, Prostate Cancer UK launched its first-ever large-scale advertising campaign. At 9.00pm, viewers on all TV channels watched comedian Bill Bailey talk about the Sledgehammer Fund, aiming to raise awareness and understanding of a disease that kills almost as many men as breast cancer does women, yet is much less known about or funded. This event was the culmination of a year that had seen a complete transformation of the charity, changing not just its name and visual identity, but also many aspects of its behaviour and internal culture.

This is our story of how within a few months we helped the rather too polite and self-effacing Prostate Cancer Charity become the louder, livelier and more outspoken Prostate Cancer UK ([www.prostatecanceruk.org](http://www.prostatecanceruk.org)).

We're telling this story because what we did runs counter to much of the conventional textbook wisdom that is mandated by large organisations or recommended by branding consultants. This states that radical rebranding projects like this should begin by working on a clear strategic blueprint for what the brand should become – a Brand Key, or the infamous Brand Onion. This is then used to brief agencies, and when the

new identity is ready, it is revealed and 'sold in' to the organisation.

But this was much more a process in which strategy, execution and cultural change were allowed to emerge together. Both design agency and staff were involved almost from the start. At the end, we certainly had a clear and rigorous sense of exactly what the brand is now about, and we can put that into words. But we never had a 'brand onion'. Nor did we have a pre-scripted process for how we would approach the work: the structure of what we did, we also invented as we went along.

This may not be as crazy as it sounds. Experts who have closely studied how things really get done concur: for example, Karl Weick argues that successful strategy generally emerges by making sense of things that are already being done, and Don Schon, in *The Reflective Practitioner*, shows how professional practice across widely different fields depends much more on the interplay between experiment and skill than on the application of pre-existing theories or processes. It's just that the stories that get written afterwards – the case histories, awards papers or corporate manuals – tend to rewrite what actually happened in order to support what Schon calls the myth of 'technical rationality', the idea that you get to a practical outcome by working out

the theory (or 'strategy') first. We believe this is hardly, if ever, true of any creative process, yet the attempt to come up with a theoretical solution prior to acting on it is one of the most important factors that make creative processes in organisations much more difficult and drawn out than they need to be.

## BACKGROUND

The Prostate Cancer Charity had been founded in 1996 by Jonathan Waxman, a young cancer specialist at London's Hammersmith Hospital, who was horrified by the lack of understanding of the disease and the limited options for treatment; only 20 years ago, physical castration was the standard procedure. By summer 2011, the charity had grown and developed into an organisation of over 100 staff, with an active board of trustees. In recent years, it had enjoyed a major increase in income as the principal UK beneficiary of Movember, the hugely successful international charity that raises money for men's health through sponsored moustache-growing each November.

Yet The Prostate Cancer Charity and the disease itself both remained very little known, relative to the scale of the problem; 10,000 men a year die from prostate cancer

in the UK, almost as many as women dying of breast cancer. Yet, while £853 was spent last year on research for each diagnosed case of breast cancer, less than half this amount – £417 – was spent on prostate cancer.

With a new chief executive, and a newly created post of director of communications, the trustees now wished to increase the salience and scale of the charity to a new level.

### THE CHALLENGE

Despite this intention, the organisation seemed unsure on how to proceed. A confusing range of options were debated. Was it necessary to change the name – something no organisation undertakes lightly? How radical a change was needed in visual identity? What would be the communications strategy – was the goal to urge men over a certain age to demand screening for the disease, or were the available tests so uncertain that this would just create alarm, unnecessary invasive treatment with serious side effects, and impossible pressures on the health service? But if not that, what? Such questions raised deeper strategic dilemmas – was The Prostate Cancer Charity about campaigning, fund-raising, research, or support for people with the disease? (It was and, in fact, remains, all of these.) Should it narrow its scope, or, as others suggested, broaden it to include all male cancers, or even all male health issues?

When we began working together in September 2011, it seemed logical that the strategic issues had to be resolved before work could begin on rebranding. But we then challenged that assumption. Maybe the demands for strategic clarity and for a tightly scripted process were precisely the things that were holding the organisation back from acting; perhaps only by acting would things become clearer. We also developed a hunch that there were deep patterns in the culture of the charity that were inhibiting it from becoming famous – an ‘evidence-based’ culture made people cautious about taking risks, while overly polite norms of internal behaviour actively (if unconsciously) sustained a discreet and somewhat ‘muffled’ public profile. All this expressed itself publicly through a recessive visual identity in a pale, NHS blue, and a rather static logo.

