



Designworks – a mix of logic and magic

According to some in the profession, design as an effective business support tool may have been undervalued by the recent public logo design competition for the new Auckland Council. The competition invited anyone to enter a logo rather than just designers and offered prizes rather than cash.

It has been held up as an example of how brand designers face a constant struggle to have the value of their craft recognised by the public and the mainstream business community.

But pioneering design agency Designworks has avoided that debate, preferring to let its work do the talking.

That work spoke volumes at last week's Vero Excellence in Business Support Awards where Designworks scooped the supreme award. Insurer Vero New Zealand is one of only two local companies who've achieved gold status in the internationally recognised Baldrige criteria for performance excellence – an international best practice framework oriented towards commercial success rather than esoteric principles. Vero and the award organiser, Bizzzone, also subjected the award entrants to rigorous assessment under the criteria.

Considering any design company will have its share of esoteric principles, the supreme award is a vote of confidence in the design discipline's strong focus on business results, and the acumen required to succeed in the industry.

Designworks chief executive Sven Baker describes the company's approach as "an alchemy between strategic logic and creative magic".

The phrase itself weaves the abstract with the absolute.

But while some traditional businesses might resist the agency's magical meddling, which is often not restricted to only the brand's outward appearance, Designworks' unique branding concoctions have worked for some of New Zealand's biggest businesses.

It has developed Telecom's new

identity, supported Air New Zealand's "cuddle-class" product development and rebranded AMI Insurance with bright yellow smiles. Other clients include the fashionable ferment of Monteiths beer, meat exporter Silver Fern Farms and "the Gateway" that is Auckland International Airport.

However, it seems Baker takes the most satisfaction from helping small to medium-sized businesses redesign themselves and attain ambitious goals. "We see ourselves as quite different from the advertising process which is about pure communication," says Baker. "We really focus a lot on re-engineering business processes and how design works at every level. It's not an aesthetic process we go through – it's a methodical, deep, considered process.

"Where you can see the most significant change is in that SME category where you have the opportunity to be quite bold in how you change the script with those organisations."

Designworks helped Wellington-based air-conditioning and ventilation company Controlled Environment Systems (CES) change its consumer profile "overnight", says founder Craig Gadsby. The company is now called HotChilly.

"Our initial approach to Designworks was based around assistance to create a smart company profile. We walked out with a whole new company, something that we never imagined could be the effect of re-branding, and certainly not to that extent." The move from a commercial and industrial service provider to a consumer brand has had a massive effect on the SME's fortunes and Gadsby says its branded vehicles are now recognised on Wellington's streets.

Jay Wester, managing director of home heating and plumbing company Leap, says the impact Designworks has made on his business is massive and the new brand has been "our saviour". He says the impact on the bottom line directly reflects the total rethink that the agency provided.

"Leap has gone from flat growth to a period of sustained, strong growth over the past three years – and in the face of a recession in our traditional market. The rethink has allowed us to

completely redesign our business model for the better."

Telecom marketing director Craig Herbison also has high praise for Designworks' branding nous, despite the telco's muddled public profile in recent months.

"Within two months of relaunch [logo] our brand preference had risen to business case. It's too commercially sensitive to state the numbers but let's just say 'it's heaps'. And as a lead indicator of market share the signs were good for this rising brand preference to translate into increased customers and revenue opportunity.

"Unfortunately, events unfolded which meant we were unable to quickly capitalise on the environment the new brand had created for selling to take place. Even in the face of these events our brand preference has held out well. There's no question in my

mind that Designworks' new brand work was the sole if not major contributor to our strengthening brand preference."

Baker advises companies facing a public backlash that they can't always "communicate their way out of a problem". They have to look at the "fundamental characteristics" of their business and how that aligns with the consumer expectation. "If that's out of alignment, that's the problem you have to fix."

Designworks is typically Kiwi – ingenious but modest, optimistic while refreshingly realistic, and has even come to the realisation (after an overseas experience) that it wants to call New Zealand home.

The agency no longer has global aspirations: "Been there done that," says Baker who joined the company as a graduate in Wellington, and eventually helped set up Designworks in Australia during the 1990s. He moved back to New Zealand because he says his heart is here. He now splits his time between Auckland, Wellington and, to a greater degree, Christchurch.

"The character of the New Zealand way is a really important part of a brand's story in the export space, because we want to create export



offerings that reflect and leverage off the New Zealand story.

“There’s now a sense of confidence that that story is more than just rolling hills and a clean green image – there is an essential character to New Zealanders as people that has to be built into that story as well.”

The firm’s Kiwi clients are pre-

disposed to that quiet confidence too – it’s needed for this particular type of brand therapy, says Baker.

“There’s often a leap of faith required in the process, you can’t always validate an idea through research. That can often be a rear vision mirror exercise, whereas innovation is often going into a new

space which can be a little bit scary.

“It’s in our nature as Kiwis to be that way inclined. Those conventions that restrict other countries don’t seem to apply here.” Even the business conventions that do apply here – the Baldrige criteria for instance – seem to be no match for Kiwi ingenuity.



On awards night:

[From left] Chris Meade, Michael Crampin and Sven Baker from Designworks, Roger Bell from Vero, Noel Blackwell from Designworks, Prime Minister John Key, Nicki Chapman and Shayne Priddle from Designworks.



Take your pick: Designworks is prolific, working with some of New Zealand’s most well-known brands.