

# New era, new image

*Alex Beech* reveals how Laban worked to create, present and manage a strong professional image



**I**n the current environment where arts organisations are competing with factors including developing new audiences and gaining funding, it is increasingly important that we create, present and manage a strong and professional image equal to those in the corporate sector. A few years ago at Laban, we embarked upon this process which took just over one year. Here's a brief insight into how we did it.

There are many reasons that an organisation may want or need to re-brand – ours was simply that we were facing massive changes inside and outside the organisation within a relatively short period of time. We wanted to meet these changes with a strong and unified organisation and to express that by having the whole organisation supporting a new brand image and therefore a new era

in the history of the organisation. In 2002 we were about to embark upon a prolonged period of change. A change in location, building, status, director and a merger were all pending within a three-year period. Fortunately the management team had the foresight to recognise that we needed to take this opportunity to re-evaluate our brand positioning. Therefore the first phase of our re-branding project was to appoint a research consultancy company to identify our current brand position and make recommendations as to how to capitalise on this period and the years to come, identifying any potential obstacles that might prevent us achieving our goals.

To embark upon this project we pulled together a devoted team. This core project team comprised people from the marketing

department who were charged with actually actioning the brand and also representatives of senior management and the director.

Selection of this team is paramount as a brand can only survive with the backing of the organisation and this should come from all levels. There have been many anecdotal cases which I'm sure you're aware of, where the brand has all but been awaiting sign-off, only to be presented to the board and director when the whole thing has had to go back to the drawing board.

The second phase was writing the brief. The brief enables the core project team to move forward with the branding work and judge objectively if the work is appropriate. This can become a bit of a life-line in cases where the brand is met with indecision or resistance from an

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individual. This document can also protect the designer who can feel confident that they are fulfilling an agreed set of criteria. Therefore it is integral that the brief is fully understood and agreed by all parties before embarking on the project. Our brief was in excess of 30 pages and included details of the history of the organisation, the research findings, a diagram outlining our current organisational structure, and the budget and it also identified and gave examples of our competitors.

Our design pitch consisted of six companies, two of which we had an existing relationship with, two were recommended to us, and two we asked to pitch on the basis of their existing client list. We chose a wide gamut of sizes of companies in order to gain an understanding of what was available to us on our limited arts

budget. Following the pitch presentations we decided to work with Wolff Olins whose client base comprised Tate, Orange and the V&A among others. Wolff Olins would normally be outside our budget but luckily they were interested in working on a cultural project like ours and so agreed to work within our limited budget.

Laban is quite unique in having the foresight to give responsibility to a brand manager. Although this may seem unnecessary, it makes sense that you would want to protect this investment, ensuring the purity of the brand in the early days and developing it appropriately in the months and years to come.

A potential pit-fall for any brand is a merger. Laban had worked hard at launching and maintaining its identity and during the next phase of change

it was essential for us to present two equal organisations looking forward to a joint future.

Essentially creating a joint brand is the same; we went through the same processes and we hope – but only execution and time will tell – that we have created something that can adapt and expand as the joint organisation takes on a life of its own over the years to come. We intend to continue developing our identities with the help of a brand manager – distilling and developing each one appropriately so that we don't end up with some sort of homogenized brand soup. ■

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