### THE PROCESS

To explore and surface these issues in a way that might start something shifting in the organisation, we invited Gill Ereaut of Linguistic Landscapes to analyse the organisation’s ‘discourse’ – not just the language used both internally and externally, but also the symbols and behaviour. It is in these very tangible things that the rather intangible concept called ‘culture’ exists, and when people are helped to notice them they can choose whether to change them. One important principle is that the internal discourse inevitably ‘leaks’ into external behaviour and communications. We therefore decided the rebranding project might begin by examining the internal

and health service professionals. The third would pull together the overall ‘story’ that we now wanted the brand to tell. Between workshops, Hat Trick would produce executional ideas to bring our thinking to life. We called the project ‘We, the Brand’ to emphasise that branding was not just external redecoration, but involved everyone. In practice, the plan evolved as we went along, and as the ‘story’ became clearer, the third workshop in the end seemed unnecessary.

At the first workshop, Linguistic Landscapes presented its findings – pointing out, without judging, how the discourse in the organisation tended to be quite elaborate, euphemistic, and depersonalised. The staff immediately recognised the accuracy of this and understood how their



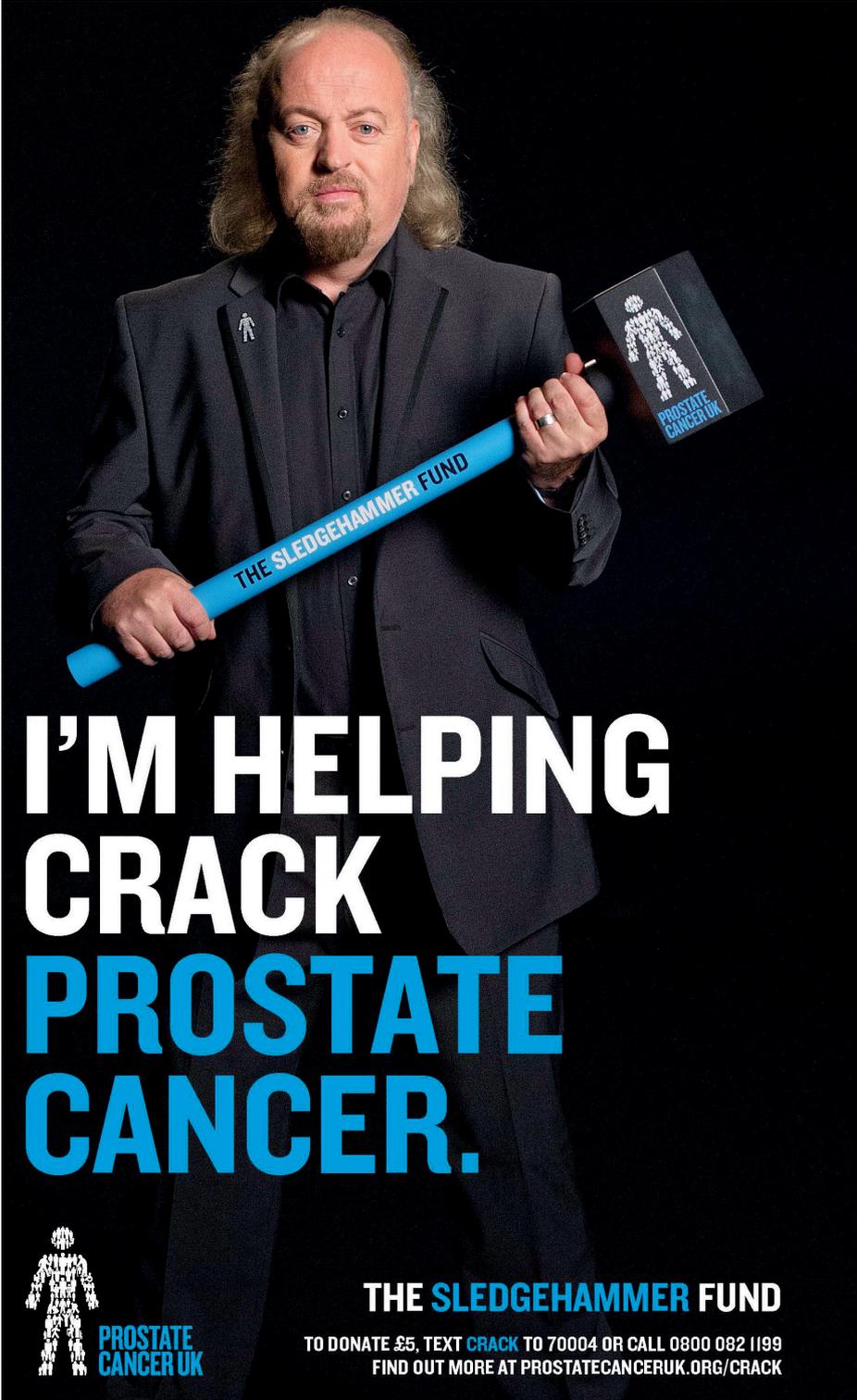
*Prostate Cancer UK: rebranded from its ‘recessive visual identity’ (left) with a bolder ‘man of men’ logo*

