

● Keywords: Branding, Grand Prix, Licensing

# Perspective

## Williams F1: The Reality of Branding a Leading Grand Prix Team



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**Date received: May 1999**

There remains an enduring snobbery that packaged goods constitute the high ground of branding. Food, drink and detergent markets understand branding better, do more of it and address more complex and interesting issues. Not so.

As a consultancy we specialise in developing brands, and operate across a very broad spectrum. At one end we have branded the Freeplay wind-up (no batteries) radio: more conventionally, we create new brands in fast-moving consumer goods, across a variety of service sectors, and at the other extreme we are involved with national branding, recently Scotland and currently Wales.

In our experience, the strategic will (as well as the budgets) to develop serious brands is declining in packaged goods, a trend reinforced by inexorable margin pressure from the retailers, and escalating media costs. In fact it is the fresher marketing pastures such as leisure, geographies and sport where the need and will for brands is growing. It is also the case that the issues are complex, the process equally challenging and the subject matter usually more interesting.

Creating a brand for a Grand Prix team is a case in point. Consider the following:

A frequent topic in blue chip marketing companies is the difficulty of developing long-term brands in the face of the annual or even bi-annual pressure to deliver stock market results. A Grand Prix team faces massive public scruti-

ny of its ability to deliver, every two to three weeks during the season. Every head or pound devoted to brand building is one not directed towards an improvement in lap time. That really is pressure.

Next, there is the attitude of the sponsors, and indeed the team owners, towards the brand's prime communication medium: the cars. The sponsors have always assumed total rights to cover every square inch of the car's surface with their identity, effectively regarding it as a mobile billboard. This in turn suppresses the team brand, and the attendant values with which they wish to associate. How then to persuade sponsors differently or sacrifice revenue potential to gain exposure of the team's brand?

A secondary problem here is the total change of visual identity that can come with a change of sponsor. For years McLaren could be recognised by their red and white colour scheme . . . until the owners of that colour scheme, Marlboro, switched teams and McLaren became silver, black and red: the colour of their new sponsors. We all know consistency of presentation is critical to brand creation: transcending total livery changes is a touch tricky. This is obviously not a problem faced by your average packaged goods brand.

Also, when Marketing meets Motor Racing there are some major cultural issues. Successful sporting enterprises tend to be run by enthusiasts with a tight and passionate focus on what it takes to win. In such environments marketing is but grudgingly accept-

ed – essentially as the conduit for providing the necessary funding, not God forbid, as a strategic contributor to the growth and success of the business. A corollary of this is that while internal marketing functions are objects of suspicion, external marketing consultants are perceived with the initial trust and welcome that would be accorded to Jack the Ripper or Charles Manson. Heaven help you if you can't justify succinctly and persuasively why any marketing initiative might be desirable or necessary.

Having said all that, why do Grand Prix teams need to develop brands anyway? There are four very good reasons. First, Formula 1 is becoming big business as evidenced by the recent plans for its flotation. To ensure effective participation in that business, a top team must have presence and prominence. Second, digital TV will soon mean viewers can choose which camera feed they follow, and which car (and sponsor) they watch: consequently, there's a need for a visible and attractive brand out there, so that we have real share of mind, and get a good share of viewing. Third, sponsors look to benefit from association with the team: a strong and defined brand reinforces the values with which they are looking to associate. Last, but by no means least, a strong brand is the critical pre-requisite of licensing, and the associated revenue stream that can bring.

The top teams all recognise this and are taking action accordingly.

The only team really blessed with a brand from history is Ferrari. They have been in existence for half a century and are the only one with an established brand identity: red livery plus the immortal prancing horse. Consequently, partnership and licensing programmes are well in hand.

Two other teams look on branding rather differently. Effectively both Benetton and British American Racing are team owners and sponsors. They use the racing operation as a total marketing tool for their main businesses. They have no need to create or nurture an autonomous team brand.

Of the rest, three teams can be seen to be get-

ting their branding acts together, to one degree or another. McLaren are using their association with owners TAG to build their brand and starting to apply it in other fields, such as super premium hi-fi and skis. Significantly Jordan have followed the Williams example of last year and started to put their name on the car. Also, in the most recent issue of *Sports Marketing*, a small note declared that Jordan were initiating a £1.8m direct marketing campaign "to build the team's brand world-wide". That will raise eyebrows in the Pit Lane!

We have been involved with Williams, the other major player, in a year's programme to create the brand's foundations, and that is the tale I will tell now.

It is not often that brand creation starts with a decision to change the name of the brand. However, for 25 years the team had been using the official company name: Williams Grand Prix Engineering Ltd. Historically accurate, but not really catchy. Equally, plain "Williams", out of context, has the problem of confusion with a number of other companies, and several hundred thousand Welshmen, all of the same name!

Consequently Head of Marketing Jim Wright and eponymous team owner Sir Frank Williams acknowledged the need for change, and authorised the move to Williams F1. More modern, easier to use, but critically it instantly identifies the team as *that* Williams, to a Brazilian as immediately as a Briton.

Establishing the brand's values wasn't too difficult. International quantitative research showed there was a high degree of consensus within the team, with commentators on the sport, and among the public at large as to what Williams stood for. Fortunately the core properties of leading-edge innovation, dedication and success, are the kind of attributes most would give their right arm for. They are also difficult qualities for the opposition to match, particularly the last. Williams F1 have won nine out of the last 20 World Constructors' Championships – an astonishing record against the best the world can offer.

