

032 INNOVATION



Richard Henderson is a leading Australian design professional with an international reputation. He has more than 26 years of experience in the development of a diverse range of brand image projects – retail, corporate, environmental and government. His experience includes the imaging of identities for Telstra, AFL, BHP Billiton, Crown, ANZ Bank, FoodWorks, Bunnings, Orica, Johnson & Johnson and MCG.

Return on imagination.

Imagine a world where return on imagination was just as important as return on investment... it's easy, if you try, writes **Richard Henderson**.

In 2006, Australian businesses are still largely driven by strict ideals and ambitions of successfully achieving returns on investment (ROI). This is certainly nothing new and by no means is it a surprise; after all, favourable bottom lines and solid economic returns are still the defining elements for a company's universal success.

Indeed, the attitude remains that if money is to be spent by an organisation, then positive value and return must be evident – moreover, it must be assessed, proved, measured and detailed.

While, however, this notion of 'return on investment' has grown over the past decade to incorporate a variety of different vehicles, including staff, resources, products and technologies – all of which are now perceived as influential and positive 'value adds' – design and brand identity are still needlessly battling to find their way into the psyches of value-conscious and return-driven Australian companies and their respective decision-makers.

This is somewhat ironic, because in order for businesses in today's increasingly 'ideas driven economy' to proactively progress and actively compete, respect for the power of imagination must continue to grow – and quickly. As companies seek advantages over their competition via radical innovations, new markets, business systems, procedures and practices, imagination has gradually positioned itself as the business currency of the future – but this currency's horizons need to be expanded, and design must be included.

In the design world, ROI should really be an acronym for return on imagination, and the higher the investment in imagination, the bet-

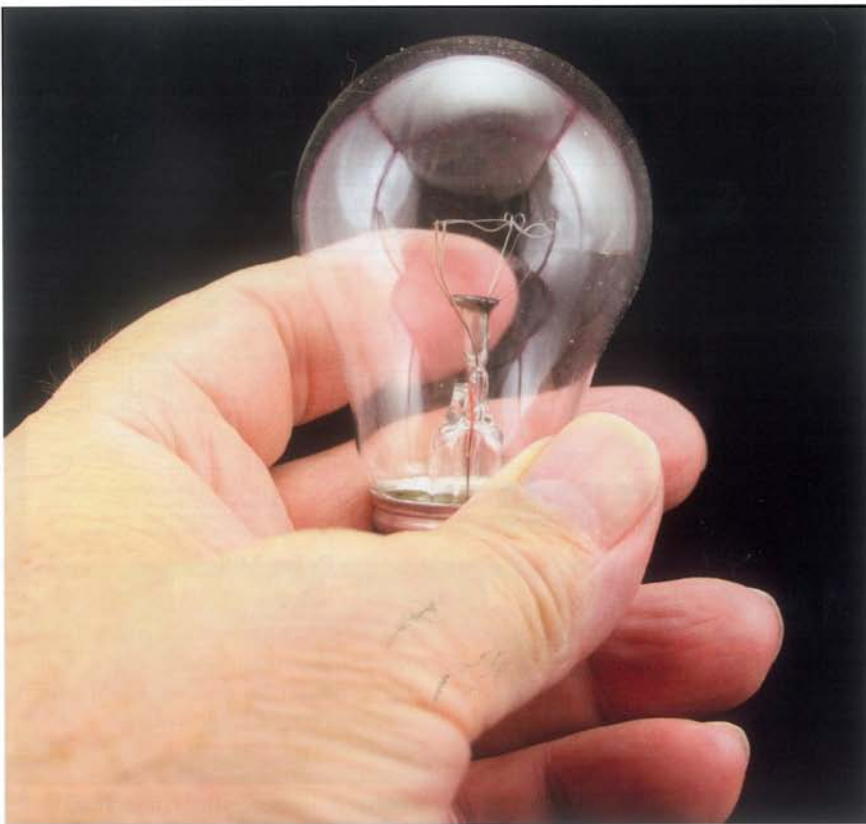
ter the outcome should be. Because creativity and imagination are not limited to the realm of artists and poets; everyone can imagine new possibilities, which is why in business the go-getters are those who identify new points of view or innovative paths to success within competitive markets.

Highly successful organisations rate imagination as a KPI: 'Show us new ways of thinking and we'll help you grow your career.' Unfortunately though, creative imagination is still not embraced sufficiently in Australia, because the majority of businesses unwisely distrust amorphous realms of creativity. Faith in imagination, however, requires trust – after all, it is a crucial element of working relationships. Yet by examining the agenda of meetings between Australian companies and creative teams, a gaping hole in dialogue and trust still emerges. Where there should be talk of the true identity of the company and how that will steer it towards a bright future, there is still too much silence. This dialogue is largely missing because too many businesses, corporate or otherwise, hold misconceptions that design is merely an end product. If this were true, then the designer's job would be limited to doodling towards a finished logo and, beyond that, applying it and associated brand elements to collateral, signage, merchandise etc.