discourse first. As fashion expert Gok Wan might say, ‘it’s no good buying an expensive new dress until you’ve learnt the right way to strut down the catwalk’.

Linguistic Landscapes analysed hundreds of documents – e-mails, memos, press releases, internal and external publications – as well as conversations in the office and on the telephone. Meanwhile, we planned how to integrate these findings into a simultaneous process of cultural change and physical rebranding. We outlined three one-day workshops, to involve as many senior staff as possible, at monthly intervals. Before the workshops, we held chemistry meetings and appointed a design agency, Hat Trick, which took an active part in the workshops. The first of these focused on the organisation’s internal culture. The second would focus on external stakeholders – men with the disease

choice of words constructed a reality that they had the power to change. As we talked, we were all becoming aware of the huge contrast between the embarrassment, pain, and controversy that were all inseparable from prostate cancer itself and the rather muffled, over-polite discourse that was current in the organisation.

Jonathan Waxman, the founder, now spoke passionately about his anger and ‘outrage’ at how prostate cancer was still so widely ignored. The participants in the workshop then worked in small groups on their own ideas for rebranding and communicating the organisation; they created ideas like renaming it ‘Outrage’ and having a clenched fist as the logo. The lively debate seemed to release a huge latent energy in the group, and the whole organisation continued to buzz for weeks afterwards.



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## THE STRATEGY

As we all continued to talk together following the workshop, the strategic direction became clearer. If the organisation could now free itself to embrace more controversy, to admit openly what it didn't know, and to talk more directly about the reality of the disease and its treatment, it would be possible to tell what now seemed the obvious story – that this is a terrible disease, but even experts still don't know enough about how to treat or even diagnose it, and that's why we need a lot more money for research. Medical opinion firmly advised against active promotion of the PSA (blood) test, though this remains a controversial point and many men who have had the disease disagree.

There was extended, and sometimes frustrating, debate about names. A consensus emerged, supported by research, that 'The Prostate Cancer Charity' was problematic. This was helped by an incident on primetime TV when a guest told a game show host that he was raising money for The Prostate Cancer Charity and she said, 'Oh that's interesting, what's the charity called?'. The word 'charity', hardly ever used in charity names, lacked medical authority and had other negative connotations. Changing a charity's name is a major legal issue and cannot be taken lightly, and it is always harder than you might think to find a name that isn't already owned elsewhere. After reviewing hundreds of names, management and the board finally agreed on Prostate Cancer UK – less radical than many of the other suggestions, but given that media budgets would always be limited, it seemed more important to have a name that instantly identified what we did.

Meanwhile, Hat Trick was also producing design options which we reviewed with the management team and the board. The previous logo had used a small outline figure of a man. We had anticipated moving to something quite different, but the route that most excited us now took this figure and transformed it into a 'man of men', a distinctive image that symbolised men coming together to fight prostate cancer and to support each other. Hat Trick also replaced the original pale 'NHS' blue with a much darker shade combined with black for a more masculine and contemporary look. One of

the most appealing things about the new visual identity was its flexibility – the ‘man of men’ theme could be adapted into endless different shapes and themes.