The double-edged sword related to the com-

Figure 1: The design of the identity

**Williams**  
GRAND PRIX  
ENGINEERING  
LIMITED

1: The old

**WILLIAMS F1**

2: The new

pany's rather British belief in getting on with it, without blowing their own trumpet. On a good day this is real integrity (in stark contrast to some more flashy members of the Paddock Club). On a bad day it can be construed as introversion and not bothering to communicate with their public.

This can be a problem for any team focused on track success. A recent McLaren publication noted: "We recognised at the time that McLaren as a team was quite aloof and a bit out of touch with the general public . . . we decided to make ourselves more accessible to the public." We and Williams F1 are similarly addressing that – initially with a website and subsequently with an enhanced communication programme currently in preparation.

Next the design of the identity. Simplicity and modernity were the keynotes, along with the obvious consonance with brand values, and the long-standing Williams' colours of blue and gold. A black and white rendition hardly makes the design point, but the virtues of brevity are obvious. So far public reaction has been highly favourable. Equally importantly, it is the kind of design that will look as good in

2009 as it does in 1999 – not always the case with those whose idea of branding begins and ends with an in-your-face logo.

A colleague of mine, Creenagh Lodge, refers to logos or identities being merely "the outward sign of inward grace" . . . where full definition, understanding and commitment to a brand constitute the grace! An intrinsic part of brand creation for Williams F1 was to establish it with the staff who must live it. For the first time ever, the entire work force convened in groups to hear a marketing story: Jim Wright and I explaining the need, the rationale, the underlying values and the new identity. It focuses the mind wonderfully to have 30 minutes to explain (the virtues of) branding to a bunch of extremely intelligent, talented and cynical engineers. Happily they took the point, and it was followed up by appropriate collateral expressing and explaining the brand values referred to above. No-one in this business can afford to believe brands can simply be imposed via a new logo from a remote marketing person. They have to be understood and lived.

At this juncture, we had followed the classi-

**Figure 2: Increased exposure**



■ The new identity, now in evidence on the helmets of Ralf Schumacher and Alex Zanardi.

cal steps of brand creation and had a strategy in place that was clearly understood.

So much for the theory: what about the practice and communication of that brand?

The brand is now being systematically built. First, consistent branding is now prominently appearing across everything relating to the business. Second, last year saw the Williams name writ large on the car in unsold space, or where regulations forbade the appearance of a sponsor's logo – a first in recent years. This year the sharp-eyed may have noticed the new logo on the crash helmets of Alex Zanardi and Ralf Schumacher. Crucially, we are patiently building the argument with sponsors that increased exposure of a clearly-defined Williams F1 brand works to their advantage.

BMW, the Williams F1 engine partner from 2000, understand the importance of brands extremely well, and have almost perfectly-synergistic brand values of their own. This augurs well both for building the brand with integrity and for potential licensees having a coherent property to exploit.

When it comes to licensing the brand, one encounters a rather different set of problems from the more ordered world of packaged goods marketing. I hesitate to say it when writing in an august journal devoted to sports marketing, but sporting institutions can be notoriously unprincipled in taking any licensing dol-

lar at the expense of undermining the brand. To quote a recent *Sports Marketing* article on football and football clubs: "Slap a badge on it and it will sell is the general attitude. This has resulted in the sale of products that are in many cases simply tacky. The merchandise does not necessarily reflect the values of the club or the 'brand' it represents. In short, football, in branding terms has no substance, no soul, it is all fur coat and no knickers."

Beyond this neglect of values, brands can be slapped on some appallingly-inappropriate types of product even if they are not tacky as such. I once did not endear myself to Richard Branson by writing an article titled, 'When does a Virgin become a prostitute?' It was actually a *cri de coeur* rather than being snide, as I felt slapping the name indiscriminately on products such as vodka and computers would be destructive to a brand and company I admired. Sport is even worse in this respect: I can't help feeling that putting the Bayern Munich brand on sugar confectionery does them no favours.

Also, there can be a real fixation with the short term. It is incredible that one could end up having pitched battles with partners wanting to base all activity around this year's transient sponsor livery, with no regard to the longer-term building of the team brand. Football certainly has a better understanding of

the relationship between the enduring (club) brand and sponsor – there is no doubt that Manchester United, not Sharp (their sponsors), have won the 1998-99 English Premier League!

Happily Williams F1 understands these dangers only too well. They have a brand strategy, a licensing strategy and a licensing division within their Marketing Department. They recognise that corrupting their brand or indiscriminate licensing in a property-saturated market would be disastrous.

For us, as branding consultants, the whole experience has been, and continues to be, fascinating. Applying long-established principles of marketing to an area so vibrant, so Now and with such different issues is incredibly refreshing. If I had to choose between being market-

ing director of Proctor & Gamble or a Grand Prix Team, I know which I'd choose!

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### Biography

**Chris Wood** is a director of Corporate Edge, the specialist branding consultancy that has worked with the Williams Grand Prix team to create their new brand: Williams F1. A division of CLK.MPL, the international branding, innovation and design specialists, Corporate Edge is a specialist consultancy dealing exclusively with corporate branding. Corporate Edge has created brands for Carlson Worldchoice, CGU, Lloyds TSB "Insurance Shop", Travel Inns, Prudential's Egg, and Scotland the Brand.



International Journal of Sports  
Marketing & Sponsorship  
Volume One, Number Two  
Winthrop Publications Ltd  
Garfield House  
86-88 Edgware Road  
London W2 2YW