It's hard to find a designer who fits this bill, but creative teams in Australia do exist that generate real value for businesses. They're designers who recognise design encompasses the development of entire brand identities, and is more than a superficial panacea that makes a

company look good. What businesses increasingly need to appreciate is that an essential part of design's role in contributing to business value lies in its provision and maintenance of a clear business identity. A good brand mark should be inspirational and able to be integrated into a wide range of associated corporate and public communications. Yet at the same time it needs to be developed in a manner that is completely transparent, accountable and budget-conscious. It needs to be timeless, not tiresome, and it must achieve beauty within budget! Once a business' identity is discussed with designers, the value the design team returns to the business increases exponentially – it's simply a matter of knowing what to talk about, and with whom. And it is this value that is gradually being recognised as not simply a return on investment, but moreover a return on imagination.

Today's designers recognise their clients are making a huge investment – both in the cost of creative services and implementation; and the fact that, once the identity has been rolled out, their importance diminishes. Designers are not clairvoyants, however. We cannot foresee the future, but we can make intelligent predictions and stretch our vision to encompass it. By continually asking whether a brand identity will act as a beacon for confidence and positive relationships, the power and value of the identity strengthens. And so, just as designers need to continue to expand the dialogue between companies and their own creative teams, companies also need to put imagination onto the business agenda as a viable, rewarding business asset.



Brand identity is an abstract idea that delivers tangible results. It's about capturing a personality and bringing it to life for an organisation, event or business venture. Events big or small, companies global or local, it doesn't matter. Competitive advantage now comes from creativity and imagination. Without a true identity an organisation risks fragmentation because issues of identity extend far beyond a mere 'brand mark' or 'logo' – encompassing realities and possibilities about the organisation. Key to developing a true identity is the ability to create a story that identifies the organisation's unique attributes. In marketing this is second nature, but how often do creative teams get this licence to explore?

By engaging comprehensive discussions with stakeholders (including management teams and relevant individuals) an amazing asset that they're unaware of is often discovered. Putting them at the centre of the discovery process facilitates autonomy over their new identity – which is crucial for companies undergoing significant mergers or change. The articulation of a vision that's supported by a company's management and stakeholders not only provides a measure of success, it also reiterates a belief that the cre-

ative journey is often more rewarding than the end product. And, by accepting that the journey is as important (if not more so) than the destination, a whole new process arises: one driven as much by imagination, innovation and creativity, as it is by the client's brief and investment return expectations. In other words, it is driven by collective desires to achieve returns on imagination.

We recently completed a highly successful brand development initiative for AustralianSuper that serves as an excellent example of how return on investment can be directly fuelled by beliefs in the value, power and liberation of imagination. It also affords a prime example of how the considered and focused involvement of a company's management in the creative process can empower not only designers and their creative teams, but, more importantly, themselves and their organisation. Launched nationally in April, AustralianSuper is Australia's newest top tier superannuation fund and is the result of a merger between two entities, the Australian Retirement Fund (ARF) and the Super Trust of Australia (STA). In the newly deregulated local superannuation marketplace, where the 'power

of consumer choice' reigns supreme, both the ARF and STA recognised an unlikely opportunity to unite and provide a substantially improved level of service and range of service offerings to their respective members.

In order to successfully and effectively forge a new single identity for the two funds, R-Co initiated a tailored brand rationalisation and culture rejuvenation process that comprised comprehensive brand audit and value discussion groups, and objective brand positioning exercises. All of these exercises invited the client to join the creative journey with us, to appreciate and exercise the power of imagination, and to recognise its importance to achieving traditional 'returns'.

As part of the consultative process, we asked key stakeholders (staff members and shareholders) from both organisations to talk about the new entity, what their visions of it were and what they wanted it to achieve. From this unique discussion process we collated the participants' words and used them to provide insight into not only their underlying sense of belief in who they were and what they did, but also to highlight and foster their excitement about moving forward, together, into a new era. By engaging and involving the client in the creative process, we not only took them on an effective journey of self-discovery, but in doing so, equipped them to have ownership and understanding of their imaginative and innovative brand mark, communication design and visual iconography of their manifestation of their brand and its values.

Once dialogue opens, imaginative journeys commence and designers are trusted to assert their role as thinkers and creators, business will benefit from a more rewarding relationship with them. Ultimately, companies' reputations rest with their senior managements' investments in their images and brands. Therefore, it's imperative that 'new' dialogue between creative teams and their clients occurs at this level. With top-level and CEO support, brand management becomes easier and notions that 'the business is the brand and the brand is the business' are strengthened... but only if returns on imagination are recognised in similar terms to those on investment. When all is said and done, creating a culture of innovation is not about making people more imaginative, but about creating environments, processes and journeys that allow for authentic imagination to thrive. ■