The key elements of the rebranding were now all coming together: the name, the visual identity, a shift in internal culture, and a clear story or strategy holding it all together (which we now began to call the MANifesto). Six months after we began, at the end of March 2012, all these key elements were approved by the board and we could prepare for a public relaunch over the summer and autumn. Although advertising would not appear until the New Year, we even had by now the essentials of the creative brief that led to the final work.

## CONCLUSIONS

What is interesting about this story for us is the balance between structured process (workshops, research) and the improvisatory or emergent quality of what we did; strategy as an abstract formula did not precede the tangible executions, but emerged along with, and to a large extent out of, them. This way of working created a momentum that achieved radical changes within six months, a pace which some people early on had considered impossible. There were, as well, moments of feeling stuck or of sometimes painful conflict, but we kept talking and worked through these to the next step, rather than seizing up.

Much current practice assumes that ‘creativity’ is best enabled by structured processes and the use of facilitators. We didn’t do this. Ralph Stacey, professor at the University of Hertfordshire, is another academic who has studied in detail how people really get things done. He argues that if we are prepared to ‘keep the conversation open’, we all have a remarkable natural ability to come to better decisions and more creative solutions. The facilitator with the flip chart and set of rules, and the rigidly prescribed process, may not be necessary or even helpful. Stacey says: “The capacity for emergent new ways of talking is fundamental to organisational creativity... The dynamics of more fluid, spontaneous conversation rely on enough trust and ability to live with anxiety, as well as power relations that are both co-operative and competitive at the

“This way of working created a momentum that achieved radical changes at a pace some considered impossible”

same time and rhetorical conversational practices that do not block exploration.”

Our conclusion would be that, in any creative process, we might benefit from trusting more in the power of ‘fluid, spontaneous conversation’, and rely less on ways of controlling the process that can interfere with that. This may be counter-cultural, it may even seem scary, but based on our experience here – it can work.

In that spirit, we’ve set out ten principles for getting started and keeping going, when the present seems confused and the future unclear.

- Get started, even if you’re not sure of the whole process or the answers to your questions. Things will become clearer as you go. You don’t need ‘the answer’ or ‘proof’ in order to act.
- ‘Just talking’ with a very loose agenda is more productive than tightly scripted processes. The questions that really need to be answered will become apparent as you work. We’re not sure we ever had a meeting with an agenda, and, apart from formal presentations to the board, never ever used PowerPoint.
- Focus on tangible outcomes rather than on abstract theory. In our case, we soon had a good idea what we needed – a new name, a visual identity, a clear story to tell, and some change in the culture and behaviour of the organisation. We didn’t waste time looking for a North Star or a Brand Onion – but still ended up with a clear, coherent and radically transformed brand. Strategy became clear through working out the details of what we really needed to do. Having actual images and stories to share earlier, rather than later, also created shared

confidence and belief in what we were doing.

- You need just enough of a plan to keep moving forward, and to give others confidence to support you. It’s better to let a plan emerge from talking than to impose a formula, but if a formula gets you started it’s better than nothing. Just don’t be so attached to the plan that you can’t pay close attention to what continues to emerge, and respond to it.
- Think of a brand as something created by internal culture and behaviour as much as by externally produced design and communications. Working on internal discourse and culture is a good place to start.
- Don’t wait to involve others until you think you have all the answers, but make them part of the process as early as you can. We invited a large proportion of senior staff into our early work on the brand before we had a clear brief or strategy and involved them in the process. We appointed a design agency before we had a brief for them. We invited others into meetings whenever we thought they might know something, or have a different point of view. As a result, the outcomes of the work needed hardly any ‘selling’ when they appeared.
- Writing things down can be very valuable, but never regard anything as written in stone. Briefs and strategy documents and points of view are all part of the conversation. There may come a time (as it did for us) when you need to publish statements of what you’re about that will be around for a while, and the choice of words here obviously deserves some care: but what you do is always more important than what you say.
- Accept that in any creative process there will be times of feeling stuck, negative, or anxious, and there will be episodes of conflict. You can generally get through these if you keep talking, keep moving, try something different, and trust something will emerge.
- Pay more attention to ‘what can we do now’ than to ‘what might go wrong’. Unless, maybe, you’re a firefighter or an air traffic controller. And maybe even then.
- Don’t be too attached to anything you think you know, including these principles.



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